

Gateau Life

Excerpts from the Past Thirty Years' Developments in Confectionery

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For most of the twentieth century, the chefs of France led the way in both innovation and commercial success. This was no less true of the *pâtisseurs* – the confectionery bakers – who developed and consolidated their field of gastronomy to such an extent that they seemed untouchable. However, during the '70s a certain stagnation could be detected, and slowly room was made for young guns to make their mark. This happened from an unexpected angle: In 1979 the profiterole, one of French *pâtisserie*'s perennial successes, saw a golden age in the hip confectioneries of New York. At the same time a group of young local bakers were experimenting with a honey meringue. It needed a bottom, and they opted for the popular profiterole. With a dash of pearl sugar on top, a new pastry was born. The name was obvious: Sugar Delight. And it became a great hit. Some food critics railed at the lack of originality and the fact that this pastry was based to such a great extent on an already existing recipe. However, this *modus operandi* of borrowing ingredients would prove pivotal in the art of pastry for the following thirty years.

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Malcom McLaren was not a chef, let alone a *pâtisseur*, but he was a savvy trend spotter. In the early '70s he and Vivienne Westwood opened a clothes boutique in London, a couple of years later he created the punk phenomenon The Sex Pistols, and in 1982 he recognised that the art of pastry was developing by leaps and bounds. McLaren sought out some bakers in New York and had them produce a cake inspired both by recent American confectionery and by African cuisine. Among the ingredients were such exotic items as baobab fruits and fried banana leaves – not exactly regular fare for western palates – but even though the cake was a peculiar gustatory experience which failed to dictate a fashion, it did become a hit. To be sure, the buzz was helped by the fact that McLaren had a naked 15-year-old girl promote the cake.

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Until King of Bran took centre stage, the New American Cake had been dominated by whipped cream, icing and custard. King of Bran were a trio of *pâtisseurs* from the black ghetto who began their career baking cakes for block parties. In the mid-'80s they made it big with a series of heavy loaf cakes that were made with, for confectionary, unusual flour types: rye, barley, spelt, etc. Overall King of Bran were as much *boulangers* as they were *confiseurs*, and their sales were made in the bakeries as much as in the confectioner's shops. They made heavy-duty cakes; cakes characterised by a great degree of what one might term masculinity. A prune custard with bran was a big hit for them in the Christmas of '87.

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Strudel Dudes: Three young Jewish guys from Brooklyn who in the mid-'80s made a breakthrough on a cake scene that was otherwise dominated by black people. They had a colossal hit with a beer banana layer cake which was launched with the slogan 'Fight for your right to pastry.' This layer cake was by no means sophisticated gastronomy; the bases were store-bought, and the whipped cream came from a can. It did not have any subtle nuances of taste but it was fun to look at and to eat. Back then the beer banana layer cake seemed like a lucky hit, and no-one imagined that twenty years later Strudel Dudes would still be at the top of the pastry game. But following their first cake they taught themselves to use real ingredients and also began to borrow bits of existing recipes in a more intelligent fashion, and today Strudel Dudes hold a position as grand old men of *pâtisserie*.

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Cake Politik was a *pâtisseur* collective who started out as food critics. So when they themselves decided to bake, they had a fully developed attitude to gastronomy. The cakes that Cake Politik made in the '80s are still today regarded as some of New *Pâtisserie*'s most innovative and delicious products. The group's ideological leader, Chunk-y, was very interested in the conditions of African-Americans and utilised the attention they got from their cakes to put political issues on the public agenda. Cake Politik were especially known for a series of fruit pies in an easily recognisable style which was to find many imitators: Colourful berries, a heavy dough base and an aggressive taste combination of the acidity of the berries, sweetness from the sugar and the crunchy dough. Among the group's highlights was the bestselling *parfait of a blackcurrant*.

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In the late '80s and early '90s Dr. Dough was a member of the controversial chef collective P.W.A. When the group disbanded, Dr. Dough went solo and debuted in 1992 with The Toffee, a cake with thick caramel on a crispy biscuit base. The taste hit something in the zeitgeist, and the cake became a huge hit. He also launched the careers of several other *pâtisseurs* whose cakes invariably would have the same

caramel taste, and for a number of years he completely dominated New Pâtisserie. One of the pâtisseurs he advanced was Chocolate Chocolate Chipp whose hand in The Toffee's success cannot be overstated. Chocolate Chocolate Chipp (who later dropped a Chocolate from his name) was one of the most outrageous personalities in patisserie and became one of its great icons. An even bigger icon was formed in Dr. Dough's white protégé, Donut Boy.

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While the West Coast in the '90s was distinguished by Dr. Dough's springy cakes, the New York scene was faltering somewhat until the confectioner Delicious P.I.E. emerged with a bang. He promoted the use of yeast as a rising agent whereas the chef groups in Los Angeles swore by baking soda. Pâtisserie had always had a tradition of dissing one's competitors, but over time the rivalry between the two rising methods escalated. Both factions had a penchant for cheesecake, and to outsiders the two types of pastry tasted similar, but inside the business accusations and badmouthing flew back and forth. The figureheads in this battle were the pâtisseur 2 Bake N Shake from LA and Delicious P.I.E. who represented the so-called Yeast Side. The rift culminated when 2 Bake N Shake was shot dead in '96, and Delicious P.I.E. suffered the same fate six months later. None of the murderers have yet been apprehended. Both Delicious P.I.E. and 2 Bake N Shake's cake companies have since issued a string of cakes whose recipes had only partly been finished by the pastry chefs themselves.

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Delicious P.I.E. worked for the chef Puff Pastry who usurped the throne as the king of patisserie after Dr. Dough. He was a skilled businessman (launching a line of porcelain, Bad Bun, with cake dishes, pastry forks, tea cups, etc.) with a great feel for what the consumers wanted. Even people who had never set foot in a confectioner's shop were captured by Puff Pastry's seductive calorie bombs. The food critics did not have great respect for him: New Patisserie had always been based on reusing ingredients from old recipes, but Puff Pastry did little more than issue familiar cakes with a bit of coloured icing: Éclair with strawberry icing, millefeuille with strawberry icing, apple crumble with strawberry icing. Nonetheless he made millions. He was not a very gifted chef, but he had remarkable business acumen. In the early 21st century he changed his name to P. Pasty – and later merely Pasty, but at this point he was no longer the icon he had been in the '90s.

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Big Banana Waffle was a member of the wildly popular Iroquois Posse, a group of pâtisseurs whose cakes and general appearance was inspired by old movies about Native Americans. All the members of Iroquois Posse subsequently had solo careers but none as colourful as Big Banana Waffle. His cakes looked like nothing you had ever seen. He would serve flan with spinach, layer cake with asparagus coulis or, most strange of all, chantilly dorade – gilt-head bream whipped cream. Nonetheless he managed to make these weird combinations work. His personal life was no less notorious: In '97 he was arrested for failing to pay alimony (about \$35,000) for the three children he had with his wife. At this point he was also the father of ten more children. The following years he was arrested for various traffic offences and minor drug possessions. He was sentenced to six months of rehab but having served four, he escaped. He was still wanted by the law, but after a month he turned up unexpectedly at the launch of a new cake by the Iroquois collective. Despite a huge police presence, he was able to get away. He was captured a few days later in a McDonald's parking lot where he was signing autographs for a big throng of people. Big Banana Waffle died in 2004 in his kitchen.

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Now, at the dawn of the 21st century, patisserie is more popular than ever. Even chefs of the old school have begun incorporating confiserie in their food. In some establishments the influence is so pervasive that defining whether you are in a restaurant or a confectionery can prove difficult. The new pâtisseurs began as a young generation's rebellion, so what role can they play now that their triumph is total? A new generation, the children of the old chefs, demonstrate with their cakes that the possibilities of patisserie by no means are exhausted. These young chefs avoid the familiar, commercial recipes, instead attempting to reinvent baking. Chefs like Mm Food, Cantaloup Box, Apple Top Consortium and the Englishman Cookie Pretzel have all made cakes that are acquired tastes. At first it might be hard to recognise the ingredients or even tell them apart, but their products are nutritious and exciting, marking out new territories for patisserie.

Bio: Giuseppe Raffael Mantard was born on a leap day and thus is only one quarter of his age. He has southern ancestry and a cat that lies to his face. This is his first book about cakes.

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