

Saddam's chocolate and Gaddafi's camel milk: tyrants' meals revealed

Description



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From Stalin's all-night Georgian banquets to Hitler's obsessive vegetarianism, a new book spills the beans on their dinner tables.

As any parent of a young child can tell you, the line between neurotic eating and megalomania is thin. Indeed, by gathering together a collection of recipes and rumours about the food habits of the 20th century's great tyrants, a new book, Dictators' Dinners, suggests that there scarcely is a line at all.

Of course it is hard to say whether total power encourages people to eat only what the hell they please, or whether food tantrums just evolve naturally over time into ruling by fear, but the two do seem to go together. Certainly, when you read about their eating habits, it is hard not to feel that you understand a little more about the men who ruled their countrymen so cruelly. Despite his avowal of restrained and healthy eating, for instance, Saddam Hussein fought a long losing battle against his love of Quality Street, "which many guests recall being offered," according to the authors. You wonder whether, in his hideout, Saddam at last felt able to enjoy [the Bounty and mini-Mars bars he was found with](#).

Indeed it seems you can divide most tyrants fairly easily into gluttonous maniacs and health nuts. In the first group, we find men like Tito, Mobutu, Idi Amin and Stalin, who used banqueting almost as a weapon against underlings and fellow heads of state. Georgian delicacies such as satsivi, a lukewarm chicken-and-walnut stew, would be served under the auspices of a toastmaster who would ensure that the group kept up an even pace of heavy drinking, sometimes until 5am. Khrushchev wet the bed after one feast, while Tito ended up vomiting into his jacket sleeve. It was even too much for a functioning alcoholic like Churchill, who in 1942 discovered that sweet red Khvanchara wine did not agree with him. It may be relevant, or it may not, that one Stalin's chefs was Spiridon Putin, Vladimir's grandfather.



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How a man like Antonio Salazar would have managed on such an occasion, one cannot imagine. The Portuguese autocrat was an extreme ascetic who lunched on fish-bone soup and would not take butter on his toast. At the other end of the scale, perhaps as a result of all the nourishing camel's milk he drank, Muammar Gaddafi was famously flatulent. As indeed was Hitler, for reasons the Führer never understood. Clark and Scott claim that his famous (but patchy) vegetarianism was partly a tactic to manage his constant farting. Gaddafi was quite unembarrassed about his, as John Simpson can testify. Paranoia, of course, is an occupational hazard for dictators, and that too soon finds its way on to the menu. Whenever Ceausescu went abroad, he took his own chemist equipped with a portable laboratory to analyse his food – an extra layer of paranoia, really, since the Romanian tyrant also brought his own cooks. In state banquets, Ceausescu just scraped his food on to the floor as subtly as possible and kicked the evidence away. No parent will wonder where he learned that trick.

Dictators' Dinners: A Bad Taste Guide to Entertaining Tyrants by Victoria Clark and Melissa Scott is out now.

[Leo Benedictus](#)

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