

Sweet Story of Success

It is 4 o'clock on Christmas morning.

Henri Charpentier is 14 years old today.

He pulls on his coat while he throws himself down the rickety stairs. His frozen fingers fumble in his pocket for the keys to the front door. He slips out as quietly as a 14-year-old teenager can. He carefully makes his way, slipping and falling only once, towards his uncle's restaurant.

He hears the restaurant before he sees it. The Café de Paris is already throbbing with life and pulsation with expectation. Today is the day!

You will be forgiven if you thought all this fuss was because it is Christmas day. Yes, indeed, Christmas day is a very important day on the French religious calendar, but the main Christmas feast in France takes place on Christmas Eve. This year is no exception. Henri worked till 2 o'clock this morning. He barely had time to go home and change before he had to come back. You would also be mistaken if you thought that all this is in celebration of Henri's birthday. Nothing ; could be further from the truth. Henri has only been working at his uncle's restaurant for 7 weeks. His mother had begged her brother relentlessly since he was 10 years old to give him a job.

Henri is obsessed with food. Much like his uncle, but apparently without the creativity that made his uncle famous. Not to mention his hopefully age-related clumsiness. The great chef prudently decided to give Henri a job as an assistant waiter, hoping he would wreck less havoc on the restaurant floor than he would in the restaurant's kitchen.

The chef's wish had only partially been granted. Henri has managed to make an impressive amount of *faux pas* during his short tenure at the world-renowned restaurant, so much so that the poor chef has, on more account been heard to mutter, "Sacrebleu! Qu'on me débarrasse de cette imbécile!"

Knowing his uncle to have a volatile temper, Henri decided not to take his uncle's expletives and insults to heart. Although he spent most of his time in the restaurant, whenever he has a moment free, he slips into the kitchen where he, wide-eyed with wonder and bursting with admiration, quietly observes his uncle at work.

Henri has learnt an enormous amount about cooking in this short period of time. One of his most important lessons has been that unless a dish has been damaged beyond repair, chances are that it can be salvaged with a bit of ingenuity and a lot of flair.

No, today is not special because it is Christmas day or because it is Henri's 14th birthday - an occurrence that no-one in the restaurant was aware of, as far as he knows. Today is the day the Prince of Wales was coming to dinner! The Prince arrived in Monte Carlo a couple of days ago, with a sizeable party. On this memorable day, he and his guests have decided to sample the great chef Escoffier's celebrated Christmas fare.

Henri knows he wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the Prince, but he doesn't care. He is convinced that this will be a tremendous learning opportunity for him and he intends to make the most of it. The whole morning long, he slips in and out of the kitchen, whenever he dares, and takes in, with bated breath, the creation of the most lavish of Christmas dinners.

Promptly, if rather surprisingly, the Prince and his party arrive on the dot of noon. Even the Prince knew that it would do no good to offend a chef as grand as Escoffier by being late. Henri watches the proceedings from behind an antique drinks' cabinet. Everything was going swimmingly. One exquisite dish follows another, and the Prince's praise flows as freely and as abundantly as the wine. The Prince, replete after a very heavy meal, asks for some of Escoffier's feather-light pancakes for dessert. The chef is only too happy to comply. The dough is whipped up double-quick and the commis-chefs rush to bake the pancakes to perfection, naturellement. Soon their irresistible aroma fill the restaurant. Auguste Escoffier is getting annoyed, as preparing the delicate pancakes for such a large party was taking longer than he thinks it should. A lot of shouting can be heard each time the door of the kitchen swings open. The Prince takes it all in his stride and is seen licking his lips more than once. Escoffier prepares the orange butter to pour over the pancakes himself.

Just at that moment, the head waiter discovers Henri hiding behind the drinks' cabinet. He pulls out a bottle of Cointreau to serve with the pancakes and struggles to twist off the top. His temper frayed, he grabs Henri by the ear and drags him, stumbling and protesting, towards the kitchen.

And then it happens.

The kitchen door swings open.

Escoffier, himself, carrying a single serving of his piece de resistance reverently on a plate, appears in the door. For a moment, time stands still...and then everything goes wrong at once. The head waiter, looking back at Henri, collides with the chef. The plate of pancakes goes flying. For once in his life, Henri does not dither, he reaches for and gets hold of the plate before it hit the floor.

The plate survives intact. The pancakes and the butter sauce continue their trajectory and land in a pool of Cointreau that the head waiter, still defiantly holding on to the bottle, has spilt on the floor.

Henri knows it was up to him to save the day - and his now blubbering incoherently uncle's reputation. He scoops the pancake up, dumps it back on the plate and makes his way to the Prince's table, holding the plate high above his head, balanced on the tips of his fingers, just as he had been taught. Less than a meter from the royal party, he passes under an old-fashioned chandelier, fitted with lit candles. The Cointreau brandy bursts into flames. Henri does not notice.

Escoffier sees it all happening and falls to his knees. His reputation is ruined.

With a flourish he has never achieved before, Henri presents the Prince with the still-burning pancakes.

Everyone in the restaurant holds their breath.

The prince, who had seen nothing of the altercation, stares perplexedly at his burning pancakes, and then his whole face breaks into a smile. "Escoffier, you old devil, what is this? Flambéed pancakes? Incroyable! Whatever will you come up with next?"

Escoffier scuttles over, a million excuses on the tip of his tongue.

"So what do you call this exceptional dessert, Escoffier?"

Escoffier could barely utter a word but did manage to mumble that he would be honoured if the Prince would name this new creation.

“In that case, mon brave, I will name it ‘Crêpes Suzette’ after Princesse Suzanne,” the prince says, gesturing towards a young girl sitting at his table. He cut a piece of the now burnt-out pancake and put it in his mouth.

Once again, everyone holds their breath. Once again, a blissful smile spreads across the Prince’s features.

“Escoffier,” he says, “how come you have kept the best till last? This is one of the most fantastic desserts I have ever eaten!”

“Votre Altesse,” Escoffier says, “it was not I who invented this dish. It was this young fellow, my nephew, Henri Charpentier.”

“Eh bien,” says the Prince, “I certainly want to reward him. What shall I give him? Here, young man, take this ring,” he pulls a jewel-encrusted ring off his finger, “and take my cane and hat too!”

Henri humbly accepts his gifts, convinced that these are the best birthday presents ever.

Henri Charpentier did his apprenticeship as Master Chef at the Café de Paris in Monte Carlo, at Maxims and the Tour d'Argent in Paris, at The Cafe Royale and the Savoy in London, at the Metropole in Moscow, The Vier Jahreszeiten in Munich and the Quirinale and Belle Meuniere in Rome. Guests to his restaurants included: King Edward VII, Queen Margherita of Italy, "Diamond Jim" Brady, King Leopold of Belgium, J. P. Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt, William K. Vanderbilt, Sarah Bernhardt, David Belasco, George Jen Nathan, John D. Rockefeller Sr., Lillian Russell, Rudyard Kipling, William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, Florenz Ziegfeld, Marshals Joffre & Foch, "Jimmy" Walker (NYC Mayor), Bing Crosby, John Wayne, Ingrid Bergman, Lauritz Melchior, and Ethel Barrymore.

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