

THE MADELEINE OF COMMERCY

Story of a local speciality

The madeleine of Commercy was created in the kitchens of King Stanislas around 1750. It is difficult to say much more about it: “The question of who invented them will probably remain unanswered” sadly reflected the historian Charles Dumont back in 1843.

In order to satisfy their master’s weakness for sweet things, Stanislas’ cooks vied with each other to make the best desserts. Thanks to them we have some delicious desserts such as the Ali-baba, the ancestor of the rum-baba, a strong-flavoured biscuit with saffron and moistened with Malaga wine. The fashion for Turkish-inspired culture (‘les turqueries’) was part of the 18th century’s larger passion for the Orient. Without any doubt, the madeleine is a result of this heritage. From the Dukes of Lorraine’s kitchens, the madeleine made its way to Versailles’ salons. Maria Leszczyńska, daughter of Stanislas and Queen of France, used to serve the little cake to her guests.

After Stanislas’ death in 1766, one of his former pastry cooks set up his own business in Commercy with the secret recipe of the madeleine. For some, this was Pantaléon Colombé, the ancestor of a family made up of inn-keepers, pastry chefs and bakers which would pass the secret recipe on to each other. “Amongst the craftsmen, the Colombé family has gained over a long time, in all fairness, a good reputation”, commented Dumont: “Until 1817, the madeleine didn’t make much progress. A pastry cook, competing with his rival cooks decided to lower the price and to give the recipe to all and sundry in order to out-sell them. His sparring partners could only save face by lowering their price by half and by improving the cake’s quality. If the people had benefited from this “price war”, the fighters have made an even larger profit. Nowadays, they are making even more in dozens than in the single units before.

If the word of Charles Dumont - who witnessed this fantastic fight - is to be believed, the number of madeleine-makers (the ‘madeleiniers’) increased significantly. Half a century later, in August 1870, Bismarck’s secretary, who had just penetrated into Commercy with the Chancellor and the Prussian army, noted in his diary: “Signboards were found at the doors of many houses with the inscription: ‘fabrique de madeleines’ (madeleine making place). With their melon-shape, the biscuits were a great success in France. We made sure we sent some boxes back to the homeland”.

The beginning of fame

On the 26th July 1852, Louis Napoleon inaugurated the new Paris to Strasbourg railway line. After the official speech in Commercy, the imperial suite reached the new “hotel de Paris” for a light-meal where the madeleines made by the hotel’s cook were displayed in a prominent position.

This train enabled Anne Marie Caussin, a young lady from Commercy, to move to the capital. She eventually became Madame de Cassin before marrying the Marquis de Carcano, the heart-throb of the Parisian jet-set. She used to have a salon in her mansion where she served madeleines freshly brought to her each evening by the last train from Commercy.

Even if the madeleine of Commercy owes a great deal of its fame to Stanislas, Maria Leszczyńska, Napoleon III, the Marquise of Carcano, the “madeleiniers” have also proven themselves in the creative concept of marketing them. The packaging per dozen, the boxes made of fir trees from the Vosges, then in beechwood, have helped create the image of the madeleine. After this came an ingenious idea ... on the 13th October 1874, a local decree authorised the sale of madeleines on the railway station’s platforms.

“Madeleine of Commercy!”

When those few words are pronounced in front of a traveller from Paris to Nancy, he is reminded of the platform of a railway station, a low building already outdated, where young girls moved around selling labelled boxes, opened or closed, always very enticing. A few syllables for Beauguitte, a few crumbs for Proust; the madeleine seems to live through its own magic: “I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place...” Did Marcel Proust have tea at Marquise de Carcano’s?

The madeleiniers

Cloche d’Or, Cloche d’Argent, Cloche Lorraine... The image of the cloche (the bell) is often linked to madeleiniers. It is by tradition a tribute to Stanislas who donated the biggest bell of the Saint Pantaléon Church.

The madeleine is above all a family story, that of the Colombés. The oldest ancestor that has been retraced had a name quite disquieting: the Burnt-one. As a dynasty of pastry-chefs and bakers, the Colombé family still manage several madeleine productions, including the Cloche d’Argent and the Cloche Lorraine.

It is perhaps due to its origin in the kitchens of the Polish King that several head-waiters from Commercy also made madeleines: the hotel de la Providence, the hotel de Paris and the most famous, hotel de la Cloche d’Or.

The making of the madeleine

Until 1939, the madeleine was made in the traditional way by six producers. The total daily production of madeleine before the war was estimated to be approximately 60 kilos, equivalent to 2,500 madeleines, most of them being sold on the stations' platforms.

The weight of a madeleine has been reduced regularly over the years from 90g-100g (according to Dumont), to 30g before the war and 25g today. If the ingredients are always the same: flour, butter, sugar, eggs not forgetting baking powder and lemon essence, each producer has his own proportions.

In the old days, the madeleiniers got the ingredients from the local market. They also had to take into consideration the variable quality of their supply in order to maintain the reputation of their product. The madeleiner used to work at the bowl, surrounded by assistants passing through the ingredients: firstly, the eggs broken one by one, mixed to the sugar, then the flour, and lastly the clarified lukewarm butter. Once the mixture was ready, he then filled the individual tins with a horn.

The madeleine today

Two companies continue the traditional production of the madeleine of Commercy: the company « Saint Michel - Grojean » and the « Boîte à madeleines ».

This article was translated by Pierre Guernier for French Moments with the kind permission of Commercy's tourist information centre.

Pierre Guernier

French Moments Sydney
PO Box 297 - Spit Junction - NSW2088 - Australia
pierreguernier@frenchmoments.com
www.frenchmoments.com

FRENCH MOMENTS
SYDNEY