

From Courtesans to Queens: Recipes Named for Women

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Throughout history recipes have been named for people, places, things and events. Since the seventeenth century when the practice began of naming recipes after people, Britain, France, and the United States have contributed the most recipes named for women. These recipes were usually created and named by male chefs. Auguste Escoffier christened the most dishes with female names. Courtesans, noblewomen, and performers had the most recipes named for them over time. *Cherries Jubilee* and *Chicken Tetrazzini* are two dishes that were created and named for women which have stood the test of time and remain popular today. Research uncovered recipes named for women mainly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some recipes named after women are well documented, but there are many that are not. There is a need for more thorough verification of all recipe names, not just those named after women.

The chief impulse behind the recording of recipes is memory. When a dish is “done right” there is a need to remember how to do it again (Appelbaum 2006, 68). Thus, the primary objective of recipes is to ensure that successful dishes can be replicated in perpetuity. An understanding of the origins of recipe names and naming practices contributes to the overall understanding of their place within culinary history and culinary onomastics. The process of incorporating proper names into recipe names increases substantially the perceived value of recipes over time, especially when they are

named for notable personages. In examining recipes named for women, it is insightful to look first at the general tradition of naming recipes for people.

The practice of naming a dish after an individual occurred first in the seventeenth century (Claudin 1884, 310). Naming a dish after a person (or place) in itself offers little or no information about the recipe, though widespread use will transform such names into generic types (Weiss 2002). For example, recipes with the name *Du Barry* usually indicate the presence of cauliflower as a main ingredient (Stevens 1998, 45).

Naming new dishes after well-known personalities of the day was the prevailing culinary tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the Napoleonic Era (1799-1815), new culinary creations were usually christened in honor of statesmen or military victories (Claudin 1884, 310). By the mid-nineteenth century this practice was enlarged to accommodate a new form of celebrity. Recipes began to be named for divas of the ballet, opera and theatre. Prima donnas were flattered by this homage to their talent, while the chefs who acknowledged these women often enjoyed a modicum of fame. Chefs named substantial dishes after performers and offered them to the restaurant public. The creation of the dish for the performer and in the performer's name implicated the performer in its consumption. Chefs and their clientele often had the additional enjoyment of watching these performers consume the creations that bore their names (Senelick 2005, 45-46).

In the seventeenth century the term "actress" was unequivocally synonymous with "prostitute" and "courtesan" (Hickman 2003, 39). In Renaissance Europe actress/courtesans played an important role in upper-class society, often appearing in court and sometimes taking the place of wives at social functions. Thus, the practice of incorporating the names of courtesans into recipe names was considered a tribute to them. Several courtesans are remembered today not for their

talents but rather for the dishes that were named after them (Rogov 2007, xvi).

The first official royal mistress in French history was Agnès Sorel (1422-1450), the favorite of King Charles VII. She invented over one hundred dishes to please her royal patron and served as a source of inspiration to the great chefs of that era. Four centuries after her death, Adolphe Dugléré, a renowned Parisian chef, created posthumously in her honor the *Omelette Agnès Sorel*. This concoction of mushrooms, chicken breast and thin slices of smoked or pickled tongue is considered one of the great classic French dishes. A variation of this recipe is *Velouté Agnès Sorel*, a cream soup made with the identical ingredients included in the omelette (Escoffier 1941, 188; Rogov 2007, 19-20).

Potage Fontanges, a consommé of sorrel and peas with cream and egg yolks, was named after Marie Angelique de Scorailles de Roussille, Duchesse de Fontanges (1661-1681), one of the many paramours of King Louis XIV. This courtesan exerted a great deal of influence in her twenty brief years. Besides having a soup named for her, the *fontanges*, a headdress introduced in 1680, was named after her (Lacroix 1963, 455-456).

Rissoles Pompadour, puff pastry filled with pickled or smoked tongue, truffles and mushrooms in a rich demi-glace sauce, was dedicated to the Marquise de Pompadour, Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson (1721-1764), the favorite mistress of King Louis XV (Montagné 1977, 484). She was so influential that more than fifty dishes, often containing truffles, were dedicated to her. These included *Filets de Sole à la Pompadour* and *Abricots à la Pompadour* (Rogov 2007, 108-109).

After her death, Marie-Jeanne Bécu, the Comtesse du Barry (1743-1793), replaced Madame de Pompadour as the king's favorite. Several chefs named dishes for her which often contained cauliflower. *Potage Crème Du Barry* (*Du Barry Cream Soup*) is one of the best known of these creations (Rogov 2007, 128; Stevens 1998, 45). The cauliflower was symbolic of

Madame du Barry's wigs, which were fashioned into elaborate hairstyles piled high around a three-foot wire frame on which curls were powdered. It was actually Madame de Pompadour, however, who initiated this tall hairstyle trend (*Civilization* 1995, 29; Trager 1995, 166).

Pommes de Terre Anna (*Potatoes Anna*), a simple but rich casserole of sliced potatoes cooked in butter (better known today as *scalloped potatoes*), was created and named by Dugléré for the actress and courtesan Anna Desliions (1838-1894), who frequented the Café des Anglais (Montagné, 393; Stevens 1998, 181). When the potatoes were julienned instead of sliced, the dish was renamed *Potatoes Annette*. Anna was known by this diminutive only to those with whom she had been intimate. The owner of the café, Maurice Chevreuil, kept meticulous lists of Anna's lovers which included detailed information about their eating and drinking preferences. According to Chevreuil's lists, three kings, twelve emperors, eighteen princes and thirty-four dukes knew Anna as Annette (Rogov 2007, 251-252).

Georges-Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935), the "Father of Modern French Cuisine," had a long and profitable partnership with César Ritz, the Swiss innkeeper and founder of The Ritz hotel. César's nickname was "King of Hoteliers and Hotelier to Kings." César's wife, Marie, once remarked to Escoffier that toast never seemed thin enough for her. In response to her complaint, he proceeded to grill a piece of bread, split it in half, grill it again and present it to her. She was delighted with this simple creation. Thus, Escoffier referred to it as *Toast Marie*. Although she was flattered by this tribute, Marie advised Escoffier to wait and name it later for someone famous (Stevens 1998, 41).

After abandoning her husband and baby in Australia in order to pursue a career in opera, Helen Porter Mitchell Armstrong (1861-1931) renamed herself Nellie Melba. She chose Melba as her new surname, a contraction of the name of her native city, Melbourne (*Victoria's Messenger* 2006, 8).

In 1894 Dame Melba sent tickets to Escoffier for her performance of *Lohengrin* at Covent Garden. In tribute to her he created a magnificent ice sculpture of a swan, reminiscent of the swan boat featured in the opera. Nestled between the wings of the swan was a silver bowl containing peaches and vanilla ice cream (Snodgrass 2004, 219). Escoffier named it *Pêche au Cygne* (*Peach with Swan*). A few years later he eliminated the swan, added a raspberry purée sauce (*Melba Sauce*) and renamed it *Pêche Melba* or *Pêches à la Melba* (Fitzgerald 1999, 58-59; Stevens 1998, 211; Zeldin 1993, 736). The enduring popularity of *Peaches Melba* and other recipes created by hotel chefs confirms the ability of hotel restaurants of that period to assure the fortune of a name by associating it with a famous personage (Senelick 2005, 46).

While recovering from a severe illness in 1897, Dame Melba was in residence at London's Savoy Hotel where Escoffier noticed that her convalescent diet included toast. He prepared *Toast Marie* for the ailing diva. As she too was pleased with it, he acted on the former advice of Marie Ritz and renamed it *Melba Toast* (Stevens 1998, 41). Due mainly to its low calorie content (*Victoria's Messenger* 2006, 8), *Melba Toast* has become a time-honored food and is sold commercially today throughout the world.

Escoffier created *Consommé à la Sarah Bernhardt* for his close friend, the *Divine Sarah*. A sumptuous chicken consommé thickened with tapioca containing chicken dumplings, truffles and poached marrow, it appeared under a slightly different name, *Potage Sarah Bernhardt* (*Sarah Bernhardt Soup*) in *The Escoffier Cook Book* (1941, 220).

Escoffier was fond of bestowing women's names on numerous consommés. *Consommé Alexandra* was named in honor of the Danish princess; *Consommé George Sand* was named for the French author whose given name was Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin; and *Consommé Réjane* was named for the French comedic actress Gabrielle Réjane (Escoffier, 199-220). *Consommé Rachel* was given in honor of

the greatest French tragedienne, Elisabeth Rachel Félix. Her stage name, Rachel, was used for a number of other dishes, including eggs and sweetbreads, many of which were created by Escoffier. Charles Ranhofer, the celebrated French chef of New York's Delmonico's Restaurant, created *Artichokes à la Rachel* in her honor (Ranhofer 1920, 818).

Escoffier supposedly named *Poires Belle Hélène* for the mythological Helen of Troy. In actuality, he created this rich dessert to honor Hortense Schneider who starred in Jacques Offenbach's operetta *La Belle Hélène* (*Fair Helen*). This was an elaborate dish of pears poached in vanilla syrup, dipped in chocolate and set upright on a bed of vanilla ice cream. Escoffier later renamed it *Pears Hélène* because Edward, Prince of Wales, had a well-publicized romance with Hortense. However, he later married Princess Alexandra of Denmark. As Escoffier did not wish to offend this royal lady, he deleted the word *belle* from the recipe's name (Stevens 1998, 213).

One of the most popular and basic of American desserts is *Cantaloupe Lillian Russell*, named for the first great prima donna of the American stage (1861-1922). It is simplicity at its finest, consisting of a half melon with a mound of vanilla ice cream nestled in the hollow created by the removal of the seeds. Oscar, the maître d'hôtel of New York's Waldorf-Astoria, created and named this dish for Russell in the 1890s. This dessert has retained its popularity, although its name has been largely forgotten primarily because of its length (Stevens 1998, 218).

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) had countless dishes created and named in her honor. The *Victoria Sponge Cake* was prepared to welcome her return to official service after the death of her husband, Prince Albert. For the occasion of her Golden Jubilee on June 20-21, 1887, Escoffier was asked to create a dish to commemorate this historic event. As cherries were the Queen's favorite fruit, *Cerises jubileea à la reine* was his response. Better known today as *cherries jubilee*, this was truly a dessert fit for a queen because at that time it could be

enjoyed only a few months of the year when cherries were in season (Stevens 1998, 215).

Luisa Tetrazzini, the Italian-born soprano, served as the inspiration for *Chicken Tetrazzini*, a rich mixture of chicken, mushrooms and spaghetti in a sherry infused parmesan sauce baked in a casserole. Ernest Arbogast, chef at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco where Tetrazzini lived for a long time, created this popular recipe around 1908-1910. It remains one of the best known pasta dishes based on spaghetti (Herbst 1990, 89; Stevens 1998, 117).

Great Britain, France and the United States are the three countries that have contributed the most recipes (in the English and French languages) named for women. These recipes were usually created and named by male chefs. Escoffier was the most prolific in naming his creations after famous females. Chefs, gastronomes and restrateurs alike basked in the glory of these women who were immortalized in the diverse recipes named for them. Although many recipes created during the period 1871-1910 bore the names of female leaders, popular performers and other great ladies, the majority of these women have been largely forgotten or ignored within the realm of culinary history (Senelick 2005, 46).

Culinary and gastronomy websites are an excellent starting point for onomastic research on food and recipe names and naming practices. Unfortunately, far too many of them do not provide citations for their assertions. Discrepancies concerning the origins of recipe names are abundant throughout cookery books as well. Some recipes named after women are well documented, while others, such as crêpes *Suzettes* (Barnette 1997, 104) and *Lady Baltimore Cake* (Herbst 1990, 251), are so interspersed with unverifiable legend and lore that it is often impossible to separate fact from fiction.

From this selective look at recipes named for women, it is apparent that culinary history and the history of

gastronomy provide fertile areas for further onomastic analysis and research. Onomasticians and food historians share the challenge of documenting the name origins of eponymous recipes.

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