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The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris



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A Tale of Intelligent Extravagance

Can money be made by throwing it out the window to make it come in the door? Laurent, one of Paris' top echelon restaurants, dared to make the pitch.

The *pomme de terre soufflée* is what department stores in America used to call a loss leader. You choose a bewitching item to bedazzle the customer and then sell it below cost. The short term risk can put you in the red but the loss may win you a client for life.

Take the case of the *pomme de terre soufflée*. Most gastronomes have heard of it but few have ever seen one. It is an improbable whimsy. An oval slice of potato is blown up until it resembles something that looks like a petal or a small hollow shell, depending on your imagination. Alice in Wonderland stuff.

Then one recent day at lunch chez Laurent, my personal choice for the classiest of the grand tradition restaurants in Paris, the *pomme soufflée* appeared, unannounced. I had ordered filet of beef as my main course. It came individually plated in a row of neat slices. Bordering the left side of the beef slices was a procession of the mythical golden puffs.

"The reason you rarely see them," explained Philippe Bourguignon, director of Laurent, "is because to make them is totally unprofitable for a restaurant these days. Come to the kitchen tomorrow morning and we will show you how we prepare them."

The birth of the *pomme soufflée* is a chapter of gastronomic folklore... a mistake that resulted in a triumph.

In 1832 the railway was inaugurated between Paris and St.Germain-en-Laye 25 kilometers to the west. A joyous meal had been organized to celebrate the event. However, the train was held up en route and the schedule was disrupted, The frantic cook, who had prepared everything to be split-second ready for the momentous arrival, in desperation removed his potatoes from the boiling oil and held them aside until he received further instructions. When the train finally pulled into the station, he plunged his now cooled potatoes into a fresh batch of boiling oil.

Eureka! His potatoes, instead of being spoiled, had swelled up like the breasts of pouter pigeons into *pommes soufflées*.

The demonstration in Laurent's kitchen was an example of artisanal technique aided by technology and a formalized scientific approach. Executive chef Alain Pegouret had selected the *Agria* as the variety of potato most suitable for the metamorphosis into a *pomme soufflée*. The *Agria* has two specific advantages. It remains blond

under all procedures, free of any spot of black or burn. After being subjected to the double boiling in oil, its texture is pleasantly crisp.

The specifications for the demonstration were precise as for a Broadway chorus line. Each potato was weighed in at 270 grams. It was then peeled and wiped dry but never washed. Daniel Fradin, the 20 year veteran of Laurent's kitchen brigade and the specialist of the demanding "pomme soufflée" had already formed his potatoes into perfect ovals by means of a 6x9 oval cookie cutter. He adjusted his mandoline so that he could reduce each oval into seven or eight uniform slices.



Alain Pegouret

Fradin tossed some 60 slices into a large recipient of vegetable oil which was boiling at a thermostatically controlled 140 degrees Centigrade. The temperature is all-important. He began to stir and agitate the oil in a circular motion for four or five minutes. As soon as the potato slices began to swell, he quickly transferred them to a sheet of sulphurized paper to cool and placed a wooden plank atop while they awaited the next step.

When an order came from the dining room, the potatoes went lickety split into a second basin of oil, this one thermostatically controlled at 190 degrees. The kitchen magic immediately went to work anew. Additional swelling. A quick sponge of each slice, a light dusting of salt, a dash to the dining room.

Invariably come several immediate requests for a separate order of *pommes soufflées*. The downside: more popularity for the labor-intensive dish means an extra column of unprofitability for the house. The reward, however, is increased customer loyalty and affection for Laurent for going to all that trouble.

This is the season for fresh asparagus. One of the most exquisite dishes I have ever seen (and equally exquisite in taste) is Alain Pegouret's "Asperges Balai", a conception as seemingly simple and as impeccably executed as a creation of Dior, Chanel or YSL.

Pegouret asked his supplier to find him a variety of cultivated green asparagus that was as close as possible to wild asparagus. His market-gardener located the Balai, which comes from the Luberon section of Provence.

The construction is a sunburst of thin spears of green asparagus around a soft-yolked egg "mollet". This glory is served at Laurent only in Spring. It is one of the highlights of the season.