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Grouse at 30,000 ft

THE "Glorious Twelfth" has been and gone, but the memory of an exciting event lingers on.

On the eve of the great day in August, we travelled up by plane to Inverness, the "Little Edinburgh of the North", by Dan-Air flight 158 (a BAC 111). Dan-Air took over the route last March after British Airways relinquished it.

The comfortable flight took us above Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow straight up to Inverness, passing over lochs and glens and rolling green fields.

We arrived in time to witness a beautiful sunset over the Moray Firth, an unforgettable sight.

We were driven north east to Nairn, famous for its beaches and golf courses, and settled down to a good dinner in the four-star Golf View Hotel overlooking the Firth.

Speculation was ripe: would the weather hold, and would the grouse rise? The last couple of years had been disappointing, and grouse shooting is no longer what it was.

The night was short. At 3am the Earl of Cawdor fired the first shot on his moorland estate, six miles from the fine castle and

twelve miles from where we were, thus giving the signal to the grouse shooting season.

Meanwhile we watched a superb sunrise over the Moray Firth and enjoyed a champagne breakfast (including generous slices of blackpudding) offered by the hotel manageress Miss Greta Anderson.

It was difficult to concentrate, for we were all excited and anxious – would the first bag of birds arrive from the moors in time?

The Dan-Air plane planned to fly the first batch to London, and departure was scheduled for 6.55am. Could we make it?

Shortly before half past six the estate car with 6½ brace drove up to a great cheer by an appreciative crowd. The executive chef saw to a brace or two of birds being plucked and cooked in record time and taken by car to Inverness Airport. Not much of a speed limit – the plane had to be caught.



Dan-Air at your service – grouse at 33,000 feet

The birds – the cooked ones and the unplucked ones destined for the Inn on the Park in London – were professionally and ceremoniously piped aboard, and Captain Ken Jones took off. What a relief!

We were accompanied by the hotel's executive chef, George Mackay, and the assistant manager Kevin Reid, resplendent in kilt and sporran, as well as Dan-Air's PRO, George Yeaman.

Dan-Air had planned a surprise for the passengers on the morning flight of the "Twelfth" – with the hot breakfast served after take-off we were offered grouse by chef Mackay.

What an experience – the first time ever grouse for breakfast at 33,000 ft! The whisky, too, tasted special at that altitude – we seemed to flavour the peat and the heather in the elixir of life.

Soon after 8am we landed at Heathrow and made our way to Park Lane as fast as motorway traffic would allow.

The birds arrived at the Inn on the Park at 9.07 exactly – a great achievement, although Dan-Air was not competing in the annual race.

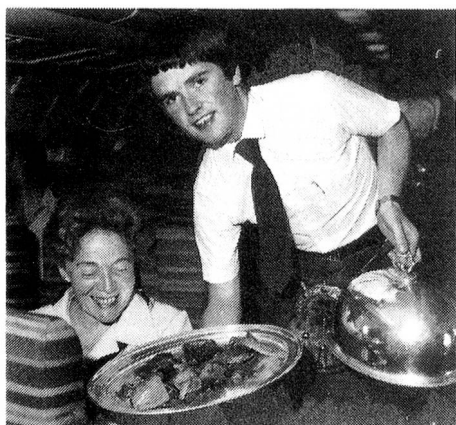
In the kitchens of the luxury hotel, the executive chef Eduard Hari, a Swiss from Kandersteg (whose wife, incidentally, is Scottish), organised the plucking and cooking of the grouse.

Soon after 10 it was served to use at another champagne breakfast offered by the Inn on the Park's public relations manageress, Mrs M.F. Sandon.

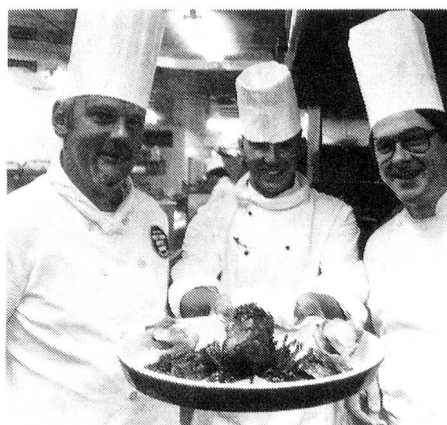
Later in the day, there was a celebration meal on the menu – a mousse of Arbroath Smokies, pot-roasted grouse, followed by Blairgowrie Flammery, a raspberry sweet laced with dram-buie. A "Prince Charlie" was no doubt the right dram to finish off the special meal.

And so the "Glorious Twelfth" passed – may there be many more.

Mariann Meier



Great expectations! Kevin Reid offers succulent grouse to Mariann Meier



Executive chefs George Mackay and Edward Hari at the Inn on the Park



Second breakfast at the Inn on the Park