Le juge

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At first glance le juge might not seem very impressive: dark in colour, it has a flat, round shape, rather like a hockey puck. Indeed, with its smooth glacee coating, it would, if struck, glide quite comfortably across a frozen surface. In spite of its smooth round exterior, le juge is in a class of desserts whose ingestion is a permanent challenge to every attempt at maintaining table etiquette. Although it might not seem easy to determine by which extremity to attack le juge — because he has no extremity to speak of— it is easy to surmise that it will more gladly defy social norms of decency and elegant consumption, than fail to honour its reputation of being available to each and every pressing appetite.

Beneath the outer coat of chocolate icing that cloaks le juge is concealed a fine layer of gooseberry jam textured with its tiny crunchy seeds. The result is a notable combination of sweetness and acidity. This tart marmalade rests on a layer of chocolate mousse whose bitterness counterbalances headaches brought on by overly rich cocoa extractions in those predisposed to such afflictions, or the loss of pleasure after two bites. This blend of soft and bitter companions is settled on a thick base comprised of a soft chocolate biscuit. In most cases, le juge is decorated with a rippled chocolate fan, and a modest sprinkling of fresh redcurrants. However, there are many acceptable variations of decoration applied to le juge, each of them evolved in the course of its rich, but little-known history, which has travelled through the centuries under many different guises.

The name of this 'hockey puck' is one and the same with the man of the profession who stalks the corridors of the courthouses. Yet, the naming has nothing to do with a superficial analogy with his sombre, often terrifying appearance — sporting an outfit that to a contemporary critical wit seems tailored for a highwayman. Having said that, the winning reputation of French gastronomy as Art was not achieved just by technique and flavour alone. The literary and political implications of many of its creations have also made a significant contribution to its success. This phenomenon is particular to France, where culinary tradition, whether gourmet haute cuisine or family home cooking, often transcends the simple satisfaction of nutritive or even gustative ambitions.

These are taken for granted. The process has been elevated to the dimension of a sophisticated game, indifferent to social status, nor conscious of the opposition between the man that creates with his words, and the man who creates with his hands. Such non-essential anecdotes of misunderstanding are best kept for after-dinner conversation. All we should concern ourselves with in regard to le juge is to adopt an air of fun in the manner children bring to eating. For this reason, le juge can be eaten anytime, anywhere.

Pastries have always played a leading role in the culinary game, and often combine humour with daring provocation. In that sense, the justification for naming le juge thus may have a grain of truth. Le juge is so-called because it is popular French opinion that judges share with their fellow magistrates, a sobriety, whether moral, physical or sartorial. Consider Daumier, who knew that judges did not refuse little 'treats': bribes that 1 they chose to deem mere gratitude.

‘Cold-blooded monsters wrapped in false pride…’: this description of the judiciary explains the bitterness that lies beneath le juge’s glacée icing. Just as seeds get stuck in one's teeth, the pitfalls of negotiating with judges far outweigh the benefits of the justice they are meant to administer.

Yet a dessert is more than a set of disembodied concepts. French pastry tradition proves not only that verbal cleverness isn't the perquisite of laborious theoreticians, in spite of their idolatry, but more to the point, that irony has its place in manual realisation, which gives 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, or 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. The same document records the first instance of the practice of rewarding a judge for displaying magnanimity in handing down sentences with jam from Bar-le-Duc. The practice gained even more importance in 1518, when the wooden case used to contain the jam was replaced by delicate jars made of precious crystal, produced by monks at the abbey of Lisle en Barois. From then on, both the nobility and the middle class rivalled each other in upholding this custom, under the benevolent gaze of the judges, always eager to do justice, not least to their appetites.

This comical, almost childish form of corruption further spread to the common people, and with time reached the excessive proportions attested to in accounts of the city right up to the eighteenth century, when the Revolution put an end to this malpractice. Production had reached 50,000 pots in 1780 and, as was common knowledge throughout France, during centuries the Bar-Le-Duc jam was 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.

The first known version of le juge was a redcurrant roll. This kind of rolled cake is an old recipe from Eastern Europe, usually made using puffed pastry spread with various fillings depending on the region. This was rolled into a log-shape, which was then cut into fine round slices. Variations on this roll can be found from Alsace to Hungary, where poppy seeds and walnuts are preferred to jam. 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 Rom's 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 roue' (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, the power of slang is that the majority of people don't understand it. Thus it was that the tradition of naming le 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, or Yule log, 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, or covering a log with cream. We only have to know that in the 'dangerous social classes' the judge was called the 1 'saboteur', assisted by gendarmes known as 'Christmas trees'. The Yule log is but a metamorphosis of the original roll known as le juge. He has always been eaten on Christmas Eve throughout Eastern Europe: yet the association relies upon a verbal pun: of the Yule log being a means to deliver a cheerful poke at the judge with a Christmas tree, whereby justice is served. Words can deceive and pleasure is not only oral...

The first juges were sold in Paris, by daring pastry chefs from Alsace. These took the form of gooseberry rolls, served lying flat and coated with chocolate icing, giving them an appearance quite close to the form of a reclining judge.

The name blended in easily, given this pompous end of century fad, with its diplomates, marquises, religieuses, financiers, colonels and other nourishing notables. Le juge remained in fashion until World War I, aided by the steady production of gooseberry jam, which by 1909 had achieved an output of 600,000 jars. The progress of the democratic spirit under the Third Republic, as well as the Dreyfus affair, and the persecution of Jewish Alsatians ordered by the judiciary, provided rich fodder for the French love of caricature. However, the thrill of victory was not favourable to le juge, steeped as it was in sarcasm. The way judges acted during the Occupation is certainly not a subject of pride for the French administration, especially in the higher spheres of power. The goose-feather seeded jelly having disappeared, there arose the need for a replacement fruit. The solution came from a pastry confectioner in Rom, who disgusted by the gutlessness of his magistrate clientele, found the adequate fruit: in the absence of the goose-feather seeded white or redcurrant jelly, he used the gooseberry.

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. He modified the dessert's structure by adding a thick and very mellow Sacher sponge cake, made from raw almond paste and cocoa powder. By proceeding this way, he could reserve the real chocolate for the icing on 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 Lorraine 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. 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. Yet, le juge managed a stupendous comeback during our millennium, which remains unexplained in the actual state of research—although it would constitute an admirable topic of investigation—with the founding of a new company in 2000, thus perpetuating the lineage of le juge.