



KEYSTONE CUISINE

By Zachary Falck

Donahoe's

When people reminisce about 20th-century downtown Pittsburgh as a place where things were cooking, they often recall Donahoe's. In striving to become one of "the world's greatest food stores," Donahoe's kitchen prepared "Reddy Kookt" meals for hurried customers. Donahoe's two downtown lunch counters and cafeterias served a "good-sized city" of office workers, shoppers, and conventioners.

Donahoe's began as a butter shop in Pittsburgh's Diamond Market House in the early 1900s. By 1919, when Donahoe's declared it was "America's finest pure food store," there were 17 locations around Allegheny County. Owners called the Fifth Avenue store in downtown Pittsburgh, which opened in 1923, "the FIRST ... Department Store of Food." The nearly 30 stores that had opened by 1950 were found in towns such as Aspinwall, Braddock, Homestead, Ingram, Millvale, Mt. Lebanon, Monessen, New Kensington, Sewickley, Tarentum, and Wilkinsburg.

Newspaper advertisements informed bread-and-butter customers about the cafeteria's daily specials. On one Thursday in 1927, Donahoe's offered to deliver steamed lobsters to the offices of men who preferred not "to fuss" with the crustaceans in a restaurant. More typical offerings included roasted chicken with stuffing and giblet sauce; baked shad with roe, parsley butter, and french-fried potatoes; and, a "blue ribbon special" of roast stuffed duck with fresh applesauce, candied

sweet potatoes, and Waldorf salad. One Friday's "airplane fish dinner" was fried yellow perch, fresh beans, and scalloped potatoes.

In 1927, Donahoe's sought to attract new customers by promoting healthy eating. Dr. Frank McCoy, author of *The Fast Way to Health*, helped Donahoe's develop "balanced food combination meals." McCoy featured omelets, toasted triscuits, stewed raisins, peanut butter, unsalted almonds and pecans, cottage cheese, lettuce, grated carrots, prunes, apples, oranges, and boiled rice. To counter perceptions that such meals were a fad, John Donahoe stated that a balanced meal was the "restaurant meal of the future." Even ex-mayor William Magee praised the cafeteria's advancement of "the general welfare of the community."

Yet Donahoe's always had treats for eaters who desired to "pamper their tastes" and who disregarded "established health rules." Its "creamy-whip" ice cream soda was "the foamiest, frothiest delight ... ever tasted." An ad tempted shoppers with diet lists to forget just "this once" that doughnuts were not on them because Donahoe's baked "the 'sweetest' doughnuts that ever touched your tongue." The cafeteria promised to refresh people "tired from shopping" with pie and coffee.

Some customers purchased grocery-prepared meals. A busy woman who might be "tired of making up menus" could "Buy Tonite's Meal Reddy

Donahoe's efforts to become and remain a household name included persuading shoppers to take prepared foods home and to bring their families downtown. This 1956 ad suggested the cafeteria featured foods familiar to children.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, December 13, 1956.

Kookt." Some Reddy Kookt dishes offered from the 1930s into the early 1950s included beef tongue, deviled crab, shrimp salad, salmon croquettes, fried oysters, fried perch fillets, fried whitefish, mushroom chop suey, macaroni with cheese, chicken a la king, roasted chicken with gravy, and chicken croquettes with creamed mushroom sauce. Donahoe's "Kold Aire" kept butter, peach ice cream, and raspberry sherbet solid on the way home.

Although Donahoe's owners hoped to establish "THE food store of America," the business did not survive into the last quarter of the 20th century, as eating and buying habits moved towards fast food restaurants and other convenience foods. Although the firm resolved financial problems in the 1930s and 1940s, it faced bankruptcy in 1962 and was placed in state receivership. By emphasizing "pickle-barrel" and delicatessen goods in 1963 at the Fifth Avenue store, the company managed to repay debts and expand into Pleasant Hills. But a plan to use its large downtown kitchen to prepare ready-to-reheat stews, Italian dishes, corned beef, and fried chicken for branch stores could not prevent the company from closing in June 1970. ☼



Donahoe's store on Washington Road, Mt. Lebanon.

All HHC L&A, Donahoe's Inc. Collection, c. 1925-1950. 1997.0244.



Donahoe's Fifth Avenue store, 1941.



Donahoe's Homewood store, 1939.