



King of CHEFS

Paola Westbeek looks back at the astonishing career of French chef Marie-Antoine Carême



Above left:
Marie-Antoine Carême

Above right:
Kitchens at the Chateau de Valençay

Before the likes of Anthony Bourdain, Julia Child and Gordon Ramsay whetted the appetites of everyone from the food-obsessed to the novice cook with their culinary prowess and enticing best-selling cookbooks, the world had Marie-Antoine Carême.

Hailed as France's first celebrity chef, Antonin, as he came to be known, was the founding father of haute cuisine, ushering in the dawn of a culinary golden age marked by lavish tables and fine dining.

From destitute child to pastry genius

Though Carême's creations graced the tables of the rich, powerful and famous, his early

childhood was anything but privileged. Born in the slums of Paris in 1783/84, he was abandoned by his father, a construction yard worker, at around the age of 10.

It was the height of the French Revolution and the streets of the capital reeked of oppression, blood and fear. Luckily, the young boy was quickly taken under the wing of a tavern cook with whom he apprenticed for six years.

His road to fame, however, began around the age of 15 when he was hired to work alongside renowned pâtissier Sylvain Bailly on Rue de Vivienne, not far from the bustling shopping arcade of the Palais-Royal. In this swanky neighbourhood frequented by

a well-heeled clientele who wanted to see and be seen, the young man's talent soared – literally – to sweet heights.

Carême taught himself to read and had a penchant for learning. Encouraged by Bailly to broaden his intellectual horizons, he spent his spare time at the nearby Bibliothèque Nationale, studying the history of food and immersing himself in books on classical architecture, which was his biggest passion.

He would then attempt to recreate the structures he saw, first on paper and later as edible towers made of marzipan, sugar and pastry. These so-called *pièces montées*, served as ornate centrepieces at banquets, were prominently displayed in the pastry shop window, much to



the awe of passers-by. It wasn't long before his magnificent sugar sculptures landed him commissions with Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the respected diplomat who had the gift of the gab, not to mention an insatiable appetite for women and eating well.

After two years, Carême left Bailly, embarking on an illustrious career that took him into the kitchens of society's crème de la crème.

Royal cuisinier

Carême opened his own bakery on Rue de la Paix and continued to accept commissions for his extraordinary confections, even creating the wedding cake for Napoleon's marriage to his second bride Marie-Louise

Top left:
Modern chefs still wear the professional hat invented by Carême

Top right:
Carême (right) wearing the 'toque'

Above:
The majestic Château de Valençay

Habsburg in 1810 and a *pièce montée* in the shape of an Italian gondola for the christening of their son a year later.

In order to expand his knowledge of cooking in general, he worked alongside skilled chefs, one of them Boucher, *cuisinier* to Talleyrand.

When Napoleon, who was not very fond of diplomatic entertaining, passed this important task on to Talleyrand and purchased Château de Valençay (chateau-valencay.fr) in the Loire for this purpose, Carême was also hired to cater to these extravagant affairs. In fact, Talleyrand asked Carême to create a year's worth of seasonal menus, he did not fail to impress.

Carême had both the drive

and perfect circumstances to fully develop his craft.

In his fascinating book *Cooking for Kings* (the first English-language biography on Carême), Ian Kelly writes: "In many ways, Valençay was the ideal backdrop for Antonin – with marvellous kitchens, able to take full advantage of France's best country produce, within minutes of well-watered herb gardens and positioned beneath an airy dining room, the whole presided over by a wealthy gourmet."

Carême became a sought-after chef de cuisine. In 1816, he left France for the first time and went to work for Prince Regent George IV in England. At the Royal Pavilion Carême had access to a sprawling, well-equipped kitchen and the best produce. Nevertheless, even a whopping salary couldn't keep him away from France for long. He hated the wet English climate, missed his homeland terribly and didn't get along with his colleagues, who may have been jealous of his accomplishments and probably didn't appreciate his pompous personality either.

Carême's list of dignified clients included Russian Emperor Alexander I, Lord Charles Stewart (British ambassador to Vienna) and the enormously wealthy banker Baron James de Rothschild.

An enduring culinary legacy

Carême was not only the 'chef of kings and king of chefs', but he also became the first best-selling food writer. While his days were spent cooking, evenings were dedicated to penning and illustrating books filled with recipes, culinary advice and descriptions of the sumptuous menus he prepared for his clients. A clever marketer, he included his portrait in his cookbooks and did not hesitate to boldly flaunt his credentials, ▶

naming his first book, which was published in 1815, *Le Pâtissier Royal Parisien*.

Carême was the first to systematise French cuisine, explaining everything from the principles of cooking and complex culinary techniques to the art of efficiently running a kitchen. He modernised recipes for *pâte à choux*, the soufflé and puff pastry; taught us how to pipe meringue through a nozzle; invented the professional chef's hat (*toque*); categorised the four 'mother sauces'; and created classics of French cuisine such as the vol-au-vent, Charlotte Russe, *mille-feuille* and Tournedos Rossini.

Carême died in 1833, presumably from lung damage caused by years of inhaling charcoal fumes.

His last work, the highly influential *L'art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle*, consists of five volumes (two published posthumously) and is considered the first encyclopedia of haute cuisine.

In a career that spanned approximately four decades, Carême revolutionised French cooking, making remarkable contributions to the gastronomic arts and leaving an enduring culinary legacy that continues to influence chefs the world over. ♥

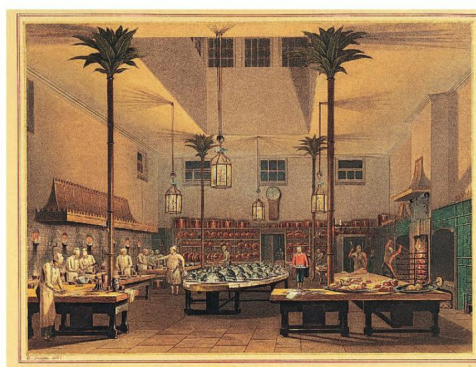


PHOTO: ROYAL PAVILION & MUSEUMS, BRIGHTON & HOVE

Above: Kitchens at the Royal Pavillon where Carême worked

Recipe



PHOTO: HANS WESTBEEK

CHARLOTTE RUSSE

Serves 6

Ingredients:

- 5 gelatine sheets
- 250ml single cream
- Seeds of ½ vanilla pod
- 350g strawberries
- 4 tbs icing sugar
- 400g Greek yoghurt
- 200ml water mixed with 4 tbs sugar
- 1 pack Biscuits Roses de Reims (27 biscuits)
- Mint leaves

Method:

1. Dissolve the gelatine sheets in cold water for around 10 minutes.
2. Gently heat the cream and the vanilla.
3. Mash 125g of the strawberries with a fork and stir in the icing sugar. Whisk this through the Greek yogurt.
4. Squeeze out the gelatine sheets and whisk through the warm cream, making sure they're dissolved.
5. Slowly add the cream to the yoghurt while gently whisking the mixture.
6. Chop 100g of the strawberries and stir them through this mixture.
7. Moisten the unsugared side of the biscuits with the water and sugar mixture. Line the charlotte mould, making sure the sugared side of the biscuits faces the lining of the mould.
8. Slowly pour in the mixture.
9. Line the top of the mould with a layer of biscuits.
10. Cover the mould with clingfilm and place a small plate on top of the mould. Make sure to refrigerate for at least five hours.
11. To serve, run a knife around the sides of the mould, place a large plate on the mould and invert the charlotte onto the plate. Decorate with the rest of the strawberries, garnish with mint and serve.