

Eating Out – Then and Now

By Chris Hirschhorn

Eating out in New York City when I was a child, or a teenager, or a college student was a very different experience. It was also a costly experience.

In the beginning, there was no eating out as a child because my parents had five children, and although my mom and dad were attorneys, there were no McDonalds or other fast food restaurants. And as a family of seven, we couldn't afford to eat out in a restaurant – fast food or otherwise. For my family, 'eating out' meant making sandwiches and bringing ginger ale and Cokes and driving to one of our local parks and spreading a blanket and eating.

Although my parents were attorneys, caring for five children, paying for food, doctors, in-home nurses, etc. was extremely costly. Once, the stress put mother in the hospital for a rest. My parents didn't charge their clients much because these clients, usually just off the boat from their birth country, had no money. Many of my folks' clients were basically impoverished. At the time, the world was on a cash economy. Credit economy was unheard of. What little my parents charged just covered our basic bills. Clients frequently paid in handmade lampshades or IOU's, for instance.

Uncle George took us to the Wing Foot Club on the bay in New Rochelle on 4th of July to see the fireworks and we dined there too. A stellar experience since we never dined out.

Eventually, there were automats and cafeterias which were fine and affordable for lunch when I was in college in the late 1940s. Over the years after college and before I married it began to change from a cash economy to a credit economy. I believe it was in the late 1950s. Credit cards were issued by banks. I remember how shocked I was when I received my first credit card in the mail. It was an American Express Credit Card.

Thus, one could for example: 'eat out,' fly to another state or country, charge the cost of travel, hotel and restaurants on the credit card and pay the credit card bill off easily with a monthly charge.

In the late 1950s, when I traveled to Germany as a chaperone to college students, I remember that I had an American Express Credit Card which I believe was the first credit card issued by any organization. I just recently, cancelled this credit card.