

PIERRE HERMÉ, A MYSTERY

by Charles Znaty

He is often asked where and how he gets his ideas for taste, texture and flavour combinations, these tasty creations that make up his brand and are recognizable among a thousand. He willingly answers... inspiration comes from his weakness for sweets, pleasure, sensations, encounters, fragrances and textures. Pierre Hermé is curious about everything and everything inspires him. It seems so easy! He travels while we are carried away by his creations. Many things have been written about Pierre Hermé: that he is “the Picasso of pastry-making; a Virtuoso of sweets; an Architect of emotions; the Dior of desserts”... but comparisons sidestep the issue. Various explanations have been sought, such as the lineage of pastry chefs he comes from, his training with the master Gaston Lenôtre, or his Alsatian heritage. Pierre Hermé admits that he owes his “passion for the profession” and his excessive taste for “work well done” to all of the above. To these criteria, he immediately adds “his eye for detail” and his “mental imagery”. These images let us catch a glimpse of his inner imaginary landscape, a sort of Zen garden where each stone contains an emotion, which Pierre Hermé, tirelessly and with patience, arranges with his delicate touch and that special tenderness of his which at times is visible in his eyes. A “mental landscape” where he finds his inspiration, cultivates, composes, imagines, looks, weighs and invents what our pleasures of tomorrow will be.

Yet, after my fifteen years and more spent working by his side, navigating the mysteries of his creative repertoire, it seems as if the heart of the matter is still to be unveiled. Let us look at his past. Speaking of know-how, it is a heritage handed down by our predecessors, which we have a duty to transmit to each generation. At Pierre Hermé, the pastry chefs come from all over the world yet all of them speak the same language. As for technique, it lies in an ironclad discipline that has to be perfectly mastered to contain it within ancillary limits only to be released when the moment to create arrives. No creation of his yields to the temptation of a technical feat and if his peers admire Pierre Hermé, it is also because he implements techniques with such mastery – or even invents them, if necessary – and subjugates them to the pleasure of eating and sharing, rather than contenting himself with the appreciative remarks that an elite on the look-out for technical feats and dazzling gestures would easily have granted him. Regarding ingredients, they are “faux-amis” whose facets he manages to tame before giving them a place in the recipe. Obviously, not all pistachio nuts or chocolates are alike ... and vanilla or rose can exhale very different aromas. As for sugar, it is sometimes a “backdrop”, sometimes “a seasoning, a condiment” which contributes to the balance of the composition without ever seeking the leading role. Because Pierre Hermé considers the end of the meal as “a grand finale”, he has brushed aside pastries in which sugar, a sycophantic cover, flattened the flavours and masked the lack of nobility of the composition.

As for childhood tastes, Pierre Hermé's contribution has proven to be iconoclastic. Not being satisfied with depriving his pastries of all of the mannerisms, embellishments, useless decors that prevail in the field, he also relegated to the rank of gadgets the references to the world of childhood. By showing in his creations that sweets are not the prerogative of youth, Pierre Hermé opened wide the doors of the Gastronomy circles to admit pastry chefs once and for all. Although connoisseurs might like to think so, Pierre Hermé does not rely on Proustian madeleine effects or "kiddie cartoon" mixtures, the reason being that nostalgia will always taste the same.

In 1986, when he began to seek inspiration from the cycle of the seasons to invent new sweet pleasures, Pierre Hermé chose the path of Nature. The freshness of the seasonal fruits, the climate, the fluctuations of his cravings commanded new recipes, new creations. This was not the simplest avenue of exploration. About a thousand recipes and several pâtisserie windows still testify to that era. It is said that no man is a prophet in his own land. Is this the reason why we had to go all the way to Japan to open the first "Pierre Hermé Paris Pâtisserie" boutique in 1998? By inventing the "Pâtisserie Haute Couture" concept and by making this "Collection" idea popular, we only tried to show a well-informed and novelty-eager Japanese public that we were different. And it was a big success.