

‘Madame Blini’s Disdain’

The first thing you need to know about Madame Blini is she only eats in bed.

I go to *her*.

That the once great Arlo Gegenschmäcker should be reduced to such servitude is a tragedy. Alas, what the client wants, the client gets. We can inspire and we can encourage, but ultimately we must always obey. Whether on a hundred foot-yacht in the Caribbean or an alpine lodge in Davos, it's the client's prerogative to eat where they want. Thankfully, that place is usually a table – but not for Madame Blini. Here, in the basement of the Paris townhouse she calls home, she takes her meals on a sea of velour cushions, propped up by pillows, surrounded by the trinkets with which she fills her bed. Why is a table so important, you ask? Are you not being paid well for your work, Arlo? Well, some things in life are worth more than money. Respect, for instance.

You see, for the once great Arlo Gegenschmäcker, a table

was not simply a place upon which to eat, but a canvas upon which high art could be served. I did not cook meals; I created experiences – journeys through the lands of smell and taste. To have Arlo in your kitchen was to invite a tantric, days-long voyage of pleasure into your house, where plate after plate of impossible flavours and unimaginable textures met ramekins of impish titillation and glasses of liquid poetry. Five years ago, to be catered for by Arlo Gegenschmäcker was to participate in a theatre of the absurd, a circus for the senses in which no participant was safe. Here, in Madame Blini’s basement, those days seem a lifetime ago.

Serving her in bed is not even the worst part, for that would be her eyes. Those cold, unblinking, merciless black eyes. I cannot escape them even in sleep, alongside those wispy white curls that frame her face, her protruding nose and those thankless eyes, as black and impenetrable as the ocean floor. It is the eyes that matter, for it is the eyes in which my life’s work is reflected.

Molecular gastronomy is not so much a skill as a mindset, a psychology underpinning the frozen nitrogen ice cream and wafer-thin shavings of tripe carpaccio. There are many facets to this worldview, but principle among them is provocation. Gastronomists such as myself seek *reaction*, be it shock, surprise, wonder or awe. Our creations are engineered to force a response, and were it not for my current predicament I would not have discovered just how vital that response is to our craft. For without that reaction, what are we doing? Why do we

dedicate our days to pushing the boundaries of what society deems edible?

My theory is that, at its core, cooking is about power. It is a teasing dance, a dialogue between cook and diner. I show you my menu, a carte which does not provide choice; it merely states the order in which you will receive my creations. On paper, these dishes may revile you, may make you gag. You may even feel regret at your decision to pay a thousand euro deposit for the table.

“Beetroot tartare in a reclaimed sewage water glaze...how could that possibly taste good?”, you think.

But then, as that first bite enters your mouth, your tongue acquiesces to the earthy sweetness of the pulped vegetable, accentuated and augmented by the syrupy, faecal notes of the sewage glaze; and sure enough your eyes follow suit, as they close in wonder, keen to savour the unfathomable taste, before your vocal chords join in as you purr and groan at the sheer unbridled pleasure that minutes before seemed inconceivable.

That is the moment I seek. *That* is a chef’s power. The power to make you helpless. To render you a groaning, blinded mess. To tease you with a menu that seems beyond repugnance, only to dazzle you with a flavour and succulence only I could provide.

It is the absence of such reaction that turns my current days hollow, in service of this old girl who sits in her bed, staring me down as I bring plate after plate and bowl after bowl, culinary revolution after sensory world-first. She merely stares, then eats, then licks her lips and stares again, waiting for me to

retrieve the empty dish and return with my next attempt. If my life's work is to provoke, the black eyes of Madame Blini are my Everest.

I began working for the Chatelle family decades ago. Initially the work was less frequent, a birthday party here, a wedding anniversary there; but gradually the marks I left on their taste buds became too difficult for them to ignore. No longer content to have me solely cater their parties, they took me on as their private chef, meaning I followed in tow as they traversed the globe; from Paris to Dubai, Mauritius to Rio de Janeiro. For years, I saw the world and cooked its food. Each territory brought new ingredients, new ideas; ours was a mutually beneficial relationship. Monsieur Chatelle was an art collector of some renown, with galleries and collections the world over. That is why, I believe, we were such a good match. Though his wife never seemed as engaged with my work, her husband wanted to be challenged, inspired; he saw each meal as a possible epiphany, pushing me to reach the outer limits of my talent. Furthermore, he always believed his children should eat the same food as him. He had no time for patronising breakfast cereals or the notion of “children’s menus”. So began one of the most fulfilling periods of my gastronomic career, where the entire day was focused on composing menus simultaneously daring enough for Monsieur Chatelle’s intricate palate, yet subtle enough for his four-year-old Jean-Jacques to tolerate. An ordinary day’s service for this period might have been:

BREAKFAST

Insect muesli, swimming in a squid ink
and dark chocolate goat’s milk

LUNCH

Octopus brain in a bell jar of dry ice, smoked paprika,
polenta and clementines

DINNER

Pan-fried bull perineum with an English mustard foam,
on a bed of balsamic-infused hay

DESSERT

Candied watermelon with stem ginger and off-buttermilk

Of course Jean-Jacques was difficult, at times impossible to feed. But I lived for the *challenge*, and now – look at him! The boy has become a man, a qualified sommelier at one of the most respected restaurants in Bordeaux. It was through my relentless pursuit of his taste buds that his palate matured to the extent it did. One of the proudest moments of my life was the day Monsieur Chatelle sent me a photograph from Jean-Jacques’ graduation. We still keep in touch, though I must be secretive given my current surroundings.

Perhaps hunting down perfection as a hound does a game bird is what did for me in the end. Though my situation has its roots in a misunderstanding, I can accept those who claim the

once great Arlo Gegenschmäcker pushed things too far; that he made his own bed and for that, he must serve Madame Blini on hers.

The night in question came years into my service for the family. Madame Chatelle was away caring for her sickly mother, and so, with Jean-Jacques asleep, Monsieur Chatelle was the only mouth to feed. As such, there would be no compromise, nothing to hold me back, not Jean-Jacques, not Madame Chatelle, *personne!* It had been a particularly ebullient period of work for me, and perhaps I was drunk on my own brilliance, but the idea for Monsieur Chatelle's dessert had hit me like a lightning bolt. I have always been fascinated by the physics of chocolate, you see; how something solid can melt at mouth temperature, and I wondered if it was possible to serve chocolate in the state at which it melts; not solid, not melted, but *melt-ing*. I had managed to get my hands on some unrefined cocoa nibs, direct from Mali, untouched by man or beast, giving me a chance to bend their structure to my will. I roasted the nibs with white truffle, combined them with sheep's milk and the resulting cocoa-truffle butter, to produce a white-truffle-sheep's-milk chocolate.

But still the question remained of how to serve such a creation. How could it be delivered at the required state of melt-ing, rather than melt-ed? As Monsieur Chatelle was dining alone the chance to shock and surprise got the better of me. Having finished his first seven courses, I made my move. As the stars shone a silver blue above the Chatelles' verandah, I removed my shoes and placed the truffle chocolate in my

mouth. Creeping up behind him I grasped his head in my hands, turning it quickly so our mouths met before he could react. As his stunned lips touched mine, his tongue recoiling in shock, I shifted the truffle chocolate from my mouth to his, as a bird feeds its young, meaning the dessert was delivered *melt-ing*, direct into Monsieur Chatelle's mouth.

Brilliantly designed and flawlessly executed, save for one small detail; Madame Chatelle had arrived home early, to find her husband's lips locked to those of the then great Arlo Gegenschmäcker, his employee and loyal chef. As I said, Madame Chatelle was not as receptive to my art as Monsieur, and so despite my protestations, no matter how much I pleaded that what she had witnessed was not the betrayal she imagined, her mind was made up. If anything, claiming the kiss was just 'pudding' only exacerbated the evening's tensions.

In the subsequent divorce, Madame Blini and I were tossed around as bartering chips, buffeted by the fierce winds of the Chatelles' legal disentanglement. Alas, it was not Monsieur Chatelle who won the remainder of my contract. It was the now Mademoiselle, a scorned woman with plans for revenge.

Oh the black, black eyes, those callous windows into Madame Blini's unknowing soul. This old girl who sits on her bed, and does not react. Can she taste? I sense she must. Surely, her tongue knows of the gifts I bestow upon it daily. *Daily!* Has she not even the awareness to impart gratitude or thanks? *Mais oui*, I am only doing my job, but must she be so cold and robotic? Yes, she's old, but there's life in her yet; surely she

can still be surprised, shocked, *provoked*?

Well, if her reticence is wilful, today she has her work cut out. The once great Arlo Gegenschmäcker has awoken with a new determination, a resolve bordering on fervour. He will be ‘once’ great no longer. Today I scale my Everest. Today I make Madame Blini purr.

I have been preparing for hours, re-reading old menus, sifting through encyclopaedias of ingredients, re-living past triumphs in the hope of fresh inspiration. The King of Spain’s 60th birthday, for example, when I created pieces of sushi so tiny they were served in a Petri dish, accompanied by microscopes and tweezers so guests could marvel at how young the roe eggs were; what would Madame Blini make of those? I suspect she likes fish, but my fear is she would see the microscope for the gimmick it is. Or what about the tuna ceviche for Harrison Ford’s third wedding, cooked in the lactic acid its own body released during the struggle to free itself from the fisherman’s net? Again, my instinct says its flavours are too delicate; if Madame Blini’s disdain is due to an inability to savour, everything must be bigger, the ingredients more robust.

The hours pass in a frenzy of research and experimentation, until the menu crystallises in front of me. As the early morning sun trickles through the kitchen’s shutters, I gather my first dish, and enter Madame Blini’s boudoir.

The first thing that hits me is the murky smell of wet moss and stale mud. This is no reflection on the house’s cleaning staff; it’s how Madame Blini likes to keep her room. I walk a few paces to her bed and she is already sitting up, perched atop a

mountain of pillows, a swarm of odd socks strewn across the covers.

“Would Madame care for her breakfast?”

Her black, unblinking eyes cut into me like shrapnel, but I do not bend. I take her silence as compliance and place my first dish in front of her.

“Mackerel skins, coated in a thyme egg batter, deep fried and finished with a peanut butter sauce.”

I bow and stand aside. She stares at me, and then the food, before lowering her face to the plate and attacking it, barely pausing for breath. She licks the plate clean and returns those black eyes to my face, without a word of thanks or a sound of pleasure. So far, so normal.

“Did Madame enjoy?”

Still nothing.

“Very well.” I remove the plate, take it back to the kitchen, and return to her bedside with the second dish.

“For Madame’s second course: a blue cheese and prawn head chowder, accompanied by a baby turnip purée and again, a peanut butter sauce.”

I place it down in front of her and stand aside. She looks at me, then the bowl, and once again devours the dish, with no thought of closing her mouth or basic manners; the crunch of prawn heads rebounds around the boudoir, pink antennae poking out the corners of Madame Blini’s mouth. She finishes, licks her lips, and stares once more, her cold black eyes daring me to flinch. But it is not me who will flinch today. No Madame, today it is you.

“Was this dish to Madame’s satisfaction?”

Nothing again. I expected as much. Which is why I put

everything into her third course; a carnival of horrors that will surely cause revulsion or at least shock, will surely force her from her desensitised coma, *must* make her groan in wonder at how such a monstrosity could taste so delicious. I bring the abomination to her bedside and place it before her disapproving glare.

“And for Madame’s final course this morning: a peanut butter and offal carrot cake, complete with mashed potato icing and crushed Reindeer antler.”

Now I’ve got her; I look deep, deep into those eyes, those circles of polished coal, goading her to question me, daring her to react. She returns my gaze and we stare at one another for what seems like an eternity, neither wanting to blink first.

She eats the cake and licks her lips. Without a sound, without a whimper. Nothing.

The doorbell rings and she races out of bed, running full-pelt to the front door. It is time for her morning walk, so she sits like a good girl while Mademoiselle Chatelle attaches her lead.

“Did Madame Blini enjoy her breakfast?” Mademoiselle shouts down the hall.

“Yes, Mademoiselle Chatelle,” replies the once great Arlo Gegenschmækker. “I think so.”