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Talleyrand Entertains Metternich at the Congress of Vienna

First of all—a confession.

What may superficially appear as a gastronomic tour de force is in truth a statement on the stark contrast between American diplomatic techniques in the 20th century and those of the French in the 19th. Secondly, it is an evening of homage to Talleyrand, the prime exponent of *la diplomatie gastronomique*, and to Careme, the greatest single name in the history of French cuisine, who so ably aided and abetted him.

The Congress of Vienna was one of the most important political gatherings in the history of Europe, and also the most splendid.

From a political point of view, as Henry Kissinger wrote of the statesmen at the Congress in his doctoral dissertation, “Their achievements were not inconsiderable: a period of peace lasting almost a hundred years.”

From a social view, Duff Cooper wrote that,

“The Congress that assembled at Vienna in the autumn of 1814 attracted to that city all that was most brilliant in Europe. Not only did the leading statesman of every country attend, but in most cases the reigning princes accompanied them. The royal palace at one moment lodged two emperors and as many empresses, four kings, one queen, two heirs to thrones, two grand duchesses and three princesses. The

flower of European nobility, the richest, the most distinguished, the most beautiful, all who played any part either in the political or in the social sphere flocked to Vienna.

“There was an endless series of balls and banquets, hunts, shooting parties and musical rides. There were theatricals given by the most celebrated performers of Europe, with others performed by aristocratic amateurs. There was a medieval tournament; masked entertainments were frequent, and glamour was lent to them by the knowledge that any mysterious stranger might be the ruler of a vast kingdom, that any domino might conceal a queen.”

In the political sphere, Talleyrand’s personal achievement was described by Kissinger (no admirer) as gaining for his defeated nation “the end of the isolation of France and the recognition of its equality.” While his colleagues were carousing, Talleyrand’s shrewd intellect was in overdrive. After the Turkish ambassador suddenly dropped dead after midnight revels, Talleyrand was widely reputed to have pondered, “What did he mean by that?”

In the social and gastronomic sphere, Louis Madelin of the Academie Francaise writes, “Talleyrand arrived at Vienna on September 23rd; hardly a week went by before everyone knew that none could surpass *him* in the luxury of his receptions and in the excellence of his hospitality.”

Now, to the heart of the matter. Was there a relationship between the two?

In this age of American diplomatic defeats we have had one president who gave heartburn to *his* foreign visitors with spicy Texas barbeques, and another who proudly presented Georgia

specialties such as catfish, grits and okra. Would history have been different had the food been better? Unsubstantiated rumor has it that Kennedy's missile crisis triumph over Khrushchev was planned over superb White House dinners presented by chef Rene Verdon, but that his disaster at the Bay of Pigs was hatched in Hyannis port over beer and burnt hot dogs.

Seriously, though, at peace talks in our time, such as Panmunjom, American diplomats have been known to focus on the shape of the table, while Talleyrand concerned himself with what was on the table. American diplomats seek policy instructions; Talleyrand, when offered help at Vienna, replied in official documents to King Louis XVIII, "Yes, sire, send more saucepans!" Is it conceivable that an American would say that?

Our own Mr. Kissinger's pages on Metternich, Castlereagh, etc., are extremely detailed, but in his entire 332 pages the word "cheese" never appears; yet several journals and memoirs of the period document a lively discussion during the Congress when Lord Castlereagh praised English Stilton, Nesselrode spoke for Emmenthal, Falk for Holland's Edam and Alvino for Italian Strachino. Talleyrand was silent until a courier arrived with the very Brie de Meaux we share tonight. As French historian Jean Orieux describes it on page 468 of his *Talleyrand—The Art of Survival*, "The brie rendered its cream to the knife. It was a feast, and no one further argued the point. No diplomatic victory was too small for Talleyrand."

Was omission of this incident an oversight on Kissinger's part, or a subtle philosophic point he was making?

As with eating, so with drinking. Considering our New Year's Eve alcoholic consumption in the relatively puritanical 1980's, one can only guess about pleasure-mad Vienna in 1814. In fact, things got

so hot that the Russian headquarters in an art-filled palace actually burned to the ground that night. But Kissinger very drily notes, “On 31 December Castlereagh and Metternich proposed that henceforth Talleyrand participate in meetings of the Big Four. *Ipsa loquitur*; the thing speaks for itself!”

Then again, how much objectivity can be expected from one who has never acknowledged the influence of America’s growing taste for Szechuan cooking and for dim sum on the Nixon/Kissinger initiative in opening China?

One final and significant point concerning Talleyrand and an ancient but rapidly dying art is illustrated by a story that was widely circulated in his own day. A young visitor once downed a glass of Talleyrand’s rarest and most expensive brandy in a single gulp, causing the older man to say, “Sir, the first thing you should do is to take your glass in the palms of your hands and warm it. Then shake it gently, with a circular movement, so that the liquid’s perfume is released. Then raise the glass to your nose and breathe deeply.” And then, my lord? asked the youngster. “And then, sir,” replied Talleyrand, “you replace the glass on the table and you talk about it.” Duff Cooper makes the same point, writing,

“We owe to Lady Frances Shelley the following account of a meal at Talleyrand’s home. During the whole repast the general conversation was upon eating. Every dish was discussed and the antiquity of every bottle of wine supplied the most eloquent annotations. Talleyrand himself analyzed the dinner with as much interest and seriousness as if he had been discussing an important political question.”

Who knows if the recent Geneva summit conference could have resolved the “star wars” question had only Reagan and Gorbachev discussed sauces along with satellites and mousses along with

missiles?

It is in the spirit of such discourse that we present tonight's dinner. But we cannot close without a few words about Talleyrand's great chef, and our dinner tonight *a la facon de Careme*.

As one whose stated goal was "to raise his profession to the level of an art," Marie-Antonin Careme was the unrivaled leader of the great classic French cuisine, for which he prescribed the recipes, menus and kitchen techniques in a monumental series of cookbooks and commentaries. One of his specialties was the *piece montee*, great constructions of sugar, marzipan and the like of ships, castles, Greek temples and so forth. We like to think that he would have been pleased with our *piece montee* tonight in the exact form of the New York Public Library's neo-classical Fifth Avenue home, prepared from the building's original architectural plans.

At the Congress of Vienna, Careme complained that the local meats were deplorable but that the game was excellent, especially the partridge; so that, of course, determined our main course. Turbot he called the royal fish and poularde a la Reine a noble presentation dish. *La gelee* was almost his trademark and the gateau Nesselrode was named for the Czar's Foreign Minister, a handsome young fellow whose affairs were the talk of the Congress.

The caviar would have been in honor of Czar Alexander himself and the foie gras for Castlereagh, who loved it; the consommé, with its julienne of celery root, veal and leeks, was one of the 299 soups Careme was credited with inventing.

Of the wines, Metternich is represented by the sekt from his ancestral estates; for one of the reds we chose a Rothschild, in

recognition of Nathan Rothschild's successful efforts at the Congress on behalf of the civil liberties of European Jews. The second red, Romanee Conti, is known to be one of Talleyrand's personal favorites. We close with a Chateau d'Yquem, the wine of Michel de Montaigne, who, in a well-ordered universe, would be the patron saint of diplomats, writers, enthusiasts of the table, indeed, of civilization itself.

D.R.

Daniel Rose's talks can be found on: www.danielrose.org