The Beef Wellington

and Napoleon's Enemies

FARM to FORK

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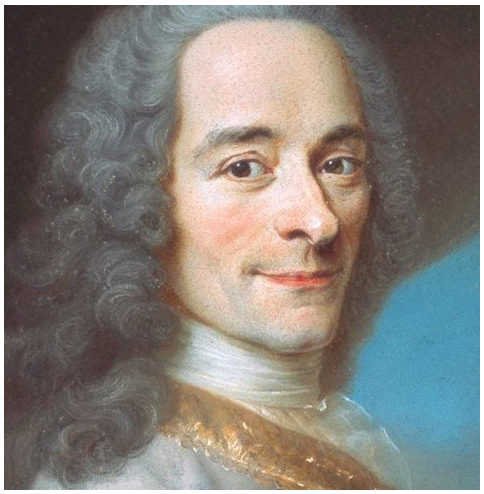
Prelude: The Age of Voltaire

In eighteenth century France, Catholicism was not only the official state religion, but any deviation from its dogma was brutally punished. A man discovered attending a Protestant service would be sent to the galleys for life, and the clergyman leading the service would be condemned to death. Major professions like medicine, law, and even grocers could only be held by Catholics. This was unfortunate for an aspiring lawyer by the name of Mark Anthony, who was raised a Protestant, but after studying law for years was forced to choose between his religion and his professional calling. Because he loved both, this weighed heavily on him, so he took to gambling, hard drinking, and speaking about suicide. Unable to make a choice, his speech became deed, and he hanged himself in 1761.

His family tried to hide the true nature of his death, because in these times the law said a suicide's body should be dragged naked through the streets while the public stoned it, and then all his property would be confiscated by the state. To prevent this, Mark's family collectively conspired to make his death seem natural, but the rope marks on his neck told the truth. The family eventually admitted to the suicide, but by this point the police didn't believe anything they said, and concluded the father killed Mark, his son, to prevent him from converting to Catholicism.



Voltaire (1694 - 1778)

The trial lasted three months, during which the public allowed their hatred of Protestants to fuel a frenzy. Based purely on hearsay, the court found the father guilty, and then proceeded to torture him in pursuit of a confession. The government stretched his arms and legs until they were pulled from their sockets. They poured fifteen pints of water down his throat, and then another fifteen. This did not force a confession, so they then tied him to a cross and broke each of his limbs with an iron bar. He still didn't confess, so they strangled and burned him at a stake.

All of this because one group of people could not tolerate another group possessing different religious beliefs. Some good people were understandably horrified, but what could one do? If one could be tortured simply for attending a Protestant service, one certainly could not question the Catholic Church. Nor could the French king, as it was the Catholic Church that lent his throne legitimacy. No one within the French borders could do anything except keep quiet and hope they were not the next to be tortured.

But Voltaire was not in France. He long ago fled the nation of his birth to avoid persecution. From his estate in Switzerland he wrote the plays and essays that made him the most popular intellectual in Europe, so popular that monarchs like Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great sought his friendship to boost their own popularity. In eighteenth century Europe the Catholic Church was immensely powerful, and so were the armies of Austria and Prussia, but no person, no institution, was more powerful than Voltaire's pen.

So when Mark's family sought help they reached out to Voltaire, and after researching the case, he decided the father was not guilty and that Mark had indeed committed suicide. Voltaire then composed his *Treaty on Tolerance*, and though he didn't sign his name to it, everyone knew he was the author. It was ostensibly written for the Catholic clergy, but he knew it would be read by all of Europe. *The Treaty on Tolerance* described the trial and torture of Mark's father, and called for the same tolerance in religion that Americans today take for granted.

All of Europe was moved, and in 1765 the French King's Council officially pronounced Mark's father innocent, and granted his family a handsome sum of money in compensation. This is just one example of Voltaire's influence on eighteenth century Europe. He was part of a group called the *philosophes*, who called on the people to reject superstition, to end the union of government and religion, and to serve God not by forcing religious obedience but by allowing people to follow their conscience.

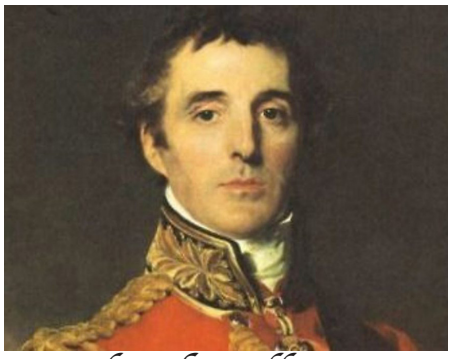
Voltaire died in 1778 but his writings were still alive, and in 1789 the tensions between Voltaire's dream and the French government's religious authoritarianism erupted into the French Revolution. Louis XI first lost power, then his head. The people gained power, and then used it to kill each other. The tyranny of the mob resembled the tyranny of its former monarch. There was one major difference though: how it viewed Catholicism. The Revolution murdered priests, forced monks and nuns to marry, and confiscated the vast monastery lands. France had heard Voltaire's call for reason, and in an

ironic turn, made the people literally worship "reason" as if it were a god, and this god told them to murder. The political mortality rate of the Revolution was roughly 50%, meaning for every 100 active political participants 50 would be murdered.

France needed stability, and they found it in the sword of a Corsican named Napoleon Bonaparte. The Revolution had made it possible to succeed in France through merit, and Napoleon was replete with talent. He first became a General, then France's First Citizen, and finally in 1804 he pronounced himself emperor. The Catholic Church was allowed to return, but in a more subdued form. During his coronation Napoleon crowned himself with his own hands, testifying that even the Church was subservient to his rule. By 1809 he had conquered most all of Europe, but there was one little kingdom that evaded him, Portugal, and this is largely because to win Portugal he would have to defeat the Duke of Wellington.

Wellington

The two men never met, and given their differences, it's doubtful whether they would have liked each other. Napoleon loved war and was willing to sacrifice thousands of lives to gain military glory. Wellington hated war, and it's not clear if he really loved anything besides the violin, gambling, and other men's wives. He was born Arthur Wesley, later changed the spelling of his name to Wellesley, and wouldn't become the Duke of Wellington until 1814. His childhood was not auspicious, as he didn't seem to be good at, or enjoy doing, anything except playing his violin. His mother, who once said, "I vow to God I don't know what I shall do with my awkward son Arthur," sent him to military schools, hoping they could make something of him, and later used the family's wealth to purchase him officer positions. Later he would earn his promotions, but these were the days when most all officers directly purchased their rank.



Duke of Wellington
(1769 - 1852)

His first battles were in Flanders against revolutionary France, where he was appalled by the laziness of British generals. He already hated war, and the sloth of the officers made war even worse through unnecessary deaths, and so young Arthur vowed he would be a better officer than those he served under. There, and later in India, Wellington would develop his proficiency in logistics, reconnaissance, and patience. His strategy of food logistics was particularly unique, so it is apt that a dish would be named after him. Napoleon preferred his soldiers to forage wherever they went, taking food from the people whose land they invaded, whereas Wellington established his own food supply chains, ensuring his men were always well fed and would not alienate the locals. Before any military venture he carefully detailed every difficulty that could be encountered, and prepared for each one. No decision was rash, and no obstacle unforeseen. When the time came to strike, though, he struck fast and always remained stoically calm amidst passing bullets. His major personality trait was an almost inability to experience fear. That, combined with patience and planning, made him formidable.

In 1808 Wellington was sent the Iberian Peninsula to protect Portugal and, if possible, expel the French from Spain. He did just that, earning him the title of Viscount of Wellington. He would not become Duke of Wellington until 1814, a year before Waterloo, where (as we all learned from ABBA) he defeated Napoleon, becoming the most revered man in Britain. The dish we now call Beef Wellington had already more or less existed in France, going by the name *French filet de boeuf en croute*, but the English renamed it after their hero. We don't know who coined the term, or when, but the name stuck. Its popularity particularly soared in the U.S. when it was shown on Julia Child's popular television program in 1965, and today it is one of Gordan Ramsey's signature dishes.

Wellington later served as the UK Prime Minister, where his resistance to social reform damaged his popularity. He earned the nickname "The Iron Duke" not due to his military ferocity but his stubbornness as a conservative politician. So many people threw bricks through the windows of his London home that he installed iron bars on the outside. The "iron" in Iron Duke was literal.

He wasn't completely resistant to change. One of his salient achievements was the 1829 Catholic Emancipation. Just as Protestants were persecuted in France, Catholics in the UK did not have full rights as citizens. Wellington's emancipation restored them to full citizenship. This is one area of his political life when he wasn't conservative, but he was always stubborn. The king would not approve the emancipation until Wellington threatened to resign.

Chateaubriand

The nomenclature of the Beef Wellington actually contains two of Napolean's enemies. The dish is a beef tenderloin encased in a pastry crust. The tenderloin is a round muscle about 2.5 feet long and 6.5 total lbs. The muscle isn't actually used much by the animal, making it the most tender of all the muscles. It is also among the most lean. Cut a tenderloin into thirds, take the middle third, and that is the Chateaubriand cut, named after the Vicomte François-René de Chateaubriand, who loved eating it.

Chateaubriand
(1768 - 1848)

Though he is hardly known today, during the Age of Napoleon he was as popular as Voltaire, and though Chateaubriand also wrote about the Catholic Church, his was a defense. In his memoir he described his life as consisting of three acts (1) in his youth, a soldier and traveler, including a voyage to the American colonies where he dined with George Washington (2) during the Age of Napoleon, a career as a writer and (3) after Waterloo, a politician.

Voltaire spent his life appealing to reason, and after people realized that they followed his advice to the detriment on their felicity, the Romantic movement was born. The Romantics also valued tolerance and individual conscience, but felt there was more to life than mocking the superstitious. They taught us to love nature, to value our individuality, and to be suspicious of those who claim they and only they know God's designs. Chateaubriand came to the stage in the first act of the Romantic movement, and became its literary leader.

While he was initially sympathetic to the French Revolution, when it abolished the nobility he grew disillusioned with its methods. Later the Revolution would send his wife, mother, and sisters to prison, and his brother to the guillotine. Chateaubriand grew cynical of society with or without religion, but liked it better with religion, and so he penned *The Genius of Christianity* and dedicated it to Napoleon. Whereas Voltaire was a *philosophes* Chateaubriand considered himself an *anti-philosophe*, and championed Christianity for the sentiments it espoused, especially that of faith, hope, and charity. Christianity's truth was, he contested, manifested not in the logic of its theology but the beauty of its art and architecture. Here was a man of emotion—not a philosopher, but an artist; a writer who won his audience not by steel arguments but literary charm.

Napoleon sought to exploit the popularity of *The Genius of Christianity* by appointing him as a first secretary to the French Embassy in Rome, but it did not take long for the emperor to begin executing people like the Revolution he superseded, and like before, Chateaubriand backed away from the prevailing political notions, and became Napoleon's intellectual nemesis.

Chateaubriand lived a long life, eventually seeing two more French Revolutions after Napoleon was defeated. During these years he regularly asked his chef to cook his favorite beef dish, where the center-cut tenderloin was wrapped inside fattier and less valuable cuts of meat, to keep the tenderloin moist while cooking. Those other cuts of meat would be thrown away and only the center-cut tenderloin would be consumed. Celebrities are always imitated, and as others prepared this dish they referred to that center-cut tenderloin as the "Chateaubriand".

Coda

What does this recipe we call the Beef Wellington mean to us, today? Besides being a feast in one dish, it is a symbol of western civilization's penchant for aspiring to high ideals but failing to live up to them. The recipe calls for the best of everything. Not just meat, but tenderloin and pate. Not just bread, but pastry. Not just onions, but shallots. And so it is named after the best of western civilization: the best generals, the best writers. Yet the Beef Wellington is notoriously difficult to cook. It takes great care, and many failures, not to have a soggy pastry. Likewise for our civilization. We create a beautiful religion, and then use it to torture innocent men. We give citizens freedom and democracy, and they set about killing each other. We crown a man emperor to end the madness, and he conscripts all your sons to fight his wars.

It is easy to become cynical as we continually fall short of utopia. Even Chateaubriand in old age occasionally gave up, once remarking, "I ought not to have been born." But during those meals, savoring that center-cut tenderloin, he surely felt satisfied. We, too, must be content with an occasional Beef Wellington, as that might be the best this world has to offer.