Nutritionists tell us that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I think my mum used to make similar policy statements every once in a while, so it must be true. When you're away from home without your significant other to cook porridge and sweeten it with honey, you will probably have found yourself having to brave the breakfast room. It can be a daunting experience.

Not all of us are at our animated best in the morning, and some of you may have sought safe haven in room service over the years. There is one colleague - I've been bribed so will divulge no names - who cooks porridge in his room. Hotel breakfast are pleasingly egalitarian because we are all united in our quest for answers: where's the coffee, the tea, the toast? Breakfast rooms combine drama, crowds, steam and milling confusion; they are rather like railway stations.

You wake up on Morning 1 in your spanking hotel, remember the route to the lifts and the floor on which they are serving breakfast (none of this stuff has been harmonised). On arrival there will be a sign asking you to wait to be seated. Obediently you and others wait. It takes time but, hey, who has anywhere to go in the morning. When I reach the front of the line I'm asked what my room number is. I rattle it off "2107" only to be told that the hotel doesn't have a room with that number. As usual I can only remember the room number I had last week. So out comes the room key with the room number; I mumble the number which is laboriously entered onto a list and I'm in, free to drool over the lavish abundance that is the hotel breakfast.

In a perfect world you would never visit a breakfast buffet for the first time, unable to find the correct crockery or work the coffee machine and generally getting in the way of the smug experts who've just spent their second night in the hotel. Like the army before moving into a theatre of operation, I try to reconnoitre so I can get the lie of the land regarding such essentials as: cereal, fruit, tea, coffee, bread, coffee, cold cuts and coffee. Did I mention coffee? The problem is that you don't know where anything is and you keep returning from your table to the buffet because you've forgotten something vital, like a knife. These frequent trips mark you down as the new kid in town.

As a result of globalisation all hotels now offer orange juice; some squeeze their own but it's usually made with concentrate and is absolutely mouth-puckering. You make a mental note to avoid it on Morning 2. The cereal and fruit salad can look attractive but you are often defeated by the absence of bowls or spoons, which the hotel has playfully hidden.

I am rather partial to smoked salmon, probably because I didn't get enough of it when I was a baby. Many hotels now offer it as the brain food option on the breakfast menu, but I always seem to arrive when the salmon plate contains only a few wisps of bedraggled parsley. I know that the dish will be replenished so I can get my fix, but when? My time is not my own because I'm here promoting -
hold on, what am I doing this week? Aha. Got it. Congress on short term memory loss.

Recently I managed to find a full plate of salmon and took my regulation slice (well two, I'll confess) and picked up a brown roll next to the salmon. When I bit into the roll it contained candied peel and sultanas. Believe me, this doesn't mix with salmon. *A prize for those who can guess which country this happened in.*

Hotels like to offer you the full fried breakfast of bacon, eggs and sausage. Many employ a chef to prepare eggs "to your taste" and generally fuss over you. Ordering eggs in an American hotel is a literary event: sunny side, over easy, over well, huevos rancheros. I love the language, the eggs are secondary. The trouble is that all these hotels are serving the sort of breakfast our ever-loving-spouses no longer allow, what with cholesterol, animal fat, hardened arteries and shortness of breath. I occasionally succumb, sneaking a little bit of scrambled egg to accompany the smoked salmon. Food of the gods, and just the thing to gear up to some German embedded sentences.

Once I have finally loaded my plate with food, poured myself a cup of coffee and found a seat I carefully place my prized victuals on the table, only to discover I've forgotten to bring a spoon. I return to the buffet, pick up a spoon and come back to my table to discover the waiter has cleared my plate because he thought I'd left. Such moments have forged my steely character.

Sometimes you spy a colleague braving the buffet. It's always a great relief to know you're in the right place and on the right day. We've all woken from the occasional nightmare where we've flown to Australia instead of Austria.

Some colleagues are prepared to interact with the human race first thing, others should really be given a wide berth. There is no way to tell which category your breakfasting colleague comes in to so I urge caution. After all it was Oscar Wilde who said, "Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast".

Drawings by Benoît Cliquet

**Recommended citation format:**