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 230 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 lunch,” in “the room where it happened.”

“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 1815 visit, “Mr. Jefferson had a wonderful tact in interesting his youthful visitors, and making the most dissident feel at ease in his company.”

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.

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