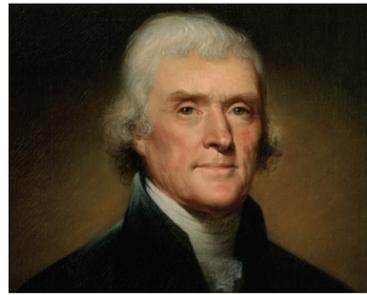


Thomas Jefferson

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PRIVATE SUITE
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THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED

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Thomas Jefferson's tombstone listed the achievements for which he wanted to be remembered – author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and father of the University of Virginia.

But the Sage of Monticello probably wouldn't have imagined that 190 years after his death he would also be celebrated as one of America's first "foodies," popularizing delicacies he imported from Europe, like ice cream and macaroni. Now, thanks to the success of the Broadway sensation *Hamilton: An American Musical*, many are learning that Jefferson also hosted America's most famous "power dinner," a probable precursor to today's "power lunch," in "the room where it happened." Jefferson was always playing politician at his gatherings, says Monticello historian Christa Dierksheide. However, she adds,

"there was probably more urgency to the dinners in the 1790s and during his presidency when the nation was so divided and its future uncertain."

Known in history as the Great Compromise of 1790, Jefferson's most famous power dinner happened when the United States was a young and fragile union of 13 states that, in spite of the recent signing of the U.S. Constitution, was decidedly un-united. Adding to the turmoil, the founders had radically different visions for America's future, threatening the nation's very survival.

The stakes were high in June 1790 when Jefferson invited Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and Virginia Congressman and future president James Madison to dine at his home in New York City, then the nation's temporary capital. Jefferson hoped that the dinner would help solve the legislative gridlock about the new federal government's role and scope.

After enjoying copious French wine and a meal prepared by the enslaved French-trained chef James Hemings, the three men struck a deal. To appease Hamilton and proponents of a powerful fiscal and centralized state, the federal government would assume the states' war debts, totaling some \$25 million. To appease southern constituents who wanted to delegate power to individual states, the nation's new capital would move south to what is now Washington, D.C.

The evening that charted America's future has been immortalized most recently in *Hamilton* and in the hit song



Jefferson adopted a purposeful informality in his behavior as chief executive, issuing dinner invitations in his own name rather than as president.

"The Room Where It Happens," the hip-hop interpretation of how the founders negotiated the compromise that is now part of American mythology.

While the 1790 Great Compromise was Jefferson's most famous power dinner, it was not his first. As Virginia's governor during the American Revolution, Jefferson hosted English and German Convention Army officers who had been imprisoned near Charlottesville. And as the French Revolution unfolded in 1789, Jefferson, then U.S. Minister to France, hosted a power dinner for several National General Assembly members in hopes of settling economic issues with King Louis XVI. Unfortunately for the king, the results were short-lived.

President Jefferson regularly hosted power dinners that, while primarily social, were "power" events, according to scholar and Interim President and CEO of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Charles Cullen. Guests were "influenced by the power of personality, if nothing else, over the dinner table," he says.

When he retired to Monticello in 1809, Jefferson continued hosting power dinners, at times entertaining 50 visitors at once. The most memorable – and perhaps most lavish – was in 1824, when he hosted a series of dinners for visiting Revolutionary War hero the Marquis de Lafayette.

Even the threat of bankruptcy didn't stop Jefferson from hosting elaborate – and frequent – dinner parties. In fact, after Lafayette's visit, Jefferson wrote to his agent, "During Genl La Fayette's stay, at Monto, I was obliged to have so much company that we got all but thro' our stock of red wine." Jefferson lost no time in replenishing the "stock," using credit to finance a new supply of wine.

Jefferson's last Monticello power dinners were for University of Virginia students and faculty. Former student Henry Tutwiler offered this description of his 1825 visit: "Mr. Jefferson had a wonderful tact in interesting his youthful visitors, and making the most diffident feel at ease in his company."

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Muffins - like those shown on the left - were so loved within the Jefferson family that Jefferson himself requested the recipe while living at the President's House.