

Freedom Fries
and
Café Crème

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To James

Special thanks to James, Jane, Kat, Yvonne and
all of you who made me believe in my writing and cooking.

This book is also dedicated to all of you who work very hard
in a kitchen trying to please the palates of so many of us!

January

The Height of Good Taste

'To eat is a necessity, to eat intelligently is an art.'

François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld,
1613–1680, French writer

'Papa, what's a New Year's resolution?'

Armand, reading and sipping his coffee, was a little taken aback by this sudden question. He got up from the comfortable sofa and turned up the flames of the gas fire until he could feel an agreeable warmth on his face. Then he settled back down, inviting Juliette to sit beside him ...

A few minutes later, she seemed satisfied with her father's explanation.

'Have you made one, Papa?'

'Well, er, let me think about it ...'

The little girl was all ears.

'I promise I'll tell you later, Juliette.'

'OK, Papa! Then I might make one myself.'

Juliette was always so conciliatory.

January and its New Year's resolutions! And what *were* Armand's, since, for once, he was feeling rather satisfied with his life? He simply wanted to go on trying to be as happy as he could, and to keep certain habits that he believed were good for him and Juliette.

Would a relationship actually contribute more to his happiness? Or would it simply be a call of the flesh, since he felt no lack of companionship or affection right now? And he had hardly been able to trust anyone after what Han had done to him and Juliette.

On the other hand, there was Liana, whom he'd met at Brenda's New Year's Eve dinner party. How attractive, friendly and witty she was. Even though they'd been seated at a table with other people, the two of them had managed a good bit of subtle flirtation throughout the evening, while enjoying Brenda's exquisite festive dinner.

Much of their flirting had been based around the sensual enjoyment of the food – the aroma, the deliciousness and beautiful presentation of dishes – and the sweetness of the champagne had helped oil the wheels.

They'd been having such a very good time ... until Armand had had to leave when his mobile phone rang to remind him it was late and he should return home.

'So soon?' said Liana, disappointed, feeling that the spell of the evening had been broken.

Armand muttered a vague excuse, but his face showed his regret.

'Anyway, it was very nice to meet you, Armand!'

Liana was smart enough to see she couldn't say anything to detain him, and though she could imagine many scenarios that would explain his sudden departure, she didn't ask.

'I hope I'll see you again,' she added, summoning her self-confidence. After all, they'd established a bond through their conversation and their shared love of gourmet food.

‘I hope so, too,’ Armand replied sincerely.

He left, thinking that he would definitely contact Brenda to learn more about Liana, and possibly to ask her for Liana’s phone number.

Actually, Brenda had called Armand the day after to tell him that Liana had asked for *his* phone number.

Women nowadays do take the initiative, don’t they? And why not? thought Armand.

That had been a few days ago and Liana hadn’t called. Not that Armand really expected her to, but one never knew. He hadn’t called her, after all. Even if he’d felt very attracted to her – he had never enjoyed such sensuous dining with anyone before – he was a little afraid he might be disappointed if they met in other circumstances.

Snow was falling slowly, bringing an atmosphere of peace to the neighbourhood.

It’s hard to believe we’re in Manhattan, mused Armand, watching the snowflakes drifting down. As his mind wandered back to Liana and New Year’s Eve, Suzanne Ciani’s piano music, playing soothingly in the background, added a little melancholy note to his mood.

Later on, Armand knew, he would have much less time to relax since Rick and Carla, his employers, would be back.

He turned from the window to look at Juliette. She was drawing a very colourful picture to give to Rick and Carla. The couple were portrayed with outsized smiley faces, standing beneath a dark, slim Eiffel Tower, and with a big sun shining in the background.

Juliette was really into her drawing, the tip of her little

tongue pressed against her upper lip in concentration. Even her teachers were amazed, and happy to see that, unlike many of her peers, she did other things besides watching TV or playing computer games.

Armand walked around the spacious, overly decorated apartment to check that everything was in order before Rick and Carla arrived. The cleaning lady was just finishing and he was satisfied that the place had never looked better.

Three strident buzzes from the doorbell.

‘Papa, they’re back!’ Juliette ran to the front door.

Yes, Rick and Carla had returned. Although it was their home, they always rang the bell to announce their arrival since Armand and Juliette lived in. ‘It’s a question of respect,’ they insisted.

The door opened on a pair of smiling, artificially tanned faces. Tony, the apartment block concierge, was behind them, pushing their abundant luggage on a trolley.

‘Hello, Rick and Carla. Welcome home! You look great,’ Armand greeted them.

‘Yeah,’ Juliette confirmed, animated, jumping up and clapping her hands.

‘*Bonjour, tous les deux*, so good to see you! And to be home!’ Carla and Rick said almost in unison.

They skipped into the living room, took their coats off, sat down on the big white sofa and sighed with pleasure. Juliette immediately seated herself between the new arrivals. The three of them giggled with delight. Rick and Carla admired the picture Juliette had drawn for them. It