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Karl Nesselrode: Foreign Minister and Pudding

A repressive official; a decadent chef.

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Karl Nesselrode (1780-1862) was a staunch conservative and monarchist. In the mid-19th century, he had successfuly transformed Russia into what would later be called "the gendarme of Europe." And thanks to popular support for the "Russian world" in the Balkans at the time, he achieved the predictable result of Russia's complete diplomatic isolation on the eve of the Crimean War.

Nesselrode was not a minor figure on the Russian political scene in those years. Actually, that's the understatement of the century: he holds the record for the longest tenure as Russia's foreign minister (from 1822 to 1856). But never mind politics. We're interested in the culinary side of Nesselrode. This long-serving foreign minister was renowned as a sophisticated gourmet. At least three dishes are connected with his name: Nesselrode

pudding, Nesselrode soup and mayonnaise.

This, by the way, was a family affair. His relative, Dmitry Guryev (minister of finance in the reign of Alexander I) became famous for his Guryevskaya kasha. The famous memoirist Philip Vigel wrote: "Guryev did not travel abroad without purpose; he improved his culinary skills there. He was truly an inventive genius in the kitchen, creating pâtés and minced meat patties that bear his name." Nesselrode's contemporaries spoke more sarcastically about him: "Of the various skills necessary for a good diplomat, he perfected himself only in one. His knowledge of the art of cooking was superb."

Nesselrode had both allies and opponents. Alexander Pushkin, who was also a renowned lover of fine cuisine, was "in the employ" of Nesselrode, working in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The wife of the minister - Maria - met with Pushkin at the wedding of Yelena Goncharova to d'Antes, who was under her patronage. Gossips accused Countess Nesselrode of composing anonymous letters to Pushkin and said she penned the libelous "Certificate of a Cuckold" that led to the tragic duel.

And at that wedding Grigory Stroganov, a famous Russian diplomat who had been an ambassador to Spain, Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, stood in for the bride's father. Like all members of the glorious Stroganov family, he was no stranger to a good feast. I'm sure he had his chief's pudding more than once.

If you want to know how Russian aristocrats of the time dined, you need only read descriptions of the dinners the Stroganovs held. In old chronicles we often come across references to how another glorious representative of this dynasty, Alexander Stroganov, served his guests game (from his estate near Perm) baked in a honey sauce, and meat delicacies with mushrooms and berries. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a book about these Stroganov feasts by Mikhail Pilyaev, a chronicler of old Russian life:

"There were not many courses, but everything was exquisite. The most expensive appetizer was herring cheeks, one plate of which was made from over a thousand herrings.

The second course included savory dishes: moose lips, boiled bear paws, and roasted lynx. Then came cuckoos roasted in honey and oil, burbot roe and fresh halibut liver. The third course was oysters, game stuffed with nuts, fresh figs. Salted peaches and very rare pineapples in vinegar were served as salads."

This was what Karl Nesselrode was up against when he was inventing a new dessert. Here the son-in-law followed his father-in-law's footsteps. Guryevskaya kasha is a dish for Gargantua. Nothing compares to its vivid and rich flavors. "Guryevskaya kasha! It is the pearl of porridge, the caprice of a modern Lucullus..." gushed a food writer in 'Muscovite' magazine in 1856. Sugar, clotted cream and baked dried fruit — a gourmet's dream.

Nesselrode's pudding became a kind of heir to these traditions of culinary luxury. What was this famous pudding? It's basically a cross between a cake and ice cream. Mashed chestnuts were mixed with egg yolks, beaten with sugar and cream. The French chef Jules Gouffé who was working in Russia at that time wrote a recipe for it in his book "Gastronomic Almanac" (1877):

"Peel 40 chestnuts, blanch them so that the inner skin slips off. Put them in a saucepan with 1.5 bottles of syrup and a pinch of vanilla. Cook over a gentle heat, then strain through a sieve.

Put 8 yolks, ½ pound of fine sugar and 4 ½ cups of boiled cream into the saucepan. Stir over low heat. Add chestnut puree, 6 tablespoons of Maraschino liqueur, strain.

Place in an ice cream maker and stir in 18 tablespoons whipped cream and ½ pound pitted raisins that have been plumped in syrup. Churn. Pour into a pudding dish. Place it on crushed ice. Serve chilled.

Now that is decadence!

There is no canonical recipe for the pudding. Every chef cooked it in his own way. As society became more democratic, there were inevitably simpler variants. In 1899 the Russian culinary classic Pelageya Aleksandrova-Ignatyeva doesn't mention any syrup or Maraschino liqueur.

In his poem "Levsha" (1881), Russian writer Nikolai Leskov nimbly turned Count Nesselrode into “Count Kiselrode” (unprincipled and taking on any form, like kissel — a kind of jelly). In the Soviet Union Nesselrode was destined to be known as a suppressor of freedom and tsarist henchman. He was not forgotten, but his pudding was.

But that doesn’t keep us from remembering this dish and pleasing our guests not only with its taste, but also with its fascinating history.

Ingredients:

- 400 g (14 oz.) chestnut paste (purée)
- 100 grams (4/5 c or 3.5 oz.) powdered sugar
- 300g (1 ¼ c) highest fat sour cream or 33% cream
- 100 g (scant ½ c or 3.5 oz.) candied fruits
- 50 g (about 1/3 c) dried cranberries (or other dried, sweet-sour berries)
- 50 g (about 1/3 c) raisins

Instructions:

- Whip the heavy cream or sour cream with powdered sugar; mix with chestnut purée.
- Add raisins, cranberries, candied fruits. The candied chestnuts can be soaked in cherry liqueur beforehand.
- Spread into jelly glasses and freeze. Remove from the freezer 15 minutes before serving.

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