

Le ministre

Le ministre used to be a soup made of fruits, which was usually served cold, well before sometime during the eighteenth century, the sweets were definitively separated from the salty, acid or bitter ones, and condescendingly relegated to the *end* ('*issue*') of meals, at the moment of clearing (*desser/vir*) the table, after the last '*relevés*' (*removal*). As remains of these heroic times, the franc-comtoise sweet '*guigne*' cherry soup, and the Magyar morello cherry soup have preserved the medieval tradition; these cherry *ministres* are served either as an appetizer or a dessert, sometimes salted, sometimes lukewarm, or even laced with wine, according to the occasion. Yet worried gastronomes fear that this anodyne archaism may encourage other aberrant inversions: once admitted that *le ministre* may be served first, what could stop, by a mere mechanical reaction, the meal ending with a *tripe Financière sauce* or grated carrots with idiotic pickles... For indeed nothing is as fragile as the establishment of good taste: the synonymy of *dessert*, end of meal and *fruit* took centuries to establish the content of the conclusion of meals, which was dependent till then, not on the course's main ingredient, but on the conjoined constraints of the kitchen, the serving hall and the office. This close game was to cause many reforms in the distribution of dishes, from which our dessert culture was to emerge, the gem of a glorious era, when the Russian style of service had not a gleam of hope of ever evicting the French style of service, which it was yet to achieve under the reign of Nicolas Pavlovitch. Considered in the culinary context of pre-revolutionary France, the progressive adhesion of *le ministre* to the cause of an autonomous pastry was an all but visionary challenge, whose radical nature is unconceivable nowadays, since it implied its extraction from other soups which were served first, and its rallying the '*oublies*', sort of waffle, accompanied by wine and spices, whose rank was to be the '*boute-hors*' (*ousters*) and to have the last word.

In spite of *le ministre*'s venerable age as well as of the historical role it played in the definition of the elementary principles of modern gastronomy, since the second half of the twentieth century this dessert is most frequently called, in French kitchens or at least in Parisian kitchens, a '*nage* of fruit'. Being less obscure than *le ministre*, the *nage* exerts a certain attraction through its easy-to-overcome oddness, a mellow seduction that is perfectly adapted to the kind of clientèle without much culture favouring fashionable restaurants, who have deemed it less banal than a 'soup' of fruit. The precision of the relationship between these three categories should help in their definition in the context of a rigorous hierarchy of the genre and its species. Amongst the 'soups', *le ministre* applies only to the fruit soups, which can be thick but never roborative, and are consumed at dessert. As for the '*nage*', it designates, among *les ministres*, those less exclusively liquid or thick, the only ones with morsels of fruit, either immersed or floating, even sometimes going to the extreme of resembling a syrup gorged with wild berries.

Nevertheless if there is a real problem posed by *le ministre* it is not that of its position in relation to the *soup* or the *nage*. In the closed circle of desserts bearing the names of professions, or in pastry confectioner's jargon, 'professional sweets', *le ministre* is rather more intriguing than any of the others. Why is that? Because just any other sweet, even the very last of fruitcakes could have gone by the title this soup of fruit arrogated itself. The absence of a motivation for this denomination, its flagrant lack of legitimacy, seems to reveal an unbearable form of arbitrariness to free thinkers. For that very reason the minister does not escape the contests of sarcastic ingeniousness with which *le financier*, *le diplomate*, and *le juge* are all familiar, not to forget *la religieuse* (the sister) and *le mendiant* (the beggar). Some of these hermeneutics specialists even go as far as to affirm that the *nage* of fruit is termed

ministre because the beholder of that portfolio is so imbued with his own importance that his uttermost pleasure is, in the secret of his cabinet, to assist to the procession of his many *protégés*, come to flatter him and ‘serve His Excellence his soup’... Other specialists, for their part, found their arguments on the scrutiny of the formulations of ministerial official language—that is to say false promises, hype and the usual soup (*tarte à la crème*)—whose identification with an insipid soup or better even, with a marshmallow soup, when the demagogy is so blatant it is nauseating, is attested in the popular classes’ more familiar language, who seem decidedly to be obtuse.

However amusing these theories may be, they are not validated, for the real explanation is in fact incredibly simple. In Italian, soup is called *minestra*, which the Provençal *minestrone* should evoke to the French who still ignore the erstwhile culinary meaning of their *ministre*. Further enlightenment about this unexpected contiguity between the notions of ‘soup’ and ‘*ministre*’ implies a detour, one which takes us back to the common origins of the three vocables which revealed it, the Latin *minister* which means ‘servant’. This same root is found in the words ‘*administrer*’ and ‘*administration*’, the ‘*administrative*’ power being used, evidently, at the sole *service* of the people, to the exclusion of any other repressive or self-interested ends. The terms: servant, to serve, and to unserve (*desservir*) are also part of French table vocabulary and are all used when serving the soup, which is served, thus, administered, like a potage, such as *le ministre* is served for dessert. Furthermore etymology would suggest that the *servitude* of the liquid sweet takes its roots in the Latin opposition between *minister* and *magiste*. The first one is derived from *minus*, which gave the word *moins* (less in French, but also minus in English), but also *minuscule* (tiny) or *minable* (despicable), while the other comes from *magis*, that is to say ‘more’, but also master and masterly: the master knows more than his pupils, but the minister counts less than his administered. This common sense truth has crossed centuries, since after engraving in the marble that there is no power except by delegation of the people, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of August 26th 1789, supreme benchmark of ministerial action, reaffirms the primacy of the propagation of thought over the bouts of susceptibility of administrative agents. Its article XI indeed stipulates that: “*The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Every citizen may accordingly, speak, write and print with freedom*”. And conversely, article XV adds: “*Society has a right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.*”

At a time in which the *minister* plays at being a hidden god, like the host in the tabernacle of a deserted church, there is no doubt that the mere thought of his antique predestination to the humbleness of service would persuade the unbelieving crowd to consider him differently. Yet quite willing to avoid the divulgation of a polysemy whose consequences could reveal themselves to be uncontrollable, the caste of high-ranking priests-pastry confectioners has opposed its veto to any desecration, for the ministries are essential sanctuaries for French culinary experimentation, which it would be blasphemous to sully. The Presidency and Matignon, and many administrations employ chefs of great talent, at the personal service of ministers in charge, and of their families. This is also true of the formal ministries, such as the Quai d’Orsay, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or of the mammoth-like Ministry of National Education. Briefly freed from the harrowing rhythms and the military organisation of the starred restaurants, which they will eventually go back to unless they open their own pastry-shops, these state-employed pastry confectioners well know that the administration will not hesitate to acquire the high-quality products and sophisticated technology necessary to the full expression of their talents; these costs will then light-heartedly be attributed to the taxpayers, who know nothing of their rulers’ banquets, whose cynical generosity profits only their clans or clientèle. Yet this self-censure which hampers *le*

ministre's democratisation is less the result of a sordid matter of interest than it is a case of pathological interiorised primitive social complex. For it is out of the question that the plebeian masses consume *ministres*, as for patrician attacks, this would verge on profanation. In these circles in which vanity is exacerbated by the derisory enjoyment of the least morsel of power, the feudal mentality of the little 'barons' and the corollary servility of their arrogant flunkies have instituted taboos of an astounding violence in the face of a naïve conception of the democratic functioning of our European republics. There is no doubt that the sacrilegious ingestion by a *servant* of his totemic dish would provoke a national tragedy, the simple fact that it could happen would cause the serving pastry confectioner, who would be guilty at a second degree of this fetishist incest, to become deeply and durably autistic, the ultimate psychic rampart to the anthropophagic fantasy that would have struck him down like lightning. Having become secularised, the '*petites mains*' (the little hands) remain the prisoners of the taboo of the unnameable: their menus do not propose any *ministres*, but instead '*pagailles de fruits rouges*' (red berries jumble) or '*nages de fruits au citron vert*', (fruit *nage* with lime) so that none of their transfixed colleagues dare transgress the taboo either. Yet there are traces of a malaise in some of the awkward approximations one finds, such as '*minestrone d'agrumes, liqueur de citron*' (minestrone of citrus fruit, lemon liqueur), which was seen on a menu in a well-known restaurant near the ministerial offices.

These manifestations of the unconscious are a perverted symptom of the repressed sacrificial dimension of the *minister*, as shown by the choice of ingredients, which give it its crimson colour. From the 'Great Morillion' cherry soup, which was celebrated by Grimod de la Reynière in the last years of Louis XVI's reign, up to the modern 'carpathic' versions of *le ministre*, most of the certified recipes of European gastronomic history call for a combination of classic red fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, redcurrants and cherries, with a marked preference in the last instance, for the soft-fleshed acid varieties, such as the *guigne* sweet cherry or the Morello-cherry. Their fruity savour is often made more pungent by a strong maceration in spiced red wine, a combination of cinnamon, black pepper and cloves, with zests of citrus fruit in counterpoint to a slight thickening with redcurrant gelée. *Ministres* of this type wear a robe of deep incarnate, which is much more intimidating than the desperately wan grenadine coat of the common '*guignolet*'* cherry liqueur *ministre*. In order to avoid that impediment, pastry confectioners like to resort to an assortment of blueberries, myrtle, blackberry or blackcurrant. Thereby not only attenuating the *ministre*'s monochrome goriness, but also thereby enriching its texture; to the agreeable contrasts of textures is added the gustative pleasure of the unpredictable savours of the acid notes. And to top the red and blue, a bit of white is welcome in order to raise high the patriotic banner of this dessert that's banished from the governmental strongholds; the utter paradox is that it was '*fin de siècle*' fashion which gave this innocent French country soup, albeit unwittingly, a last touch of political connotation. *Ministres* are now served in pretentious small glass-casings called 'verrines', which are always colourless, and are adorned with a gew-gaw made of a marshmallow cube stuck on a plain little stick. Delicately swaying at about an inch above the scarlet undulation, this tottering head evokes the manes of the petty tyrants of the *Ancien Régime*, who were joyously decapitated on the thresholds of their ministries by a crowd jubilant at the thought of airing out these bogs of consanguinity, and taking their heads out on a pike so that they could at last get a look at the country.

Alas! It is a well-known fact that the association of the marshmallow and *le ministre* is purely fortuitous and absolutely without any war-like romanticism: the small white dice are but an accessory which finicky pastry artisans make an excessive use of when decorating their

* Nothing to do with Guignol, the famous puppet. Guignolet is a liqueur made from guignes (sweet cherries)

most flashy creations, especially the desserts sold in glass-casings although they're not liquid. The idea is to make it look sophisticated, and even more to the point, to justify a higher cost so that the client gets used to paying more even if there is no real justification in the price of the products used, but this does not explain it all, for this presentation does make visible by the transparency of all the elements composing the dessert, which is built according to a mechanical piling up of successive layers in a cylindrical formation. The aesthetics if pleasing to the eye, remain sterile: the savvy asymmetries, whose perilous invention constitutes one of the charms of plate desserts, are banished from the start, without appeal. The geometric diktats of an imposed figure do not even allow for the use of the irregular shapes of the fruit, whether enhanced through a presentation of their natural shape or through their way of being chopped. Carême would turn over in his grave, he who saw the art of pastry as a branch of the architectural arts, like sculpture. This process shows an extreme weakness in the construction of the dessert, whose structural decadence has inevitable repercussions on the proposed gustative pleasure. The larger fruit are banned, except if they're crushed, chopped up, or mashed to a pulp which excludes the degrees of maceration obtained or the different nuances of textures of the flesh, for instance in a same morsel prepared for candying—in that case, when working with meat, why not just give up the art of roasting, the taste of game, the choice of the cut, and just concentrate on how to season hamburgers. Moreover the layers of creams or compotes in the glass-casings are too thick and too numerous to be tasted simultaneously; thus a mere juxtaposition of preparations and not the elaboration of a refined assortment of tastes promised by the PR men of this short-winded revolution. And last but not least the biscuit is reduced to the too modest function of acting as a staunch partition between two preparations so that they don't interfere with one another. Yet only a certain type of monotonous, rather bland biscuit can fulfil this task, and that is how crunchiness and mellowness disappear as well. That is when the marshmallow dice make their entry. It was a case of enhancing a dessert intimately combining the delicate savours of a litchi compotée, a mango marmalade with a 'fleur de sel' caramel cream of mascarpone. The different preparations, the very similar textures were all delicious, perfectly executed—which is rare—but their bureaucratic compilation was meaningless. The suavity of a coconut marshmallow, as chopped up in half a dozen little dices with a crunchy surface, could seem to be a judicious choice to decorate the superior layer of glass-casing: the coconut with its exotic touch could marry with the mango and the litchi; re-enforced by the contrast of their internal mellowness, the crunchy surfaces of the marshmallow would have compensated for the too uniformly smooth lower layers; and as for the small cubic volumes, their festive disarray would have lightened up the rather bland and bare top of the cylinder. It looks great on the paper, but nothing happens when it's tasted.

An absurd fashion at the beginning, transposed any which way with mismatched analogies, that is the sad origin of the whitish rattle held so thoughtlessly by *le ministre*: the stick is there to place a distance between its embroached marshmallow and the red flow whose contact would not be in its interest. To pretend that the sweetish bitterness of the little cube prepares the palate for the tasting of the acidic perfumed soup would be to delude oneself, for *le ministre*'s head is no more use than it is of historical significance. That is why this inept appetizer (*amuse-gueule*) is left aside, rather than reticently swallowed. As the accessory bundles its counterfeit legend along, from its burning pinnacle the marshmallow declines the litany of misunderstandings of which it is only the vain excrescence. In the same way as Holbein's enigmatic anamorphosis, the white shadow hovering over *le ministre* relays, in art history, the role of the premonitory fly, which was purposefully painted on each still life, in order to affirm laconically—"you are nothing".

Le juge

When it's time for dessert, at first glance *le juge* might not seem very impressive: small, flat, round, and black, shaped like a hockey puck, made slippery and greased so it can spin off without qualms across the frozen surface, as an aerial hockey stick sends it overhead. Because of its roundness it belongs to that category of desserts whose ingestion is a permanent challenge to the tentative efforts of codification of table manners. Although it might not seem easy to determine by which extremity to seize it—because it has no extremity to speak of—from the onset it is easy to surmise that it will more gladly defy social norms of decency and cleanliness, than fail to honour its reputation of being available to each and every pressing appetite.

Beneath the chocolate icing, which entirely covers *le juge* is hidden a thin cushion of redcurrant jelly, a remarkable combination of acidity and sweetness, heightened by the crunchiness of its tiny pips. This acidic marmalade reclines on a bed of chocolate mousse whose bitterness compensates the head-notes whilst making it less cloying to the palate. These two layers of bittersweet compromise rest comfortably on a thick sponge-cake base. Generally, the summit of *le juge's* body is adorned with a fan-shaped ribbed chocolate decoration, completed by artistically disposed fresh redcurrants. However, there are many variations of ornamentation, reflecting the rich history of this little-known pastry, which has travelled through time under many shapes.

Indeed, the said pastry is far from recent: if this skating-rink accessory like pastry holds its name from the ancient profession practised in the halls of Justice it is not because of superficial considerations such as are traditionally associated with the darkness, shabbiness or baseness of its exterior aspect, which, it is believed by some wise-acres, coincides not only with contemporary judges' ceremonial apparel, but also with the expression of their deep-down temperament.

Although admittedly, French gastronomy didn't acquire its artistic dignity only by using the weapons of technique and savours; the literary and political implications of a great number of its daily feats have largely contributed to its consecration. This phenomenon is particular to France, whose culinary tradition, whether gourmet haute cuisine or family home cooking, often transcends the simple satisfaction of nutritive or even gustative ambitions. Luckily enough these last two pre-requisites have always been fulfilled; which is why culinary inventiveness has had ample time to gather a ludic dimension, which ignores social barriers, and distinguishes itself as much by the pleasure taken in the play of words, as in the intelligence at work in a technique. Free because it was considered superfluous, relegated to the end of meals, or reserved for the occasional popular festivities, when not for children's amusement, and thus consumable outside of regular meal schedules and of proper places, pastry has therefore played an important role in the emergence of an avant-garde ludic food culture.

It is in that light that the purely logical, and spontaneous justifications of *le juge's* appellation are true, inasmuch as they partake of that same freedom. Indeed *le juge* is called a 'judge' because it shares the blackness, ugliness and pettiness, whether moral, physical or vestimentary, it's always been associated with, as is shown by popular imagery from Daumier to Brassens, amongst many others. For indeed judges do sit on 'biscuits', by which they are

bought, and they do ‘puff themselves up’. Indeed judges, however cupid and vain, are cold monsters nevertheless, trapped between their ‘icing’ and their chocolaty bitterness. And yes, judges are more often ‘seeds’ of trouble, not to use a harsher word, such as ‘being steeped deep in it’, than justice. Yet a dessert is more than a set of disembodied concepts.

Moreover French pastry tradition proves not only that verbal cleverness isn’t the appanage of laborious concept forgers, in spite of their idolatry, but more to the point, that irony has its place in manual realisations, which give it shape often far better than words can. This joy born of action flourishes in the dessert under the guise of humour, a transmitted, shared humour experienced in the midst of an authentic collective history, although it may never be written, nor even glimpsed by art historians, omitting their object because they ignore its existence.

Le juge is a case study in this alternative art history. It is part of a tradition that goes back to the middle of the fourteenth century and originates in Bar-le-Duc, in Lorraine: that is where a gourmet apothecary invented a redcurrant jelly which was seeded by a goose feather. The city archives would rapidly report extravagant acquisitions of this precious substance for quite unconventional uses. And little by little a custom came into being, by which all judges who displayed an exemplary form of serenity in their judgements—one might as well say, all judges, given that whether the criteria was met or not was decided by the party which had gained satisfaction, would be rewarded by an offering of this jelly. In 1518 this custom was to take on a new intensity when the rosewood cases, which the jelly had previously been presented in, were replaced by small precious chiselled crystal glasses, the master-pieces of the monks of the Lisle-en-Barrois monastery. From then on, both the nobility and the middle class rivalled with each other in upholding this custom, under the benevolent gaze of the judges, always eager to do justice, not least to their appetites. And this form of corruption, whose childlike ingenuity could make it appear almost comical, was to become totally excessive as time went by, as is shown by the town archives, before the Revolution swept away these practises: production had reached 50,000 pots in 1780 and as was common knowledge throughout France, during centuries the Bar-Le-Duc jellies were offered all over France to all the mighty or influential people of the kingdom passing through this most welcoming and agreeable city of Lorraine, for protection or influence.

Le juge appears to be connected to this ‘French caviar’ through a spatial and temporal coincidence which is all the more troubling in that its initial sweet shape was that of a redcurrant jelly ‘roll’. This dessert is composed of a layer of raised cake, coated with various preparations according to the local traditions, and then rolled to form a roll, which is then sliced into thick round slices with a spiral design. This is a cake which has an ancient history in Eastern Europe and which is omnipresent from Alsace to Hungary, where poppy-seed and walnuts replace the jelly in the roll. In Eastern France, redcurrant jellies dominate, for reasons bound to remain mysterious if one fails to take into account both the century-old tradition of graft in Bar-le-Duc as well as a major linguistic phenomenon which appeared in Europe during the fifteenth century: the emergence, in the wake of the Roms’ arrival, of a slang specific to the so-called ‘dangerous’ classes. The trial of the Coquillards that took place in Dijon in 1455 has provided us with a precious lexicon of double-meanings used by these villains, all too familiar with justice, and this has completed the data provided by the jargon in Villon’s ballads. Thus it is that we learn from the glossary that was put together by the judges from Dijon that the Coquillards call ‘the justice of any place the *marine* or the *rouhe*’ (*wheel*). Consuming redcurrant jelly rolls, as preceded by the farcical slicing of the roll into ‘wheels’, in the popular layers of society which were not devoid of humour, was a festive simulacrum of the cannibal ritual, intended to purge society of the judges’ revolting corruption.

Of course by definition, slang's main interest is that the majority of people don't understand it. Thus it was that the tradition of naming *juge* the redcurrant jelly roll in the Eastern part of France remained quite esoteric, despite the cake's popularity, and almost disappeared as time went by, as the roll changed appearances, as new pastry trends came along, such as the progressive introduction of chocolate, in the form of icing or cream. Why *le juge* was to reappear with such panache on the French gastronomic scene in the 1870's must therefore be explained at length. France had just lost Alsace as well as a part of Lorraine, birthplace of *le juge*, the future of the Republic, which was dear to *le juge*-eaters, seemed far from well-assured, when an apparently new dessert began its incredible ascension. The very first Christmas *bûche* was a confectionary produced by Antoine Chabarlot, on Christmas Eve in 1874: it was made of sponge cake, butter and chocolate cream, and was shaped as a roll. The scholars of the profession in their unconvincing quest for believable origins evoke a Provençal custom of burning a log on Christmas Eve. In French slang a *sapeur** is another word for a judge; he *saps* by *sapements*, executed by *sapins*; the same root is attested with similar meanings whether in rom, or caló or in fourbesque. This roll is yet another metamorphosis of the *roulé*** which is *le juge*: *roulés* had always been consumed on Christmas Eve all over Eastern Europe and this avatar of the log, only gave children, intent on 'entering the career', a pretext for lodging a Christmas tree in its behind by a just return of things. Words can deceive and pleasure is not only oral...

'Once you've passed the boundary, there are no limits', would repeat the *sapeur* Camember, Lure-born and a contemporary cartoon protagonist of these events. This well-known embodiment of imbecility would then add: "And, I do claim it, in my eyes, the guilty party is innocent". Animated by the same spirit of absurd exaggeration, Alsatian refugees, who were pastry confectioners, sold in Paris, in the heat of the success of the first impaled logs, the first *juges* presented as such publicly: thick slices of redcurrant filled logs, served lying flat and coated with chocolate icing, giving them an appearance quite close to *le juges'* current aspect. The name blended in easily given this pompous end of century's fad with its *diplomates, marquises, religieuses, financiers, colonels* and other nourishing notables. *Le juge* remained in fashion until World War I, as did the fashion of the redcurrant jellies seeded with a goose-feather, whose production crossed the threshold of 600,000 pots in 1909. With the progress of the ideals of Democracy under the Third Republic, as well as with the Dreyfus Affair, the sarcastic verve to which *le juge* owed its very birth, had found ample echo, yet the vicissitudes of fashion were to impose on it years of Siberian exile until the leaden years of Vichy.

The way judges acted during the Occupation is certainly not a subject of pride for French administration, especially in the higher spheres of power. This probably explains why it is still very difficult to obtain documentation on the acts of the Conseil d'Etat, in both the occupied and 'free' zones. The highest jurisdiction in French administration has taken the wise precaution of having its history recorded by its own kind: like their judgements, the result of this very objective analysis holds in a few lines, avoiding the subject without much grace, yet always without appeal. There's quite a yawning gap between this official version and history as it took place, for during that period the judge in its pastry form was in full effervescence. The goose-feather seeded jelly having disappeared there arose the need of a replacement fruit. The solution came from a pastry confectioner in Riom, who disgusted by the gutlessness of his magistrate clientèle, found the adequate fruit: in the absence of the

* *Sapeur*: in English is a sapper, 'sapements' in slang means the punishments of justice and 'sapins' those employed to mete out these punishments; and a *sapin* is also a fir-tree.

** *Roulé* means rolled yet has another meaning: to be taken advantage of.

goose-feather seeded white or redcurrant jelly, he used the gooseberry (except that in French the gooseberry is called: groseille à maquereau, maquereau meaning mackerel as well as pimp), a bit coarser certainly but with aptly evocative connotations as to what was really going on, with the noble corporation at work in the lofty halls of Justice busily selling France to the Nazis, re-interpreting French law so that it negated the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, so as to legitimise the persecution of Jews and political opponents.

Yet our modern *juge* was born a bit later. This event took place in Paris, at a time during which the lack of chocolate entailed the use of all kinds of mediocre substitutes, some closer to a colourizer than to cocoa. Indeed these tasteless ersatz brought more clients to the black-market, which was exorbitantly expensive but well-stocked, for the well-off fringe of collaborationists—high-ranking civil servants, intellectuals and judges—intended to display a lifestyle worthy of their German hosts. A Parisian pastry confectioner decided to use the business his reputation brought him in order to divert some of the chocolate graciously provided by his despicable clientèle for the confection of *juges*. He modified the dessert's structure by adding a thick and very mellow Sacher sponge-cake, made from raw almond paste and cocoa powder—that is to say from ersatz... By proceeding this way he could reserve the real chocolate for the icing of the top, without altering the traditional aspect of *le juge*, black from head to toe. The 'almond' was not the most honourable* but the recipe was a treat and the connoisseurs appreciated the artful appropriation of the invention of the Viennese pastry confectioner, homonymous with the famous Sacher-Masoch, whose laughable perversions echoed the depravations of the eponymous puppets of their favourite sweet.

A taciturn Lorrain pastry confectioner it was, who tired of hearing his finicky clients reproach him with the disappearance of the goose-feather seeded jelly, added one last touch to *le juge's* reform by adding an original decoration: a little feather planted right in its *heart*, as he called it politely. So that those who were not content could seed the gooseberry jam themselves before eating the dessert. This new version of the sweet met with resounding success and spread all over the country, for, beyond its supposed function, it meant a return to the sources of this historical pastry. Its keen irony was immediately deciphered as a limpid allusion to the nocturnal collusion of the collaborating judges and Nazi occupying forces, who shared a taste for Parisian cabarets presenting pert young ladies dancing, wearing almost nothing but a few feathers, most often planted on their rear ends. Most confessed that the judges, by their outrageous submission to the occupants had shown that they deserved this insignia: they deserved to have a feather planted in their arses to complete the picture, and that's exactly what took place.

This dessert, which was emblematic of dark times, did not thrive during the period immediately after the war. Beyond the psychological barrier, there were also many material obstacles: rationing as well as the absence of the counter-balancing fighting force of indignation. Furthermore the pastry confectioners would have to adapt to the new sociological reality of the 'Trente Glorieuses'* marked by an important part of their clientèle's accession to the middle class. This had disastrous consequences on professional onomastics; amongst those direly named desserts, only the *beaten (battu)* cakes and the *failed (manqué)* cakes managed to survive. Their disgusting names would progressively condemn to a prudish extinction such centenary cakes as the 'vérolé' (poxed), the 'galeux' (mangy), and *le juge*. Yet this last pastry managed a stupendous comeback during our millennium, which remains

* Allusion to the expression 'Faire amende honorable': to make honourable amends, a process by which the punished person asked forgiveness as he was being punished and which was denounced by Voltaire.

* 'Les Trente Glorieuses': the thirty years of economical stability France enjoyed from the Libération until the first oil crisis (45-74)

unexplained in the actual state of research—although it would constitute an admirable topic of investigation. Whereas in Bar-le-Duc there was only one firm left, *À la Lorraine*, founded in 1879, still producing goose-feather seeded redcurrant jelly, suddenly, in the year 2000, a second one appeared. At exactly the same time some Parisian pastry confectioners began to present *judes* for sale. It is true they've lost their feathers; instead a chip of black chocolate seeks, through an engraving-like effect, to emulate a downy texture. Yet as soon as one engages in conversation with one of these facetious artisans of the rebirth of this little concentrate of French history, each and every one of them is prompt to offer a set of multi-coloured feathers to be stuck into the pastry when the time comes to eat it. As we know, for children the Twelfth Night Cake (*La Galette des Rois*) would lose all attraction without the 'hidden bean' (*fève*) and the 'crown' delivered by the baker, so it is for *le jude*; one must plant the feather up its arse oneself.

Le diplomate

Le diplomate was invented at the end of the nineteenth century, an emblem, to its very name, of what is commonly known as bourgeois cuisine.

As in the case of *le financier*, the term designates simultaneously a profession, a sauce and a pastry, whose common point is that they are rich, perhaps even too rich, for a reasonable appetite. The invention of Auguste Escoffier, itinerant codifier, the *diplomate* sauce, for instance, according to the *Repertory* of his faithful Gringuoire, consists in chopped truffle, combined, to make it simple, with a viscous marriage of ‘noble rot’ and molluscs: indeed its base is no less than an ‘essence of mushroom and oyster juice’ fish fumet, first tied in, then reduced, then butter and cream are added, and yet it remains very digestible, if one is to believe its patented defenders.

The homonymous sweet does not owe its name any more to *diplomate pudding*, which Gringuoire defines with his usual lapidary eloquence as a ‘cold cabinet pudding’, decorated with frills, and with the so-called *diplomate* cream, in its composition. The latter is a simple stiffened ‘English cream’, a bit stiffer than the bavaroise, and it’s to this fortuitous collusion with the then hostile or competing powers of France that it owes its name. It may be useful to add that *diplomate* cream contains liqueurs or coffee, not without an excessive preference for the first of the two. And yet the custom is to delete this last information, even though no one knows the reason for this collective blank.

Le diplomate which concerns us here is composed of only three elements—spoon cake, *diplomate* cream and fruit—and these are disposed very simply as follows: a layer of cake, hidden under a layer of cream, which in turn is hidden by a layer of fruit, and this is repeated once or twice.

Traditionally the cake used is *spoon* cake, which despite its appearance got its name because for the first four centuries of its inscription in the history of French cooking it was spoon-moulded. Its name has nothing to do with a certain popular expression which it never fails to evoke^{*}; nevertheless, the fact that in pastry spoon cake is often imbibed with alcohol, kirsch in particular, does not plead in its favour and it remains without doubt that, in the opinion of those in the know, the diplomats of this sort ‘are quite pathetic’. It was clearly established by historians that the split between the name and the pastry goes back in fact to the eve before Napoleon’s defeat, when the cake which was to serve as a base to the future *diplomate* was given by Carême, the elongated, reduced and flattened shape which was inspired by Talleyrand, so that he could dip them in his glass of Madeira, which would not have been possible in its first form.

As if the presence of spirits both in the cake and in the cream was not enough of a lack of taste the fruits used as a third component of the sweet are also dipped in spirits. Indeed the common diplomat only uses dried or candied fruit; and at a time where industrial production of those goods can be badly manipulated, their mediocrity is again underlined by this third adjunction of spirits that was supposed to attenuate it.

^{*} Biscuits à la cuiller: spoon-shaped cookies evoke the expression ‘à ramasser à la petite cuiller’ (to pick up with a spoon), that is to say: to be completely pathetic, rendered ineffective either through intoxication or naturally.

By counting on ignorant judges' indulgence, if it is easy to make a diplomat, given the simplicity of its very basic piling up scheme of calibrated preparations, yet it is also true that the dessert does not present a great culinary interest. That is why it had been banished from the good tables of France and Navarre, as well as of any self-respecting fine food-shop, and it's probably one of the only traditional French pastries not to have ever had any popular roots. Neither its pretension, which is contradicted by its gustative and technical mediocrity, nor its heaviness, a candied embodiment of self-conceit, can allow you to forget that the diplomat is void of himself and in that, conform to the only taste which gave it a reason for existing, which is now obsolete; this taste, which is undissociable from the thrusting bourgeois ideals of a bygone epoch, was that of the shameful embellishments of colonial expansion.

And yet *le diplomate* survives, here and there, under the guise of destructured recipes found on sites for housewives in quest of a certain quality of life, or worse still, as a monstrous aberration, but a real one, in the deep confines of the colonies. It is with pride that a Rumanian, or is it a Bulgarian pastry-shop, presents itself to the world, surrounded by the doubtful aura of a cake composed of two juxtaposed uneven half-circles, submerged in different dappled creams, respectively fluorescent or brownish: *le diplomate* and the 'richard' ** have merged to become a cake called 'cocktail', which is sold under the banner of an asinine Anglophony... Can the French traditional *diplomate* fall any lower, well the precise measure of its downfall would entail quite a perilous documentary adventure along the farthest of outposts according to French good taste which are China, Africa or South America, all of which, one can be almost quite sure, that they have met with as repugnant a form of *le diplomate* as the one found in Eastern Europe. Given the gastronomic horror that one would be condemned to affront at the term of this survey, it's doubtful that candidates would be numerous.

There's no inevitability in this discomfiture. *Le diplomate's* very definition is nothing but the combination of three elements: cake, cream and fruit, which can be found in the majority of French desserts; the specific use of the *diplomate* cream, one which is stiffened, perfumed, and with added spirits, is not shocking to a purist, as long as the proportions remain measured, and the choice of the savours refined and original; as for the construction's simplicity it can call for invention, or act as a reminder of humility. In short *le diplomate's* fiasco should be considered as a pretext for a vivifying and healthy recreation more than as a subject for maceration.

As for the first element, a very simple almond cake would be just fine. Both mellow and savoury, once imbibed with syrup or rather almond milk, it would produce an agreeable textural contrast with the other elements. The *diplomate* cream would be much more interesting if it was lightened up and given an added stiffness. It can be perfumed with a bit of alcohol; yet in this case it would be better to choose an old refined amber rum from Martinique, whose perfume only will penetrate the cream, without the heavy relents of alcohol. These small modifications would be enough to give *le diplomate* a bit of vitality, but the essential part is how to work the fruit. An apricot jelly, or even a simple orange zest marmalade, would make it a delicious dessert. Yet it would be an error to hamper gustative experimentation by exclusive prescriptions: the ideal would be to use only fruit in season, the best pick of the moment, and to renew these fruits all along, which is not the case in the traditional, heavy and stolid diplomat, which is alien to the notion of freshness itself. The raspberry, the fig or the mango would all be glorious, each in its own way; as for the pineapple, it would have to simmer awhile in sugar so that its natural acidity wouldn't alter

**'Un richard' evokes a wealthy person in French.

the *diplomate* cream's firmness beneath it; but it would become a feast with a bit of quince tenderised and candied with a bit of vanilla from Tahiti.

Finally at the moment of putting it together, one should limit oneself to two layerings, and then pour a fine layer of cream on the whole, in order to cover the cumulative structure and to give more elegance to the edifice. Fresh fruit of the same type as those of the filling can be used to decorate the top of the dessert. Although they must be cut and arranged with skill and a sense of aesthetics, their function is not only decorative: the contrast between the taste of the natural fruit and the taste of the fruit that's been modified is indeed stimulating for the perception and enrichment of gustative sensations. Of these refinements depends the pleasure, re-enforced by the surprise factor, for it is not given to everyone, be it only once in his life, to appreciate the freshness, the imagination, nor even the good taste of a diplomat.