Just a year ago, I gave up sweets. I was in a restaurant in San Francisco, and, for the first time that I can recall, when the waiter said, “Dessert?,” in that conspiratorial, perky way waiters have, I said . . . nothing. And then the next night, at another place, I did it again.

The usual reasons that move men and women as they age moved me: I was self-conscious about gaining weight, crossing into the world where you slowly become doughier and wake up as a middle-aged man with a paunch. So I decided to stop eating desserts, to see if that would help. Like all diets, both the reducing kind and the religious...
kind, mine had an element of logic (lose those calories neatly, and at once!) and an element of magic, too (give up the thing you like best and you will appease the gods of aging). I love desserts. I think of my mother and I taste desserts. My mother, though a scientist with an academic career, made a different dessert every night of my childhood: lemon tart and chocolate cake, wonderful coffee custard with bittersweet chocolate hardened like a winter lake on top, and hot apple pie with light custard sauce.

I am aware that pies and cakes and cupcakes are the more usual thing to love from Mom’s Kitchen. But she was a Francophile, and made soufflés, and those I loved best of all. Yet they were the one dessert of hers that I couldn't make for my own children. When I left home, she gave me a self-published recipe book that included her formula for apricot and grand-marnier soufflés. I had followed it dutifully over the years, and never got it quite right. There was a moment when you were supposed to know that the egg whites were beaten—a zone of beaten egg whites, with danger and failure on either side. “DO NOT OVERBEAT/ DO NOT UNDERBEAT!” she had written, and although I had seen the proper moment, the true loft, countless times, the presence of the words somehow froze the operation, made the right state of beaten egg whites an unobtainable condition. I could never find the zone.

The curious thing was that, while it was hard to do without sweets at home, it wasn’t nearly as hard when we went out to eat, and especially not when we went out to eat fancy food. It was as if the dessert chefs had given up on dessert, too, and produced something else in its place. At even a moderately upscale establishment, you would invariably get what I had come to think of as the Portman Plaza plate, since it so closely resembled the model that a developer would have proposed for the center of a crime-wracked mid-sized city in the seventies: three upright cylinders—small towers of something wrapped in something—with the tops sliced at an angle; a crumbly landscape of some kind;
and a reflecting pool running around the edge. The plate would be advertised as, let’s say, a chocolate-peanut-butter mousse cake with walnut-balsamic crumble and a sesame sorbet with Concord-grape foam. But the effect was always the same: not enough of a cakey cylindrical thing, too much of a crumbly thing, far too much of a gelatinous thing, and an irrelevance of an off-key runny thing. Without surrendering sugar, dessert had surrendered all its familiar forms—the cake, the soufflé, the pudding—as the avant-garde novel had surrendered narrative, character, and moral. Losing our faith in art is, in a secular culture, what losing our faith in God was to a religious one; God only knows what losing our faith in desserts must be.

Leafing through books at the neighborhood cookbook store, I slowly became aware that our dessert modernism sprang from somewhere else, and had a more revolutionary purpose than I knew—that the Portman plates were to a European movement what the Portman towers had been to the Bauhaus, the American domestication of something austere and rigorous. Here in New York, the true, uncompromised revolution was limited to a handful of places, and I went to one of them, Wylie Dufresne’s WD-50. I broke my sweet fast, and had a full roster of the pastry chef’s delicious devisings: cheesecake with dried pineapple, pineapple purée, and pineapple tuiles; lemongrass mousse with lemongrass foam. The chef, Alex Stupak, turned out to be an intense intellectual, clear and dry in his judgments.

“I happen not to like sweets,” he said as we sat down after dinner and he began to explain his work. “It’s an idiosyncrasy of mine. I decided to become a pastry chef because it gave me autonomy. Whether you think your desserts are manipulated or not, they are! When you’re conceptualizing an entrée, a protein, you generally expect to get a piece of that thing intact. In pastry, it doesn’t occur. Pastry is the closest that a human being can get to creating a new food. A savory
chef will look at puff pastry not as a combination of ingredients but as an ingredient in itself. Pastry is infinitely exciting, because it’s less about showing the greatness of nature, and more about transmitting taste and flavor. Desserts are naturally denatured food.” He looked at me sternly. “Birthday cake is the most denatured thing on earth.”

When I asked him who had influenced him, his eyes, which had been narrow slits of purpose, suddenly shone bright. “I admire Albert Adrià more than any other cook in the world,” he said, referring to the younger brother of Ferran Adrià, of the legendary (and soon to close) restaurant elBulli, in Catalonia.

Everywhere I went, I heard similar talk of him and other Catalan dessert wizards. Dan Barber, of the restaurant Blue Hill, spoke reverently of Jordi Roca, whose restaurant, run with his two brothers and situated not far from elBulli, had recently been voted one of the five best in the world; on a visit to New York, Rene Redzepi, whose restaurant, Noma, in Copenhagen, had in the same poll been named the best restaurant in the world, spoke of both Adrià and Roca with the same quiet awe.

In search of the truth about the new sweets, I even went to the White House, whose pastry chef, Bill Yosses, I had been made to understand, was the Great Still Center of the American dessert. Yosses turned out to be a smiling, vaguely seraphic presence—at one point, he neatly, calmly distinguished caramel, mere burnt sugar, from butterscotch, brown sugar mixed with butter, for the benefit of his sous-chefs. (Though, as we walked through the White House, it did occur to me that, from the point of view of a caterer, the White House might seem less like the nerve center of the free world than like a medium-sized, slightly shabby charming resort hotel in Virginia, the kind where your best friend from college puts everyone up when he marries that horsey girl you all have doubts about.)
“Dessert is aspirational,” Yosses said, laying out his philosophy. “It’s the one part of the meal you don’t have to eat. It’s the purest part of the meal: the art part. But it’s also the greediest part, the eat-it-in-a-closet part. We don’t have to have it, and we do. When I was a kid, I would stuff my face with éclairs. I still would, I guess . . .” His voice trailed off. “The real question is this,” he said. “How did this thing, this spice, sugar, become a staple? How did something that ought to be like saffron, a rare thing to add, become the thing we build on? How did a whole way of cooking creep up from sweetness? Why do we use it to end the meal? Those are the big questions.” I asked if I should go to Spain. He gave a Yoda-ish smile, and said, “Oh, yes. That’s a trip you ought to take.” When I consulted Dan Barber again, he was still more emphatic. “Go there!” he said. “That’s where it’s all happening. Go!” And so I went.

On the plane over, I felt like Paul Newman or Michael Caine in a Cold War spy movie of the sombre, le Carré or Len Deighton kind: a black-and-white film, with a jazz score and a grimly ambiguous ending. I was crossing the salt-caramel curtain, and no turning back.

When I got to Barcelona, there was, just as there ought to be in such a movie, a cool, efficient beauty, in a black frock and a sports car, waiting for me. This was Lisa Abend, an American writer who lives in Spain, and who was to be my companion in Barcelona. She had spent the past season observing the innards at elBulli, while writing a book about the Oompa Loompas of the operation.

It was twilight, and we sped through the dark, narrow streets of the Old City on the way to our first stop, the EspaiSucre. This “Sweet Space” was, Lisa explained, a working research laboratory and school, where new desserts are regularly conceived and experiments made, with the results exhibited, and eaten, at a nearby restaurant. As we drove, the almost kinetic energy of the Catalan capital was evident, as
it had been the last time I was there, twenty years before. At the time, the only dessert seemed to be flan, with a distinct salty taste that I associated with the local café con leche. I asked what had happened in the twenty years since.

“I’ve been doing a lot of research, and it really seems to be the case that the legend is the truth,” Lisa said. “Twenty years ago, the Adrià brothers took over a struggling French restaurant up in Roses, and in the nineties they began to collaborate with a chemist here at the university. And, being isolated and inexperienced, they began to do new things. It really did come from two intense brothers who didn’t care what the rules were supposed to be.”

We pulled up in the darkness to a modern glass storefront amid the medieval buildings and parked on the sidewalk. Inside, Jordi Butrón, the chief scientist-cook of the research center, greeted us solemnly and led us into his classroom. On the blackboard behind his head was a series of abstruse-looking diagrams. With a close-shaved beard and mustache, he had more the look of a severe French sociologist than of a happy Spanish cook. I explained that I was on a quest to find out what desserts really were and where they were going. He held up a hand and began to speak, in rapid, accented French.

“In retrospect, they’re disgusting, many of the things we used to do—too much fat and too much sugar, and a series of clichés taught while being rationalized,” he said. “The key thing now for a cook is to develop a library of flavors that you can recall. If I say to you, ‘Apple and cinnamon,’ you would click in immediately. ‘Yes, apple! Yes, cinnamon!’ The library of your mind contains that. But what if I say ‘Apple, asafetida’? Nothing! You have nothing stored there.” He added slyly, “Now, this is a benefit to the chef, because if I do apple and cinnamon and you don’t like it you think there’s something wrong with me, but if I do apple and asafetida and you don’t like it there’s something wrong with you.” He laughed briefly, professionally. “The
development of a pastry chef is not the development of techniques. It
is the slow, careful development of a catalogue of savors and flavors,
which you can develop the way you develop muscles. There is a logic
in every dessert worth eating. Consider the logic of white peach and
rich cheese. We must be conditioned not by sight but only by flavor,
the tongue, the nose, and the feel in the mouth.” He went on placidly,
“It is to avoid these errors that we do so much of our teaching and
learning blindfolded.”

“Blindfolded!” I said, wondering if I had misunderstood.

“Yes, blindfolded,” he repeated. He went to a drawer and took out a
handful of silken eye masks, which he threw on the desk. “It is
important to be able to work with the sensations of the nose and
mouth alone, so we spend hours in the dark, tasting. Of course,
appearance matters, but it is the last part of the equation. Taste, taste,
taste—that is what matters. So I keep people blindfolded for much of
the work, which is devoted to the marriages of taste.”

Then he opened the door to an immense, pristine kitchen, dominated
by a great length of polished black stone. Here, he said, “as many as
fourteen young chefs can work, blindfolded, to discover the taste and
enlarge their flavor libraries.”

I noticed various pieces of space-age-looking machinery littering the
beautiful, dark kitchen, and I asked how the new technology
contributed to his work.

“It is useful as tools,” he said crisply. “If I want to capture the flavor of
a raspberry meringue, I use a powdered egg white, and then I have a
true raspberry in the form of a meringue, instead of a super-sweet
meringue overwhelming raspberries.” He shrugged. “Nothing we do
with new equipment does more than allow us to reinsert flavors.”
We sat down for dinner in the nearby restaurant, and had a meal of five courses, all sweet, or at least sweetish, yet all beginning with a savory theme. First, there was cucumber-ginger-pineapple-tarragon sherbet, then olive-oil cake with San Simón cheese and a perfect white-peach sorbet. “The combination is a classic conception of the savory kitchen: cheese and olive oil,” Jordi observed. Then came an Idiazábal-stout-beet-cherry cake, too various to make much sense. Then a green-apple granita with bay leaf, as fresh and acid as a winter morning, and, finally, truffle-hazelnut-toast cream pudding. The genius showed in the details: a curry-and-salt cookie, thrown in as an extra but a study in itself. There was something perfectly modulated in the transition from savory herbs (tarragon and bay) and savory tastes (salt and curry, particularly) into sweet dishes.

“This is kind of amazing,” I said to Lisa, as I scraped the plate of truffle-toast pudding and grabbed another curry-and-salt biscuit. Lisa gave me a seraphic, you-ain’t-seen-nothing-yet smile, and said, “You’ll meet Albert tomorrow.”

I sat in my little hotel room in Barcelona, jet-lagged and sugar-satiated, and read about the history of sugar. Primates, I learned, love sweets for reasons that are simple enough to explain: sweetness is the natural sign of ripeness, and the best assurance, especially when balanced with just enough acids, that the thing you’re eating is good to eat. Yet the picture is more complex. The primate instinct for sugar is particular, adjustable, and sometimes seasonal. The lesser mouse lemur of Madagascar, a gourmand among monkeys, raises its threshold during the rainy season so that, when sugars are less abundant, it requires less sweetness. Yet this may be why the lesser mouse lemur has always remained so deeply lesser. Our nearest relations among the primates, particularly chimps, have a “supra threshold”: they love sweets and will practically die to get them—and
this, the theory goes, is one of the things that make them forage over extremely large territories, outside the forest. They strolled on all fours, then walked, then ran, just to have dessert.

As both the anthropologist Sidney Mintz and the historian Jean-Louis Flandrin have documented, it was only recently that the instinct for devouring sweets met the availability of abundant sugar. In pre-Crusades medieval European diets, only honey and fruit and other “natural” sweeteners were available, and they were mostly used in savory dishes. For centuries, sugar was a spice as rare as myrrh and as precious as saffron: an expensive extra used to give food taste and color. Only in the Renaissance did sugar slowly, through the New World, become widely current. (“Sweet” became one of Shakespeare’s favorite adjectives: it appears seventy-two times in the sonnets alone, and the first writer who mentions them refers to his “sugar’d sonnets.”)

Then, in the late seventeenth century, the price of sugar plummeted, never to recover, largely as a consequence of that hideous invention the West Indies sugar plantation. The cheap-sugar revolution took different paths in different places. In England, sugar combined with tea became the staple drink of the masses. In France, a full-blown dessert cuisine emerged, with the pastry chef as its hero. Soufflés rose; egg whites lifted up; aerated egg yolks combined; cheaper chocolate was blended with butter to make buttercream; and egg yolks were kept from cooking while allowed to thicken.

Reading the primatologists and the anthropologists, I got the sense that the double life of sweets ever since the sugar revolution—as a thing we universally crave, and as a highly specific, French-derived cooking culture—has led to a strange fight between disciplines. The primatologists insist that we eat sugar because our genes scream for it, while their humanist colleagues insist that sugar is above all a cultural symbol—we eat as many sweets as we can in order to emulate the
rich, who usually get to eat more. Yet surely an artifact and an appetite are not opposites to be reconciled but the same thing seen at different moments in its history. The lesser mouse lemur would doubtless devour a crème caramel and a butterscotch pudding indifferently; it takes a pastry chef trained in France to state the difference. The artifact gives the appetite shape; the appetite makes the artifact shine.

The next morning, I met Albert Adrià at the workshop that the Adrià brothers keep in the old quarter of Barcelona. In jeans and a work shirt, Albert had the stocky, proletarian look of a young Braque or Léger. He is a classic younger brother—earnest, hardworking, self-critical—and he explained the rise of the Barcelona dessert as a series of accidents disciplined by labor.

“Postres?” he asked. “Why me for postres? First, because the pastry chef left. I had just finished moving through all the other stations, and I was due to be at the dessert. And I also have a severe allergy to shellfish, which limits my movement. But the real reason was that pastry seemed much more interesting—a world without limits. Meat cook? Fish cook? What are you going to do with it? And also there was a lot more to learn in pastry—just the techniques! My question was, Why can’t you serve main dishes that are sweet, and why can’t you have savory tastes during the dessert time period?”

I asked when the new style had first appeared. He furrowed his brow, trying to recollect something that had clearly not been the result of a deliberate plan. “It was an accident of the kitchen, really. I suppose we first made an ice cream with saffron in 1985. My first step is, I have to draw it. I have to sketch it, get it down on paper, and then do the explanatory texts.” He began to draw on paper. “This one I wanted to take up, this dirt—one of my most famous desserts involved dirt. A sweetened illusion. The idea came when it was winter at elBulli and I was going up the hill to get my car, and stuff was falling down, and I thought, Shit, that’s good! I can use that! It’s a dirt road, and, in the
course of the fall, I noticed not only how the leaves changed color but also how they changed the color of the ground.” The dessert, as it was eventually plated, included cherry sorbet, salted honey yogurt, frozen chocolate powder, and spice bread, all evoking one fall moment: a dessert of frozen time.

Struggling to find words for his inventions, he began to speak about his most recent work: two desserts for the upcoming “Cook It Raw” conference, in Lapland, which would emphasize low-energy techniques, uncooked food. “Elemental, elemental,” he said. “That’s what I want. The really new idea I have for Lapland is—you see, I was thinking, if you were thirsty there you would eat the snow or the ice, and if you’re hungry you’re going to kill the reindeer. So: blood! The most basic thing is to drink the reindeer’s blood and eat the snow. So we made sweet snow and sweet blood. The key for the blood is your belief that it is. It looks like real blood only at forty degrees—it’s a beet-and-orange reduction, and the texture, I promise, is exactly the same as blood. So we’re not telling people that it’s not real blood. It’s meant to be provocative. But it’s very delicious.”

“Is there anything that didn’t work out?” I asked. “Something that you tried and failed at?”

“A lot,” he said. “One of the first things that Ferran asked me to do is create hot ice cream.”

Hot ice cream! He nodded gloomily. “You would look at it—ice cream—and then you would taste it, and it would be hot. Every year I thought I had it! But I never had it. What we discovered was to use an ice-cream machine but invert it, so that it was pumping in hot air, and to use gelatin to get the form. That was as close as we could get. It’s still this idea that we have.” He shook his head. “A sort of dream. I have a lot of them.”
By now, the story of elBulli has become part of modern cooking lore: how the combination of science and culinary curiosity created a real revolution in cooking, with high-tech equipment borrowed from the mass-produced-food industry for the purpose of wild, semi-surrealist picture-making. And how, at the height of this fame, Ferran announced that he would close the restaurant in 2011 and devote himself to “a foundation for pure research in cooking.” (What admirers of elBulli often forget to tell you is that it is a very hard place to get to. You weave your way there on narrow, winding cliff roads along the Spanish coast. The terror of the ascent surely adds to the delight of the arrival.)

If Albert is a Braque—a stolid man with a poetic imagination—Ferran is very much a Picasso, a grand maître who knows it. Like every first-rate artist, he has the kind of immense egomania that is oddly impersonal: his greatness is so uncontroversial to him that it is an act of generosity to try to limit it in words and dates. There is a certain kind of artistic egotism that is enveloping rather than narrowing: less “All I care about is my work” than “If you only cared about my work as much as I do, you would be as routinely elated as I am.”

I asked dutiful questions about the history, and the future, of desserts, and Ferran responded instantly, in Spanish, not with the guarded caution of his younger brother or the academic certainty of Jordi Butrón but with eager, nodding, flowing eloquence. His guttural, consonant-driven Catalan accent made everything he said sound as though he were murmuring a list of Jewish holidays. “Let us go all the way back to Carême and then come forward to us! Hmm. The problem! The problem! The phrase ‘molecular gastronomy’ I don’t like. ‘Techno-emotional’?—I’m not crazy about it, but let’s use it. Now let’s look at the history of desserts.”
He called for paper and pen from one of the countless earnest, eager apprentices, and began to draw floridly and actively, making swooping charts of the history of cuisine, filled with Venn-diagram-like circles enclosing famous names and long arcs and arrows connecting one significant moment with the next. He drew as he talked—I realized that he was the inventor of the Barcelona diagram—and soon turned to sketching boxes and vectors on a large sheet of white paper.

“Carême, you see, was a pastry chef,” he said. “Everybody thinks of him as a cook, but he was actually a pastry chef. Sugar?” He took two for his coffee. “He was the best pastry chef in France. Now, come to our own time, who’s the great innovator?” Dramatic pause. “Michel Guérard!” He trumped with the name of the chef best known as a father of nouvelle cuisine, in the nineteen-seventies. “And he was a pastry chef, too. Very interesting that two revolutionaries have been pastry chefs. Whatever they’ve tried to do, they’ve tried this symbiosis of the savory world and the sweet. Escoffier more than being a cook was a codifier. I don’t know why it played out this way, but it did. Since then, Gaston Lenôtre and Pierre Hermé. And, after that, nothing, really. It’s been consolidated, but nothing very new came out of it in France. Why did Michel Guérard begin this revolution? Because he was a pastry chef, and the pastry chef was the second-class citizen of the kitchen. He did it to show ‘I am a cook.’ It’s the thinking of a pastry chef that initiated the revolution of nouvelle cuisine!” He looked at me keenly, to see if I was following.

He was, in truth, speaking so quickly, and mentioning so many names and concepts, that I was a bit confused by the argument—until I looked down at the paper where he had been drawing the complex flowchart of French dessert-making. The point it conveyed was simple: there had really been just two hinge points in French cooking—Carême’s early-nineteenth-century revolution, and Michel
Guérard’s twentieth-century one—and both had come from pastry cooks escaping the limits of pastry. Pastry-makers were natural magicians, and magic in cooking would always come from them.

“So, now, here’s elBulli!” He drew some more. Then he called for one of the many illustrated books that document the ascension of elBulli, and flipped through its pages for examples. “We started taking things from the sweet world and moving them to the savory: a sorbet, or a savory ice cream,” he said. “One early savory ice cream was a Parmesan ice cream, in 1994. It extends an incredible dialogue between me and Albert. One of the important themes for us was about construction: how do you construct a dessert? This opened us up to the whole question of tiramisù—opened an incredible world to us. Deconstruction began here. Black Forest cake. This is mythical.”

Turning the pages of the book while drawing rapid diagrams and speaking in even more rapid Spanish, Ferran went on to explain that the true point of the deconstructed dessert was to create a kind of analytic Cubism of the pastry plate. It wasn’t that Black Forest cake was broken down into bits but that, if you’re possessed by the urge to break things down into bits, it’s more obvious that you’re doing it when you do it to a Black Forest cake. The Cubists used guitars and tables, ordinary still-life objects, for the same reason: you knew what a guitar or a table looked like, and so could see when it didn’t look that way. Once the fracture was achieved and accepted, you could move on to your own mythology. “If we make a curry ice cream, and you put mushrooms there, and eel—strange!” he said. “But if you put chicken stock, and coconut, then it’s curry.”

Were we, I asked, on the verge of entirely breaking down the line between sweet and savory?

He looked at me with delighted triumph. “It can’t be that an American is asking me that!” he said. “A hamburger with ketchup and Coca-Cola? That’s the most intense symbiosis of sweet and savory
imaginable. It’s your cultural theme.”

As Lisa and I approached the door, Ferran grabbed the pages of diagrams and handed them to me for further study. He continued brooding on the subject of dessert, explaining that for him the big question was not that of sweet and savory but that of sequence. “What matters is how we end the meal. With a surprise? A flourish? Reassurance? That’s the big question about dessert: how do we close out dinner? How do we finish the meal?”

He had a pensive look, and I couldn’t help asking him about Albert’s unmade dream. His face came alive again. “You mean hot ice cream? Yes. Yes! But . . . it’s hard! Ice cream is ice cream because it’s cold. But gelatin is the same way: gelatin used to be both gelatin and cold. There must be some way. We’ll solve it. We will.” Then he signed the historical diagrams “FERRAN ADRIÀ.”

A meal at elBulli—sweet-and-spicy flash-fried shrimp tortilla, wild strawberries in wild-hare bouillon—showed that the French line setting off savory from sweet could be entirely bypassed, like other French defensive lines in history, by mechanical ingenuity, speed, and superior strategic thinking. But I was still interested in desserts as such, pure desserts, desserts that always ended sweetly. And so the next morning Lisa and I travelled to meet with the young Mozart of pastry, Jordi Roca, at the restaurant he runs with his brothers, in Girona, in northeast Catalonia, about an hour from elBulli.

Where elBulli is old-fashioned and even a little run-down, as though to frame the hyper-modernity of its plates all the more sharply, El Celler de Can Roca, to give the full name of the Roca brothers’ three-star place, is of exquisitely contemporary design, with small groves of poplar trees contained within the zigzagged green-glass walls of the restaurant proper. A long, low-lying wine cellar sits just across an allée of trees from the restaurant, and in it Josep Roca, the second, sommelier brother—the oldest brother, Joan, is in the kitchen—keeps
his wines in tenderly nourishing musical environments, playing recorded melodies in the caves: Bach for the champagne, romantic cello music for the Burgundys, and local guitar music for the Spanish wines.

Jordi, the baby brother, is still young-looking—startlingly so, at thirty-two. Dreamy of visage and gentle of voice, he came out of the kitchen before lunch, tentative and eager and even a little wide-eyed in his chef whites, to talk about his dessert work. He had inherited the pastry station, he admitted, because it was the younger brother’s station, but he thought that there was room to grow there. “Desserts in Catalonia don’t have the weight of the past,” he explained, in the French he had learned during several stages. “We had Crema Catalana. A cake or two or three. So we felt free to invent and compete.”

After an apprenticeship at elBulli, he realized that his preoccupation was with scent. “That was something that hadn’t really been realized enough in desserts, I thought: the power of aromas. We had this new machine that could extract essential oils, and I began to play with it. I began making perfumed desserts.” He laughed. “I went to Sephora and found the most wonderful aromas in all the women’s perfumes. And I started making desserts built around their smells. Calvin Klein-like aromas. I wanted to make something as wonderful to taste as Chanel perfume was to smell. For me, that’s where all that new chemistry and equipment help. We have the machine to extract essential oils. Another just for smokes. Working with smokes and smells, this has a—fragile aspect? Sense memory extends to the heart of who we are. I think that there’s a freedom there, for a certain delicacy.” He shrugged. “You’ll see,” he said.

Did he have a dream dessert that he had tried and failed to perfect? He nodded. “Yes, there’s one I’m working on. I haven’t really . . . perfected it yet. You see, I’m a big fan of F.C. Barcelona”—the soccer
“and I wanted to make a dessert that would re-create the emotions Lionel Messi feels when he scores a goal.” Messi is the great Argentine striker who stars for Barcelona. “I feel I’m close. Could I try it out on you at the end of lunch?”

The desserts came around. And here was the real thing, here were true desserts: not dancing nimbly on the edge between sweet and salty, like Albert Adrià’s, but plain old-fashioned sweets touched by the invention and audacity of a liberated imagination. There was watermelon rind with bitter almonds and tarragon; a hot lemon-mint eucalyptus liquid that, as it was poured, solidified into a small, sweet iceberg. Then lemon custard and granita, with the floral scents in a small cup alongside: you eat and smell by turns. Lemon zest, pure distilled mint flowers. And then an apricot ice-cream bombe with a spun-sugar shell and apricot foam inside and an apricot sabayon inside that.

Finally, the server arrives with the Messi dessert, as Jordi fusses anxiously in the background. He presents half of a soccer ball, covered with artificial grass; the smell of grass perfumes the air. On the “grass” is a kind of delicately balanced, S-shaped, transparent plastic teeter-totter—like a French curve—with three small meringues on it, and a larger white-chocolate soccer ball balancing them on a protruding platform at the very end. A white candy netting lies on the grass near the white-chocolate ball.

Then, with a cat-that-swallowed-the-canary smile, the server puts a small MP3 player with a speaker on the table. He turns it on and nods.

An announcer’s voice, excited and frantic, explodes. Messi is on the move. “Messi turns and spins!” the announcer cries, and the roar of the crowd at the Bernabéu stadium, in Madrid, fills the table. The server nods, eyes intent. At the signal, you eat the first meringue.
“Messi is alone on goal!” the announcer cries. Another nod, you eat the next scented meringue. “Messi shoots!” A third nod, you eat the last meringue, and, as you do, the entire plastic S-curve, now unbalanced, flips up and over, like a spring, and the white-chocolate soccer ball at the end is released and propelled into the air, high above the white-candy netting.

“MESSI! GOOOOOAL!” The announcer’s voice reaches a hysterical peak and, as it does, the white-chocolate soccer ball drops, strikes, and breaks through the candy netting into the goal beneath it, and, as the ball hits the bottom of a little pit below, a fierce jet of passion-fruit cream and powdered mint leaves is released into your mouth, with a trail of small chocolate pop rocks rising in its wake. Then the passion-fruit cream settles, and you eat it all, with the white-chocolate ball, now broken, in bits within it.

You feel . . . something of what Messi must feel: first, the overwhelming presence of the grass beneath his feet (he’s a short player); then the tentative elegance of acquired skill, represented by the stepladder of the perfumed meringues; and, finally, the infantile joy, the childlike release, of scoring, represented by the passion-fruit cream and the candy-store pop rocks. I saw Jordi watching us from the kitchen entrance. He had the anxious-shading-into-delighted look that marks the artist.

In those le Carré and Deighton thrillers, the things the antihero learns on the other side of the curtain tend to be brooded on stoically rather than applied with spirit. What you saw on the other side of the curtain stays there. What I learned in Barcelona was that genius can produce what it chooses—but not much of it was really applicable to the table I sit at or the kitchen I cook in. It wasn’t just that you can’t do this at home; it’s that home is the last place you were ever meant to do this. The earlier great changes in cooking were a kind of baroque template, suitable for simplification—you made
haute cuisine with cream and butter, nouvelle cuisine by leaving them out—but “techno-emotional” cooking was created only for the three-star stage. It was pure performance, cabaret cooking, the table as stadium show. As often happens with the avant-gardists, by advancing the form they had only deepened the crisis. There was nothing that you could do with what I had learned, other than serve cake and ice cream while the soccer game was on, which we knew how to do already.

And yet something, at least, came out of the quest. I invited Bill Yosses, the White House chef, over for dessert, and laid a small trap for him: I was going to make the apricot soufflé, and see if I could achieve the zone. Over dinner, we talked desserts some more: the mysteries of plating, the needs of family life.

Then I led him into the kitchen, showed him the apricot-purée base, the transparent egg whites in the unlined copper bowl, the five soufflé dishes waiting to be buttered. He murmured instruction. “Butter around the outer edge, too,” he urged. “All the way around the outer rim like this. Make a small space—climb up to grow up. And then put the dishes in water: not a bain-marie or anything deep, just a shallow tray of water. You don’t want to lower the temperature too much.”

He watched as I beat the egg whites and they thickened and turned opaque. “Do you know why you use unlined copper?” he asked. “It’s for the static electricity. A small electrical storm going off in the bowl.” An act of God, making clouds of white.

We approached the zone, the perfect moment of stiff-but-not-too-stiff peaks. (“DO NOT UNDERBEAT/ DO NOT OVERBEAT!”) I beat. He waited. I beat some more. He nodded—go on. I went on, far longer than I usually would, and then he tapped my shoulder. There! That was it. The zone was there: not the gauzy, moist shiny area where I used to stop but a step above.
“I remember how there was one kid at Le Cirque back when who just did this,” Yosses said. “Starting around five-thirty, he had the bouilli or the soufflé base, and he beat egg whites all night.”

As we put the soufflés in the oven, he said, “Fifteen minutes,” and when fifteen minutes had passed he held his hand above them, to measure the heat rising, as much as the texture firming, and nodded one last time.

They were perfect. The apricot intensity shone; the egg whites’ neutrality and airiness softened and lifted it; the hotness gave an edge of taste delight that is always allied to danger, even tiny danger. A thousand small adjustments turn rules into skills, and then three smaller ones turn real skills into art. With Yosses’s help, I had taken something elaborate and made it something that seemed elemental. The primate instinct—get sweets at any price—had been turned into this polished performance. The virginal egg whites, the electric storm that whitened them and made them stiff: the perfect zone was drier and older than I had imagined. You could beat them more and they would be better.

Ferran’s question still counts: How do we finish the meal? But then how do we finish anything? At least I know now that if we beat hard enough, and long enough, and do both more than we ever thought we would have to, we might yet arrive at a lighter end. ♦

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