

## cereal offender

Old habits die hard, and, for Sally Feldman, none is harder to conquer than the allure of the hotel breakfast buffet, where only the strong – and early – will survive

**T**oday I broke the buffet barrier. No, I didn't eat my way through an entire be-domed silver platter of smoked salmon and eggs benedict before demolishing a tray of mini Danish pastries and a faux milk churn of strawberry yoghurt; I didn't even raise the lids. Like all upstanding citizens of America's 51st state, I just said no. And I am the stronger for it. Hell, I might also be a couple of kilos lighter.

What is it about the breakfast buffet that brings out the ravening beast in me, and (judging by the restless queues in front of that gently perspiring young chef folding omelettes in that weeny little pan) everyone else staying at the hotel/resort/conference facility? Talk about the day of the jackal, as we descend en masse on the bains-marie, staking out their steaming contents and eyeing up the size of the stacked

anywhere other than in hotel dining rooms? Why does it taste so heavenly only when you're sitting at a snowy cloth-covered table with a nice, crisp, unsullied newspaper? (Who can read when there's so much buffet action to divert your attention?) As for prunes – I rest my case. A sprinkle of chopped walnuts and perhaps a handful of that weird little seedy mix and it's back to the barricades.

Enough you'd think. Especially as my breakfast of habit is but a piece of fruit, some toast and (cough) a soy flat white. But no, gentle reader, when we're travelling, our hunger suddenly knows no bounds. We must slope back to those condensation-jewelled counters and pile another inappropriately sized plate with gleaming shards of bacon and shimmery poached eggs and plump little chipolatas. And we must save a spot for the leathery mushrooms, daintily eschewing any stray sprigs of curly parsley along the way – we don't want to appear needy, now do we.

Making our way back to our table with our tray, we then have to negotiate every breakfast tragic's

### Why does Bircher muesli taste so heavenly only when you're sitting at a snowy cloth-covered table?

plates to calculate their load-bearing capabilities.

How many runs will we need? Are there cutlery baskets at the ready for the necessary replenishment of equipment?

No-one wants to eat their cheese and charcuterie course with the same knife and fork as the bacon and eggs, for goodness sake.

There's a highly refined breakfast buffet etiquette – just as there's definitely no honour among fresh raspberry thieves (so few, and gone so soon).

Woe betide the late-riser. First we load up with the slices of curiously hard green melon, the pineapple, the yoghurt, and the... shudder... Bircher muesli. Is there anyone who actually eats that unappetising sludge

dilemma: when to make the toast. If we leave it too late, our cooked breakfast (and, in the case of most motels, I use that term loosely) will be cactus. Too soon, and the toast will be – horror of horrors – like the flaccid polystyrene sheets you get when you order room service. So we must hasten to ensure breakfast is still hot by the time we come to consume it. We stand impatiently in front of that strangely hypnotic revolving toaster as our wholewheat slices transform before our very eyes. Is the alchemy of the culinary process ever more inspiring, and at the same time more frustrating, than this?

Back at our table, there's a brief respite as we savour our spoils and casually cast our eyes around the room for anything we may have missed. But it doesn't last, does it. There are the cold-cuts calling, and the cheeses, and, finally, an array of dainty little pastries to round off the repast. Will it be a chocolate croissant? A diminutive raspberry muffin, or perhaps some more toast and the customary tussle with impenetrable jam sachets?

But not today, no sirree. It was time to break the mould, to prove I was made of sterner stuff. Get thee behind me, bacon. There was a thoughtful pause at the revolving toaster and a brief encounter with the melon before I retired to my corner to contemplate my next culinary challenge, The Thirty-Hour Airline Meal Diet. **VE+T**

