



The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris

Remi Flachard, the international specialist in vintage cookbooks

The subject of Gastronomy like the subject of Love has been the stuff of Literature for thousands of years. To read about food is to extend the pleasure of actually eating it. To read the menu of an inspired meal is enough to set the taste buds quivering. The market expert in this mouthwatering domain of bibliophilia is Remi Flachard, 51, who for the past 20 years has been supplying collectors around the world with works pertaining to their passion.

Flachard's headquarters is a modest bookshop at 9 rue du Bac in the 7th arrondissement of Paris. His little shop furnished in False Gothic is a gallimaufry of vintage cookbooks ranging from rare to *rarissime* plus a selection of quality titles from the 20th century. Those from earlier centuries were splendidly leather bound and generously tooled in gold. An important section of the stock is devoted to wine and vineyard culture. Another group deals with bread and bread making. The collection of historic menus is exceptional.

Most of the books are in French which is not surprising since for centuries French chefs headed the kitchens of most of the royal courts of Europe and managed to write down what was going on. Just as French was the lingua franca in the world of the diplomats, French was the lingua franca in the world of the summit cooks, a world unmarked by borders.

Flachard is an exceptionally tall thin fellow who sports exquisite shoes, boots and bottines; speaks in a measured "vieille France" manner and rain or shine bicycles 20 minutes to work each morning across Paris from the 17th to the 7th arrondissement. His ivory tower shop maintains an active mailing list reaching into eight countries where the collectors are avid to grab Flachard's latest finds. Flachard's high end finds are not kitchen home companions, one does not risk gravy on an 1823 edition of a work by the legendary Antonin Careme or a treatise on the economic viability of the potato by the agronomist and army apothecary Antoine-Auguste Parmentier (1737-1817).

The other day I dropped in on Flachard, a way stop I enjoy every few months because it feels like a trip into a literary Paris of Once Upon a Time that I happen to adore. He was hunched over a table piled with ledgers, papers, index cards and other paraphernalia. If Dumas or Balzac had walked in we probably would have said Hello without surprise. The crowded scene is deceptive. Although the narrow premises appear to be an uncharted sea of books, Flachard who knows his stuff can locate in an instant any requested volume even when it is hidden deep behind two others. Thoughtfully he has

spirited the most valuable items out of sight. Thus one can feel free to browse without succumbing to a wave of excessive temptation.

Flachard was finishing preparation on his Number 39 catalog, a lovingly produced illustrated booklet describing exceptional items currently available. He mails out several thousand of his catalogs twice a year. Requests to purchase the catalog are frequent. He turns them down saying, "The catalog is not for sale. Buy a book and I give you the catalogue for free."



Remi Flachard

With books priced in the hundreds and thousands of euros, the response at first sounds disdainfully lofty. Actually it is not as high handed as it first might seem. The shop offers a considerable selection of quality books more digestibly priced from 20 to 60 euros. Consequently obtaining Flachard's gift catalog is not completely beyond reach. Serious collectors keep the catalogues on their shelves as a source of reference.

Flachard was excitedly poring over a recently acquired set of 55 official menus commemorating banquets, dinners and receptions that had taken place between 1900-1960. The precious trove represented the private collection of Pierre de Fouquieres who had been the French Foreign Office's Chief of Protocol during what obviously was a highly entertaining period. On many occasions it was Fouquieres who represented France at the party.

The stunningly designed menus in the Fouquieres collection that Flachard was cataloguing evoked the social history of an era. The wedding of the Crown Prince of Iran to Fawzia the ravishing sister of Farouk of Egypt was a lavish affair. 15 elaborately illuminated menus attest to the 15 banquets that celebrated the ceremony. Fawzia eventually was repudiated for having produced only a daughter.

The elegant Fouquieres, who from his photo was the quintessence of Fifty Million Frenchmen can't be wrong, had impresarioed glorious official receptions for delegations of Italians, Swiss, Belgians, Americans, English and Norwegians. In 1911, Fouquieres

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was an official guest at the festive dinner at the Calcutta Club for the marriage of Tikka Sahib, the son of the Maharajah of Kapurthala, the mythically rich family whose fief was one of the princely states of India. According to the menu, the Kapurthala wedding dinner was as dazzling as anything dreamed up by Bollywood decades later.

The Franco-Russian Alliance, 1893 -1909, can be followed through Flachard's fascinating series of 11 beautifully decorated menus of meals that punctuated the many events. It was party time much of the way. The excitement began on October 19, 1893, when the Municipality of Paris honored the officers of the Russian squadron with a sumptuous banquet at the Hotel de Ville. Luminaries among the 564 guests were the Mayors of Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, Lille, Toulouse, Le Havre, Nantes and Reims. The illustrious catering firm of Potel & Chabot was engaged to serve the luxurious banquet.

The menus read like a diary of an Embassy attaché.

On October 5, 1896 at 2 p.m. the Russian Imperial yacht, *The Polar Star*, arrived in Cherbourg on a courtesy visit. Aboard were the Tzar Nicholas II and the Tzarina Alexandra Feodorovna. They were greeted by President Felix Faure who that night hosted a dinner in their honor at the "Prefecture Maritime".

Nicholas and Alexandra were back in France again on September 18th, 1901, this time steaming into Dunkirk on the Imperial yacht, the *Standart*. President Emile Loubet hosted the welcoming lunch. Two days later the French President and the Russian Tzar co-hosted

a gala dinner at the Chateau de Compiègne, Escoffier, in his "*Book of Menus*" cited the dinner at Compiègne as a model for a grand Presidential reception.

The menus from the years of the Franco Russian alliance are a footnote of history. The relationship obviously was warm. On July 28, 1908, The Tzar and the Tzarina had dinner on the French warship *Verite* anchored in the roadstead off Cherbourg. A year later they returned to Cherbourg aboard the Imperial yacht, the *Standart*, and were greeted like old friends. On the night of July 31, 1909 dinner on the *Verite* was an 18 course Royal Gala.

The fete continued. Lunch aboard the *Verite* on August 1st, 1909 had been scaled down to a happy informal family affair. The Tzar and the Tzarina had brought their children along on the trip.... the four young Archduchesses: Olga, Marie, Tatiana and Anastasia.

In his specialized "librairie", Flachard has for sale a few memorabilia with gastronomic connections. I was captivated by a pencil portrait of the endearing Edouard de Pomiane, scientist, gastronome and author of several delightful books always in demand.

At tony dinner parties in 19th century Paris, the menu was passed around in a hand-held "porte-menu". Flachard has two examples of these elegant little accessories. One with a frame and handle in sterling silver was by the firm Charles Nicolas Odier (1850-1860). The other in silver plate, marked by the firm Christophle, dates from 1900. Either one would add a charming grace note to any dinner party today.