

The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris



The Tale of a Fancy Cake

“La France : Laissez-lui faire des choses frivoles sérieusement et gaiement les choses sérieuses”. France. Let her perform frivolous things seriously and serious things gaily. Montesquieu, 1689-1755



The most celebrated cake in France in the realm of Haute Pâtisserie is a Fancy Cake named Opera which made its debut on the grand Party Circuit 54 years ago. One does not generally affix the adjective Chic to a cake. However, Opera is Chic the way one knows Dior was chic or Chanel was chic. It is a very Parisian quality and recognizable immediately. Its fans are a wide and varied group. Surprisingly the cake is a big seller among the swells of Tokyo who find it divinely “shibuyi”. The Look

pleases their aesthetic of pared down beauty and the delicate combination of tastes appeals to the Japanese who are notoriously fond of sweets. Their native confections of red bean paste are exquisite but you would never turn to them for a sugar high.

There have been a number of attempts to copy the Opera but the original one and only rests with the elegant pastry firm of Dalloyau, whose display windows are among the show-stoppers on the fashionable Faubourg. Saint Honoré in Paris. Dalloyau is jealous about its Opera and is regularly in litigation against the Big Players who claim to have invented it. According to Nadine Bernardé, the charming but feisty owner of Dalloyau, the cake was created by her father Cyriaque Gavillon and it is not in public domain.

Young Gavillon had been working as a pastry chef at the Hotel Ritz, the domain of the great Escoffier. In 1949 he left the Ritz so he could be his own boss and bought a modest bakery named Dalloyau. The little pastry shop had never been more than a neighborhood affair but it had been around for a long time. Cyriaque liked the idea that he could legally stamp on his card...Dalloyau, Founded in 1802. The date evoked a pleasing importance. 1802 marked the beginning of the return of the Émigrés who had fled the Revolution. the Émigrés brought back with them the Parisian tastes for Fashion, Culture, and Beaux Arts.

Paris in the 1950's was exploding with talents. Everything was New, New, New. There was the excitement of The New Look in Couture and the New Wave in Cinema. The cabarets sparkled with wit. Gavillon decided the time was right to redesign French pastry. For years the Fancy Cake had been a high round affair as lavishly decorated as the hats pretty

women wore to the races of Longchamps and Chantilly. Gavillon spent his days expanding his shop and its services. Nights he experimented with cakes that did away with the old-fashioned fussiness.

He changed the shape from round to square. He lowered the height and the proportions became more dynamic. The next challenge was for a skilled baker to achieve the seemingly impossible: a cake of eight layers within the height of little more than one inch. Gavillon applied the finishing touch...a sleek coating of dark chocolate on top. To enliven the surface, he incorporated a few scattered irregular shapes of gold leaf. The result suggested a piece of Art Deco. The effect was beyond pretty. It was Smart.

Looking for a classy name, he chose Opera. Gavillon's creation became an immediate hit on the Grand Party circuit. The square shape also pleased the bakers who found it easy to size Opera for six persons, for 20, or for one.

Dalloyau is still a family enterprise. Cyriaque's granddaughter Christelle recently developed a 2009 offshoot of Opera to present along side the house classic. She shifted the predominant note from chocolate to coffee. The look is the same except for a slight alteration in the composition and for the covering of pale beige mocha instead of the chocolate.

Christelle's version recently was given a private introduction in the sumptuous salons of Cerruti on the Place de la Madeleine overlooking the church of La Madeleine in central Paris. The venerable tailoring establishment had moved its garments into its storerooms to clear the space for Dalloyau to install giant epergnes of crimson roses and toss masses of rose petals around the floor. A young tenor was singing Mozart arias. A Dalloyau artist handed me a little rose he had just concocted out of sugar. Young waiters circulated about with flutes of Champagne and small squares of Opera Dark and Opera Pale for tasting and comparing.

For a few hours the world was the mythical kingdom of Graustark....all music, roses, Champagne, and splendid cakes.

“Don't talk about the macaroons,” whispered Christelle. “People keep buying them and buying them. But we are more than macaroons.”

However, the macaroon addicts are many. Every few weeks Dalloyau comes out with a new flavor. The latest is a marriage in heaven combination of Cognac and Champagne.

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