

what's up elsewhere - Interpretation on a plate

Mary Hudson takes in some history with her supper.

I have always believed meal times to be sacred. For me, they're the one occasion when you can shut your mind off to everything except what's on the plate in front of you. On the whole I'd say that most visitor experiences cater for my needs here. Interpretation is usually kept separate from the restaurant or tea room so you can enjoy your cream tea without any interference. Not so at Colonial Williamsburg, the 'world's largest living history museum' in Virginia, USA.

Colonial Williamsburg was the capital of Britain's empire in the New World. It describes its mission as to 'interpret the origins of the idea of America'. Among the authentic and reconstructed 18th-century buildings are a series of taverns in keeping with the period. The waiting staff wear period costume and all play a role in the interpretive experience.

In the tavern where we ate our evening meal, our waiter introduced us to the menu and to the foods available at the time, as well as the background to various sayings, such as 'to make ends meet' (If you could afford a napkin that was large enough to tie around your neck you were generally quite wealthy!). We were entertained with anecdotes and song as we ate but, rather than being intrusive, this approach created an immersive experience that really worked. I left the tavern with a full stomach, a complimentary copy of authentic recipes, and a much broader understanding of life in eighteenth-century colonial America.

My understanding was further increased after hearing tales and joining in with bawdy ballads while swigging local ale from a ceramic tankard in another of the recreated taverns. This was followed by my first interpretive breakfast the following morning!

Obviously the success of such a scheme largely depends upon the ability of the individual interpreters and the resources available for staffing and training. However, on a simpler level, the design of the menus and the provision of authentic recipes both added to the interpretive experience by broadening visitors' understanding of life at the time in a subtle but effective way.

A similar tack is used at Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia. The menus include relevant facts about Washington's hospitality and the foods eaten in his day. Even the disposable paper place mats provide a brief introduction to George Washington and his life at Mount Vernon, which I found myself reading while waiting for my food to arrive.

I left the States wondering why we hadn't been doing this for years in our own tea rooms. Maybe it's time to cross the boundaries between the exhibition space and the

tea room or restaurant and give our visitors something more to digest than the specials of the day?

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I find it rather easy to portray a businessman. Being bland, rather cruel and incompetent comes naturally to me.

John Cleese