
Grumpy Old Gent's Good Grief Grumblings

(The Home of Common Sense)

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EATING NAPOLEON

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Now I'm not talking about the emperor of France. He's dead and eating that would be disgusting. Nor am I talking about a Napoleon cocktail (Dubonnet, Gin and Curacao), nor a Napoleon Champagne Cocktail (Champagne, Cognac, and Grand Marnier). I'm not talking about main dishes named for the emperor either... they are just name-dropping. Napoleon for those not in the know is a French pastry mostly made in Vienna, but copied all over the world by purveyors of baked sweets. A Napoleon usually comes in a rectangular box shape, about 6 cm long and 2 cm wide, and about 4 cm high. They are capped with a helmet, or crust of hard, very hard sugar icing, usually decorated with chocolate waves or parentheses. Beneath this helmet cover with the tensile strength of steel, is alternating layers of a paper and glue. The glue is always very slippery and is made of Vanilla *Crème Anglaise* or *Crème Patissière*, and the paper is a puff or phyllo pastry. This edifice all sits on a double thick 'paper' base. The glue is always soft and

squishy. The "paper" at its best is thin but soft and fluffy. But it is always hard to cut except with a very sharp knife because the dough is laced together with butter making thin, flaky, delicate, interleaved layers that resist attack from the outside.

Now this combination of textures and strengths is deadly in a Napoleon. If you try to cut a Napoleon from the top with a normal dinner knife it just compresses the dessert into vile mess. As pressure is applied *Crème Anglaise* squeezes out from between the phyllo layers and sugar helmet is undented. Applying more force yields even more of a mess. Eventually the helmet cracks and leaves even more of a mess. Attacking with a fork to try and crack the helmet usually results in the same disaster. After a few attacks, what looked beautiful when the waiter brought it and set it in front of you, is now an embarrassing mess smeared all over the plate. Of course, the taste is so good that it is a dessert to die for. So the problem I wish to address in this essay is: How to not look like a klutz from Bavaria while eating Napoleon.

Now I decided to find a way that I could eat a Napoleon in public without

embarrassing myself. I first decided that an Internet search would tell me what to do in this situation. But alas, my Google search abilities are not all that great. I tried "Napoleon" but that brought up a lot of history, PBS documentaries, academic history conferences, and something for "Napoleon Dynamite". Well you learn something every day. I didn't know Napoleon had dynamite, it sounded anachronistic to me.

Then I tried "Napoleon recipe" which wasn't what I wanted but I figured it would get me closer to what I did want. That yielded an amazing assortment of drinks, main dishes, and variations on the dessert many of them apparently easier to eat gracefully than the original. So my problem is recognized more widely than I had supposed.

The cook's solution avoids the problem by changing a Napoleon into a different dessert with the same name. I suppose **that** is a solution but not exactly what I was looking for. I mean, what happens when you get the original when you least expect it. Say it's the 14th of July and you're invited to dinner at the White House. You're sitting to the left of Laura Bush making polite conversation

about the scientific vs. theological issues involved in how the urethra is organized into a spiral so that fluid can't spray but is directed in a stream. And out comes the White House waiter and plunks a Napoleon in front of you. How the hell are you going to eat it? I suppose you can gracefully mutter: "Thanks, but I'm awfully full". How much classier it would be if you could just eat it.

Finally, still using the Google approach to knowledge, I tried a direct approach searching on: "Napoleon desert eating". This certainly did provide some interesting results, despite the fact that I can't spell and Google failed to inform me. Even something about eating newborn babies: "her stories of women eating their newborn... 'I am Daisy Bates in the desert'"... I didn't click on that one. I was sure it was not going to tell me how to eat gracefully. I don't know of any way of eating a newborn gracefully. I doubt if there is one, and I'm positive I'll never be served one at a presidential dinner.

Giving up on the Google approach to knowledge, there were a couple of other approaches open. I could read the Bible for wisdom. My Bible knowledge is OK, however I don't remember any advice on how to eat... there is plenty of what not to eat, but Napoleoni (I suppose that is the plural) are an anachronism as far as the Bible is concerned... so that was out. Then there is the Platonic approach: go after first principles and derive a solution. Clearly the art of eating gracefully has first principles; however I'm really not capable of deriving a proper approach to eating Napoleoni from them. So I settled on a somewhat Aristotelian empirical method. These days we would call it science. But really it is just a trial and error approach. Get Napoleoni and try, try, and try again until you succeed. To do this you have to be convinced there is a proper way that can be found... and a willingness to die of sugar overload trying.

No sooner thought of than acted on. I rushed to the local bakery and purchased a baker's half dozen Napoleoni (that's

seven for the price of six) to perform experiments in the privacy of my home. I put on the coffee maker and the radio in preparation. The radio for a bit of ambiance. The coffee as an antidote to sugar poisoning. I sat down at the table with my first Napoleon staring back at me from a blue Chinese mini-plate decorated with intertwined dragons and mythic lions. The strains of the *Dies Ire* from the Verdi Requiem came from the radio. That's not the requiem for Verdi, but by Verdi for Manzoni... So I guess it should be called the Manzoni Requiem, anyway I digress. Anyway the music seemed classy enough to match the dessert, even if Verdi and Manzoni were Italian.

I attacked my first Napoleon by trying to ease a little off the top corner. I call this: "The Mouse Approach"—you know, nibble at the edges. However when the fork was applied the helmet started to tip without breaking. Pushing a little harder still didn't break the helmet but the *Crème Anglaise* started to ooze out and the Napoleon began to slide on the plate. This would be even worse at the White House because the chef there would have put some slimy sweet sauce with the shape and colors of the French flag on the plate to make the dessert look more arty. In the end, this approach was unworkable; the usual disaster ensued.

The second try was a reattempt at the first, using a knife instead of a fork and trying to carve off the corner of the helmet. I was sure this approach would work and it would leave the remainder of the dessert intact, still looking respectable. I was already feeling a sugar buzz and took a sip of coffee to calm me down. I sawed and sawed without applying much pressure, since the fork had proved that force was a disaster. But eventually I grew tired and applied some force to the sawing. The helmet started to tip and the *Crème Anglaise* to ooze. I lost patience pushed harder and disaster struck. But the dessert still tasted pretty good. Marilyn Horne and Joan Sutherland sung (in Latin): "Remember, gentle Jesus that I am the reason for Thy time on earth..."

The third approach was called: "Just look nonchalant and eat it". I am sad to report there is no way to look nonchalant with a squished, mashed Napoleon in front of you. Pavarotti was singing: "I groan, like the sinner that I am, guilt reddens my face, Oh God spare me...". Even the third Napoleon tasted pretty good.

My fourth approach was called: "Divide and Conquer". I readied another Napoleon. I was feeling a definite sugar high. A cup of coffee didn't seem to bring me down at all. In fact, I was also beginning to feel jumpy. The Manzoni Requiem was into the *Offertorium*, Marilyn Horne and Luciano Pavarotti were singing: "Lord Jesus Christ, king of glory deliver the souls of the faithful departed from the pains of hell and the bottomless pit". I was sure I knew which bottomless pit they were talking about.

The attack on the Napoleon was try and support the helmet in the center with my fork while cutting with my knife. I couldn't get the fork all the way through the dessert without the whole cover sliding off and becoming precariously balanced on the fork. Cutting with the knife in this state was impossible. So I tapped the helmet back onto the *Crème Anglaise* to glue it back on the Napoleon.

I gave the whole problem another think through. If I rotated the Napoleon on its side and cut down through it, It shouldn't squish, because the helmet was now resting on the plate. So I tried this approach. Once I had it on its side it looked like the start of a mess even before I started cutting. Pressing the knife on the helmet cracked it into several parts, while the phyllo being resistant to the knife and flexible produced an almost immediate mess.

My fifth approach was a variation on "Divide and Conquer". I figured that if slipped my knife into the coffee and got it warm I could get through the sugar helmet. Then the rest would be easy. I'm not sure how dipping one's knife in the coffee would look at a presidential dinner, but if worked then other people

would just follow me and I'd look like a hero. Now this actually somewhat worked. I got through the icing. But the real problem was the phyllo pastry. It would just not give way. The Napoleon began to cave into the center and ooze at the corners. To finish eating this was going to be a heroic act. I considered abandoning the experiment. Verdi, in Latin, encouraged me with the text: "Let the holy standard-bearer Michael lead them into the holy light". I took the encouragement, but I was beginning to feel sick along with high and jittery all at the same time. But I am nothing if not stubborn.

I offered a soft grace, before I set out on my sixth Napoleon: "Rub-a-dub-dub; Yea God!" At this approach I changed strategy completely. I decided to use the helmet as cover for the disaster underneath. So I used my knife and fork in the corner to saw through the phyllo pastry. This made a mess but the sugar helmet covered it. By tunneling under the helmet one can get out all the good stuff and the helmet hides the mess. This was all a bit difficult because I couldn't keep my hands from shaking both from the joy of discovery and from the multiple chemical highs to which I had subjected my body. This was clearly the solution I was after. Now I know what to do when invited to a White House dinner and am served Napoleon as a surprise dessert. I can now chuckle as other diners struggle with their desserts and I carefully dig the goodies out of mine, looking suave all the time.

Marilyn Horse was singing: "*Lux aeterna*" as I sunk into my easy chair feeling distinctly sick. I cuddled my Napoleon brandy to warm it and then the thought came to me that the chef creator of the Napoleon dessert had planned to have it eaten this way all the time. He had designed the hard helmet so that it would hide the problems underneath. You aren't supposed to eat the helmet, if you do eat it, you eat it last. It was not put there as icing; it is a cover for hiding what goes on underneath. So obvious! Somehow this knowledge had been lost.

So it turned out my problem was entirely the fault of the US Government I was never taught how to eat Napoleon. This was a fundamental piece of knowledge that president Bush's educational reforms had completely forgotten or had at least gone unfunded because he was fighting a war somewhere else. I was determined that when faced with Napoleon at the White House I would bring this important educational issue up with the president. As I reflected on this resolve—it occurred to me that GW probably really didn't care one way or another who knew how to eat Napoleon. This left me depressed, sad, and feeling very sick.

I took a sip of brandy; horrified I realized that there was yet another Napoleon to be eaten. I looked over at the table, and began to feel even more sick. I needed to do something about this. Carefully I set down my glass of 100 year old brandy on the coffee table. Trembling I pushed myself out of the

easy chair and took tentative steps toward the smallest room of my house. I got about three steps along. I was not very stable. I tripped and dropped to my knees. I crawled. I could hear the quiet final strains of Verdi's Requiem: "*Libera me, Domine...*" as I passed away into unconsciousness.
