

Genin - genius of chocolate

7 Mar 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT

At the end of an excellent meal last November at Auguste, a chic new restaurant in Paris's seventh arrondissement, the waitress delivered our coffees and four individually wrapped caramels. These were delicious and disappeared instantly.

Recognising our enthusiasm, she returned with another four before adding, 'They're good, aren't they. They are made for us by Monsieur Genin.'

Not that elusive name again, I thought to myself. I had long heard of Jacques Genin as one of France's top chocolatiers but one who occupies a particular niche which, most annoyingly, I thought I would never be able to write about. From his Paris workshop, I had learnt, Genin produces a large range of elegant petits fours which numerous top restaurants and hotels around France serve at the end of the meal.

French chefs buy these from him either because they do not have the necessary technical skills to do so themselves or because they do not have the space in their kitchens - and the production of these small delicacies does require a vast amount of space, almost in inverse proportion to their size. Or they buy them simply because they realise that they cannot produce something of comparable quality.

A month later I heard from a Parisian restaurateur that Genin had finally gone public. He had transferred his workshop to a two storey building in the third arrondissement, close to République and surrounded by fashion warehouses. On the ground floor he has opened a tearoom that sells everything that is made upstairs that day.

La Chocolaterie de Jacques Genin now occupies an airy wedge of a building at the apex of two streets. From the other side of the road it is possible to watch his chocolatiers in operation as the building boasts floor to ceiling windows on both floors. As Genin explained, 'I moved here because the building is perfect for what I want to do. There is so much natural light on both sides and this makes it the ideal working environment for my staff.'

The four windows on the ground floor display large white signs that read *Éclair*, *Nougat*, *Caramel* and *Chocolat*, and while they are a clue to what is on the menu and the shelves, they do not give an indication of its elegant interior. The space dates back to the 17th century, the origins of some of the exposed brickwork that has cleverly been integrated into a modern design more reminiscent of a hip hotel lobby than anything else. Rows of glass cabinets and shelves hold the chocolates and caramels while the café takes up the main body of the room. The black metal spiral staircase up to the workshop Genin climbs with great speed but his waitresses have to negotiate far more carefully on their way down, balancing large trays laden with the hot drinks and pastries, which are all prepared upstairs.

Genin, 50, was born in the Vosges in the east of France, before moving to Paris to train as a chef and opening two restaurants during the 1980s. He then decided to learn the secrets of chocolate by working for La Maison du Chocolat for four years before fully appreciating that, temperamentally at least, he could only work for himself. In March 1996, after an extended break, he opened his first workshop.



As you may gather from this picture of him wrapping his delicious mango caramels, physically Genin bears a striking resemblance to the film director Roman Polanski and he speaks about his chocolates with the conviction that characterises the French whenever they talk about food or wine. In fact, the manner in which Genin spoke about his respect for all the produce he buys and subsequently transforms reminded me more of a winemaker talking about his grapes than a chef talking about his ingredients.

This approach is exemplified in the title Genin gives himself, 'fondeur en chocolat', a foundry worker in chocolate. 'I am not a maître chocolatier, or master chocolate maker, because I do not make the couverture, the basic chocolate mix, myself. And I believe that only those who work directly with cocoa can give themselves this title. I buy all my chocolate from Valrhona because their Criollo is, I think, the best for what I want to do and also because they can offer me the consistency of quality that I, and my customers, demand.'

I was still enjoying a cup of hot chocolate and the caramels I had ordered but Genin seemed bored with merely talking about his art. Having finished his espresso, he promptly stood up and asked if I would like to see his workshop. I eagerly followed him up the stairs.

The external wall is entirely glass with just a sliding door to make life easy for the waitresses. Spread over 200 square metres the 'laboratoire' is composed of different work areas each topped with cool thick marble at which his team of eight chefs were hard at work. Two were pouring out all the ingredients that would make their nougat; one was rolling out the passion fruit and mango caramels; another was making the pastry cases for their lemon, chocolate and caramel tarts; while another was assembling the cakes, the Paris-Brest, the eclairs and the mille-feuilles for the tea room downstairs. Perhaps the most dextrous was wrapping the caramels using both hands at once.

While I was lost in admiration, Genin grabbed me by my arm and said 'You must try these', and walked me over to a machine that was just cutting up thin strips of chocolate coating some exquisite stem ginger. Despite the intensity of the chocolate, the overall flavour was clean and very fresh.

Genin explained, 'I don't like things that are too sweet. What we make here are all products which are obviously commercially available elsewhere but have never satisfied me. That's the aim of all this', he added with a smile that obviously comes so readily from giving so much pleasure to so many.

And he was also keen to point out that, unlike most commercial kitchens, there is no deep freeze. 'We make everything fresh here every day. We supply about 200 hotels and restaurants around France, although I'm afraid that out of respect for them I cannot disclose their names. And at the end of each week we send a refrigerated delivery to one customer in Japan and another to the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong. But now that, finally, I have my shop, I won't be looking to take on any more restaurant customers.'

I was reluctant to leave what can only be described as 'chocolate heaven' but unbeknown to Genin I wanted to put his chocolates (photographed here by culinary blogger and Paris-based pâtissier [David Lebovitz](#)) to the acid test.

That night we were meeting a French couple for dinner at Robert Vifian's long-established Tan Dinh restaurant, which uniquely combines Vietnamese food and the most extraordinary wine list (once famous for Pomerol but he has now succumbed to burgundy in a big way). While both of these friends are fond of food and wine, she is the most wonderful cook and I wanted her opinion on the box of Genin's chocolates I had brought along in their elegant silver box.

At the first mention of them she was somewhat skeptical, citing the large number of chocolate shops that have recently opened in Paris, as they have in other major cities on the back of the formerly strong economy. Ten minutes and several chocolates later she was as convinced as I am that Genin and his team produce quite exceptional chocolates.

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