

BON APPÉTIT

The best of French gastronomy at home and away

Food news | Classic cuisine | Vineyards | Wine

A sweet thought

A French bonbon inspired by a Russian empress has been revived thanks to a Michelin-three-star chef, as **John Malathronas** explains

Joigny, in northern Burgundy, is one of many off-the-radar towns in France that feel like personal discoveries. A bridge straddles the River Yonne, dividing the city into the 'new' – as in 18th-century new – and the 'old' medieval neighbourhood. You have the flamboyant Gothic Église Saint-Thibault, Renaissance house façades, a baroque City Hall and an 1880s market hall in wrought-iron and glass.

What distinguishes Joigny from other French classified *beaux détours* is its association with the Dagmar, a bonbon created more than a century ago by a *confiseur* in the town called Monsieur É. Dolin (no one now remembers his first name).

The sweet's name does not sound French and it isn't. Princess Dagmar was the



daughter of Christian IX of Denmark; she married the future Russian Tsar Alexander III in 1866 and became Empress Maria Feodorovna, mother of the last Tsar, Nicholas II. She escaped the Bolsheviks after the Revolution in 1917 and died in her home country in 1928.

There is no record of her having visited Joigny, so it must have been the empress's fate after the Russian Revolution that inspired M. Dolin. The sweet he created in her honour had a crunchy caramel coating with a soft chocolate fudge interior. During the 1960s, the Dagmar became very popular. Nationwide success loomed, but M. Dolin died suddenly, taking the recipe to his grave, and the sweet was forgotten.

Enter Michelin-three-star chef Jean-Michel Lorain (pictured left) who, with his father Michel (a Michelin-two-star chef in his own right) helped to make the Côte Saint-Jacques in Joigny one of France's top restaurants. However, something was nagging them; they were among those *Jovinien* children who grew up loving Dagmars and they still craved the sweets.

"In 1995 we decided to re-create this flavour we loved,

which reminded us of our childhoods, as well as to revive a Joigny speciality," said Jean-Michel. "It took us about six months to perfect the recipe from memory."

The Lorains then decided on the ultimate test. "We went to the retirement home where Mme Dolin lived her last years and asked her to taste the sweet. She just said: 'It should be a little smaller'."

The Côte Saint-Jacques now has a *laboratoire* where the

sweets are made by hand and then sold in its shop.

There it is in front of me: the Dagmar, resurrected. I unwrap it, bite through the solid caramel and let my tongue absorb the sweetness of the filling – a French bonbon inspired by a Danish-born Russian empress. www.cotesaintjacques.com

