

THE DESSERT LAB

A pastry chef's quest for the new.

BY BILL BUFORD

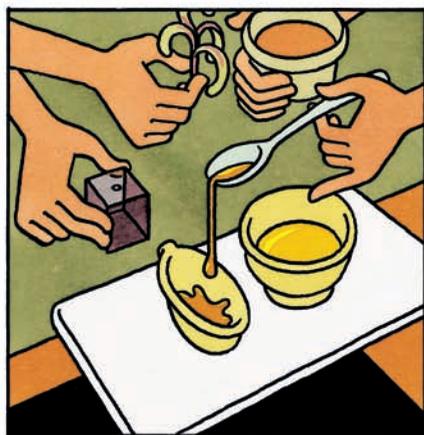
On my third day at Will Goldfarb's new restaurant, on Cleveland Place, in SoHo, an assessor from the Tower Insurance Company of New York made an unannounced but utterly routine visit. The restaurant, called Room 4 Dessert, had been open for two months. It was long and narrow and furnished with stools. It looked like a bar. The place next

nish piped inside to look like DNA"—would be the green course. The blue would be "a cotton-candy terrine the color of the sea, but with waves like the ocean." The black featured a black rum gel served in a brioche dyed with squid ink.

"Food," Goldfarb said. "We serve food."

"Food," the man repeated. He looked

sixty different items a day, had prepared a raspberry meringue that he was pouring into a bulletlike machine called a dehydrator; the meringue would remain there, evaporating slowly, for two days, until it had solidified into pink bread. (It looked like an astronaut's meal—a big, flat, compressed marshmallow.) Pamela Yung was Robert's deputy. She was making mango gnocchi by spooning fruit puree into a calcium-chloride solution that seemed to freeze it on contact. (I have no idea how, but the result, crispy orange balls floating in a chemist's tray, were rather miraculous.) My pancetta was for a dish called Picnic. I'd never eaten a dessert made with belly fat. (It was served with tomatoes stewed in olive oil and vanilla.)



Will Goldfarb was devising a one-off eight-course dessert menu. A jello made of basil and chlorophyll would be the green course.

door, which was long and narrow, was a bar. The one next to it was a bar, too. In fact, except for Eileen's Special Cheesecake, on the corner, this two-block stretch (Cleveland Place is one of the shortest streets in Manhattan) was pretty much all bars (including the nearby Falls, still open and busy six weeks after a bouncer had been charged with murdering a customer).

"So what do you serve?" the assessor was asking. "Mainly spirits?"

"No," Goldfarb replied. "Spirits are five per cent of the business."

"Really? Only five per cent? So it's what—beer, predominantly?"

"Almost no beer," Goldfarb said.

"No beer!" The assessor was openly puzzled. "What, then?"

Goldfarb was at a computer, devising a one-off eight-course dessert menu. Each course was a different color. A jello made of basil and chlorophyll—"the gar-

around. There was no kitchen. There was no gas, and no obvious array of cooking devices, except a toaster and a portable electric oven. The bar was eighteen inches across. There didn't seem to be room for anything except leaning against it and having a drink, although there was a prep area in the back, near one of the two functioning sinks and the toilet. That's where I was, cubing pancetta.

"Oka-a-ay." The assessor pressed on. "What kind of food?"

"Dessert."

"Dessert?" He paused. "Oka-a-ay. And what kind of dessert, exactly?" The assessor was a man accustomed to evasions. "Can you give me some examples? Of your desserts, that is."

In addition to Goldfarb and Ephrain, a new dishwasher, there were three of us in the back. Robert Truitt, twenty-four, who worked from ten in the morning until two in the morning, making

We stopped what we were doing: just how was Goldfarb going to describe what he served?

He was staring into space, thinking. "Chocolate cake," he said finally. "We make desserts like chocolate cake."

He was lying. He doesn't make chocolate cake—at least not in any form I've known, although at some point Goldfarb might have made one, provided he could subvert it, reconstruct it, and serve it with smoked-spare-ribs ice cream, say, topped with whipped green wasabi-root powder on an edible plate smelling of bacon and eggs that you could take home and have for breakfast. I exaggerate (Goldfarb has never made an edible plate), and I don't exaggerate (he has made edible underwear). Among the dishes Goldfarb prepared when he was "young and stupid" (his description) were gelatine slices served on a naked woman and a rose-petal vapor inhaled through a gas mask.

JOOST SWARTE

This commitment to making the next radical thing, whatever it is, and however unnerving it might be to have it in your mouth—dessert as performance art—is a movement of sorts, sometimes called the New Gastronomy, sometimes dismissed as just plain wacko. Every big city seems to have a member, some downtown laser-torching, hyper-techno gastro kid concocting “works” invariably inspired by Ferran Adrià and his brother Alberto, the two chefs of El Bulli, a restaurant outside Barcelona renowned as much for what it does when it’s closed (the laboratory season, when cooks are invited to help create new taste configurations for the next year) as for the thirty-five courses served when it’s open (the warm months). Unlike most of his gastro peers, Goldfarb has actually worked at El Bulli—for twenty months, including four in the laboratory. He has also been making the next new thing for so long it’s starting to seem a little old.

I’d sought out Goldfarb because I wanted to learn about dessert. I now recognize that going to him as a tutor was akin to learning how to drive by hanging around a Nascar racetrack. My interests were pretty basic. I didn’t know why dessert was invented or what function in the running of a human organism it was meant to perform. (I wasn’t even sure when it was invented. Raising livestock, vegetable farming, the harvesting of grains: these activities are ancient, older than history, and essential to the survival of the species. But when did humankind decide that it also needed *crème brûlée*?) For instance, I eat a tuna sandwich and an apple, and I understand, more or less, what they give my body. But what do I get out of a piece of Key-lime pie? Desserts are a problem. You’re a person who eats them and regrets that you did; or you’re one who never eats them; or you eat them and know enough to eat only a little; or else you eat them and eat them until you’re done in. That’s me. Face to face with a dessert, my judgment goes walkabout. I devour it with unreflecting dispatch, indifferent to its qualities or its composition or the skill of its making, jabbering away, jiggling in my seat, metabolism spinning at maximum revs, sweat beading up inexplicably on my forehead, wondering (while looking out for another helping) how anything could possibly be bad when it manifestly makes

you feel so good. And then—betraying an undiagnosed intolerance for milky things, or doughy things, or sugar itself, or just for eating too much—I wake in the night, sick, thinking, How could I possibly have been so stupid to do this again? Dessert frightens me.

The next day didn’t begin well for the little restaurant. Ephrain, the dishwasher, hadn’t shown up, and Priscella, the bartender, a slim West African art student with long, painted nails (“Your wait staff should be beautiful,” Goldfarb told me. “It’s very important”), announced that she had visa problems and would be leaving the country soon. (Today, in fact.) Goldfarb had no one to take orders, and, in the event that any could be placed, no one to wash the dishes they’d be served on. He studied Craigslist, convinced that he’d find a new staff there.

Goldfarb is thirty-one. He is tall and lean, with long, thin fingers, the trim torso of a cyclist, and a tight Lance Armstrong-like face that gives little away. He seldom smiles; he is rarely angry. His most conspicuous wardrobe item is a pair of clear-framed plastic glasses with thick lenses, a recent acquisition; until four months ago, he couldn’t read the watch on his wrist, and for most of his career he plated dishes from memory—his is of the flypaper kind—because he couldn’t see the ingredients. His speech can be quirky, almost foreign (it put me in mind of French Canadians practicing English), as though the time he spent at El Bulli and other European restaurants—he has also worked in France and Italy—had impressed itself on his voice memory and he couldn’t undo the impression. (He was born and brought up on Long Island.) He mimics people uncontrollably. When he has a Japanese visitor—in Japan his desserts are regarded as works of art—he drops articles and genuflects wildly: “You are big help me, thank you, thank you, thank you,” he’ll say, bowing over and over again. He is also insistently, self-consciously courteous—a philosophical position.

He tried to explain it to me as he prepared an element in a dessert called *Voyage to India*. Most of Goldfarb’s desserts start with an idea rather than a flavor; this one was meant to evoke the jumbly subcontinental associations of Jackson

Heights, in Queens, where Goldfarb lives. He wiped the plate with vodka—to give it a non-streaky sheen—then combined two items: coconut cream and dried coconut milk. That was the dessert. There was no sugar, for instance. The cream was a puree of the coconut fruit, mixed with lecithin, an ingredient used in industrial peanut butter (it makes it stiffer) and popularized by Ferran Adrià (it's the secret of foam). Mixed with the dried coconut milk, this (now) bouncy puree was rather a wonderful thing in the mouth, an exercise in opposites: light and heavy, dry and wet. It seemed gimmicky—not a whole lot of skill was on display—except that it was a gimmick I'd never experienced before.

Goldfarb was wearing the same shredded T-shirt he usually wore during the day, stretched, saggy, once white, now yellow, which had rotted and was falling apart around the armpits. He had just cleaned the toilet—he insisted that everyone there knew they had to clean it—and also the air-conditioning vents and the corners of the floorboards. The essential mentality of the pastry kitchen, Goldfarb explained, was to regard every item in your life as equally urgent—no one thing should be more pressing than any other—and therefore nothing was ever neglected. You were on call, always.

I thought I understood. That evening, I shook his hand as I was leaving and waved to the others near the sink. Goldfarb sat up stiffly and ordered me back. “Before you are allowed to depart, you must shake and say goodbye to everyone here by name. In a pastry kitchen everything and everyone matters the same.” The next day, I had lessons in how to fold a towel as Goldfarb stood by judging my effort. “You can never overestimate the importance of a correctly folded towel.” By way of illustration, he added, “Thomas Keller”—the high-minded chef of Per Se and the French Laundry—“loves my towels. He understands.” I continued folding. Goldfarb continued watching. “I've fired people for not knowing how to fold a towel.” He adjusted my cutting board so that it was precisely parallel. “In a pastry kitchen everything is controlled. A decimal point too much or too little of a gelling agent is the difference between inedible and good. Pastry chefs live on a different

planet from the rest of humanity. Welcome to our world.”

By three o'clock, a member of the rest of humanity phoned. Craigslist had come through, and Goldfarb had found a bartender, Nina, from Sheepshead Bay. She appeared at five o'clock, an hour before service started—wavy dark hair, a blouse with top buttons not quite buttoned, an abundance of dangly jewelry—but she was rapidly overwhelmed by the drinks list.

“Pretend I'm a customer,” Goldfarb told her just before six, after she'd spent her first thirty minutes studying up for the evening's performance, “and I want to know what the Sauternes is like.”

“What's that?”

“This,” Goldfarb said, and indicated a bottle.

“Oh, that. I wondered how you pronounced it. That's the stinky one, isn't it?”

Goldfarb's head fell into his hands. “Please, try not to describe the wine as stinky.”

Goldfarb discovered his mission at El Bulli. By then, he'd done college (Duke, history), cooking school (Le Cordon Bleu), and his apprenticeships (Paris, Florence), and, accepted as a member of Europe's most “cutting edge” three-star kitchen, he was in a place that asked of him exactly what he wanted to give: an uncompromising monkish dedication. El Bulli was in the mountains, removed from the temptations of the city: no company except chefs, no social life, no movies or television, no distractions, living quarters like military barracks, and brutal hours. “We got five to six hours of sleep a week.” (Goldfarb, I realized, didn't have to make desserts. His vocation could have been anything—religion, political activism, the military, even stocks and bonds—provided it was a vocation in its fullest sense: a calling of high seriousness.)

“El Bulli is the most radical restaurant in the world, and the engine is the pastry

kitchen,” Goldfarb explained. “That was the lab—the experiments in technique, in taste combinations.” The operating principle was the question “What if?” A custard has always been made with milk. What if it's made with cream? (The result is drier and richer.) A chocolate mousse has always been served cold. What if we warm it? (You taste more.) Tomatoes are always gutted. What if we make a dessert from the seeds? (You get an intensified expression of the fruit.) What if we use chemical compounds? Industrial gelling agents? What if? What if? What if?

Goldfarb became a culinary evangelist. He formed a society of like-minded chefs (“nothing less than the most forward-thinking individuals in modern civilization”). He wrote manifestos. He held meetings—on the Internet, in mountain retreats, in foreign kitchens. He was opinionated and short-tempered and impatient. He was seen to be arrogant, a freak, a genius. He interviewed for jobs, put on pastry displays, dazzled with his technical gifts, was hired, and then let loose. At Cap Juluca, on the Caribbean island of Anguilla, he pickled apricots, made reductions from Coca-Cola, and conceived of a tobacco sabayon. (He was fired after three months, and lived in an island shack, committed to a long period of self-reflection.) At Aquavit, in New York, he made desserts with Chinese spices, curries, and black olives. (He was fired after one month.) In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, he opened Papillon, with Chef Paul Liebrandt, blocks from where the World Trade Center had stood, and, with what seems like an anarchic disregard for the historical moment, produced an interactive Futurist menu that included a starter served on silk and sandpaper, a dish that required the customer to be blindfolded and bound, and a dessert that a waiter injected with a syringe of hot oil at the table.

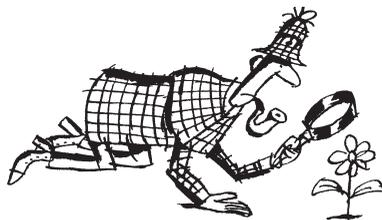
“Why?” I asked Goldfarb.

“To change the concept of the eating experience of dessert.”

“What was wrong with the old one?”

“What,” he replied, “is wrong with change?” (He was fired after five months. He went to Maine, lived in a trailer, worked at an inn, relearned the basics: muffins, apple pie, chocolate-chip cookies.)

In the spring of 2004, he was hired to



run the pastry kitchen at Cru, a new restaurant near Washington Square, with an ambitious young chef, Shea Gallante, a sixty-five-thousand-bottle wine cellar, and a supportive and enthusiastic owner, Roy Welland. By now, Goldfarb had learned caution, and he expressed it in aggressively recalcitrant offerings (vanilla ice cream, chocolate parfait, almond tea cake), until Welland, distressed by the banality of the menu, urged him to be adventurous. “Be yourself,” Goldfarb recalls being told. “No, you don’t want myself,” he replied. “Please wait until you get your reviews. Don’t let me loose.” The reviews appeared in October. The critics loved the restaurant; they hated the “smart-alecky, flavor-conflicted” desserts, which included the interactive St. Barts May 2001, a peculiar evocation of a Goldfarb seaside holiday, complete with a beach towel and a spray can of salt water. “I was crucified,” Goldfarb recalled. (He earned the *Post’s* distinction of being among the city’s worst culinary events of the year.) “I was thrashed. I was beaten up. The critics went after me with a venom I have never seen in my life. I had to leave New York. I thought, I will never cook here again.” He moved to Long Island and became a private cook. (“Good money, bad life—I will never again work for someone who keeps loaded guns at home.”) Last October, he saw an item on Craigslist: two investors were looking for a “motivated pastry chef” to start a new dessert bar. Hired and made a partner, he returned to the city.

On my next day in the prep area, I was assigned the task of cutting up tomatoes, except that, according to Goldfarb, I wasn’t cutting them. “This isn’t a rustic Italian restaurant,” he said. (That was a refrain; in Goldfarb’s eyes, New Yorkers want to eat only pasta.) “You are in a pastry kitchen. You are to sharpen your knife before you begin—on a whetstone, one side only, gently, with pressure but no pressure, twenty times in this direction, twelve times in the other.” He paused. “And your posture!” he went on, unable to contain his exasperation. “How can you cut straight when you’re not straight? And your back, please—it should be erect. Your arm loose, yes, but at your side, barely moving. You should be like a machine.” He examined my tomato cubes. “These haven’t been sliced.



“If you’re happy and you know it, stick with your dosage.”

These have been *mauled*.” He sighed. “Remember, you are on another planet.”

He summoned me to the bar for instruction. He wanted me to understand the modern dessert. He began with a book about Fernand Point, which he pulled off a small shelf by the bathroom. Point, Goldfarb explained, was the most influential force in French cooking in the twentieth century. He was the chef and proprietor of the Restaurant de la Pyramide, in Vienne, in the northern Rhône, from 1923 until his death, in 1955. “Fifteen years later, in 1969, seven of the eighteen chefs honored with three Michelin stars had been trained in Point’s kitchen.” According to the book’s introduction, written by Joseph Wechsberg (whose 1949 Profile in this magazine introduced the great man to American readers), Point’s gift was an ability to gather up a hundred and fifty years of French cooking—especially the preparations of the two great nineteenth-century masters, Antonin Carême and Auguste Escoffier—and synthesize it into a coherent cuisine. The result was Point’s menu, which everyone today would recognize as unequivocally French, particularly the desserts (displayed on another Point flourish, the dessert cart). Chocolate mousse, fruit tarts, soufflés, madeleines, *île flottante* (floating island), sabayon, Bavarian cream, crêpes Suzette,

crème brûlée, clafoutis: they’re all there.

Goldfarb pulled other books from the shelf. Jacques Maximin (representing the nineteen-seventies), Frédy Girardet (the eighties), Joël Robuchon (the nineties), culminating in “La Pâtisserie de Pierre Hermé.” Flicking through each volume, you could see shifts in presentation and flair, but, according to Goldfarb, the influence of Fernand Point was evident on virtually every page. “In eighty years—nearly an entire century—French pastry has changed not at all,” he said. And then, muttering to himself, his anger mounting, he fixated on one of the recipes, whatever he was finding in it becoming more and more injurious—to his pride, to his profession, to his calling as a pastry chef. “This is unbelievable. This is fucking unbelievable. There’s even a floating island! Can you believe that serious French chefs at the beginning of the twenty-first century are still making floating islands?” He studied a picture of the offending dish, unable to disguise his indignation: the slothfulness of it, the vulgarity.

Goldfarb’s idea of dessert was pretty high-church. Mine, in contrast, was outright Baptist, and originated not in the northern Rhône, or in the mountains above Barcelona, but on the arid plains of West Texas, where, on a three-day drive from Louisiana (where my family came from) to California (where we were mov-

ing), my father, after a coded exchange with my mother, stopped at a place he promised was related to royalty (a Dairy Queen) and introduced my sister and me to the banana split. I brainlessly devoured mine with ice-cream-headachy speed, my pleasure, and my enduring memory of it (including an image of my father grinning broadly from the front seat while he ate his), marred marginally by the fact that, ten minutes later, I was throwing up out of a moving car window. I'd like to believe that I've grown more sophisticated in my appetites, but recently, on coming upon a seminal text from my childhood—the 1957 edition of “Betty Crocker’s Cook Book for Boys and Girls”—I realized that, even today, I would find it hard to resist an Eskimo Igloo Cake. (The recipe is on page 14, in the general vicinity of Whiz Choco-Nut Crinkles and Wheaties Ting-a-Lings.)

Dessert is a modern concept. Chaucer didn't eat one. Neither did Shakespeare. Even as late as the sixteen-sixties, in the diaries of Samuel Pepys, and nearly two centuries after Columbus returned with the first parcel of New World sugar, you can read about brown ale, boiled beef, and exotic cheeses, but there won't be a single mention of chocolate cake. Desserts didn't figure in the Native American diet, or among the Aztecs. It is a European invention. The word itself is French (from *desservir*: *de-* + *servir*—that is, the thing served after all the plates have been removed). It originally described a course that was mainly fruit, nuts, sweetened meats—in effect, finger food: a way of not having to say good night. The French word appeared in print in 1539, and entered the English language slowly; its first usage was in a seventeenth-century medical text, in a telling and prophetic expression of protest: “Such eating, which the French call desert, is unnaturall.” You can then follow its rapid, unnaturall evolution in early recipes: from finger food to entertainment (a 1555 confection called Snow, made from sugar, rice flour, milk, and egg whites beaten into a froth—wintry verisimilitude on a plate), from glucose grenade (the 1750 alchemical kitchen experiments of Menon, who was the first to chart the thirteen unique changes in sugar from boiling to caramelization) to art (the castles spun out of sugar and lard by Carême). Somehow, viewed thus, a

dessert made to look like a lab experiment doesn't seem out of place.

But there is another line, which has nothing to do with technique and everything to do with fat, and derives not from the word “dessert” but from “pudding,” signifying that enduring mystery of the English diet, which, traditionally, is nothing more than a boiled sack filled with sweetened lard: suet, usually, flavored with leftover mutton, turnips, bits of dried fruit, stale bread, a glass of stout, some of Grandma's brandy, orange peel, and a carrot, smooshed all together until they go squish and ferment. (The banana split, it seems to me, is more English pudding than French art.)

Goldfarb, meanwhile, had come to recognize the importance of another element of dessert: the dishwashing afterward. This was because he was now doing it himself. (“You can never overestimate the philosophical significance of a clean plate,” he said chirpily, determined to find the silver lining in a thunderstorm.) One day, there was a dishwasher named Angel. (“The perfect name!”) The next day, there was no Angel. There were continuing difficulties at the bar as well. Nina, on her fourth night, forgot to enter the drink orders into the cash register. Hundreds of dollars in sales went unrecorded.

“Hello, ladies,” Robert called out to two women in boots walking past the door. “Any of you want to be a bartender?”

An idea occurred to me: Why not me? I submitted my proposal to Goldfarb and was disappointed by his response: no. But when no one showed up the next day, he had no choice: Can you start, you know, like, now?

There were three rules. Break nothing. (“Please!”) Make no money mistakes. And let people wait. “A pastry rule,” he added. “Better to be perfect and slow than fast but flawed.”

I was surprised by my ignorance, even in areas where I thought I knew something. “May I ask you a question about the Pinot d'Alsace?” the first customer asked, and I was relieved, believing that this was something I'd be able to answer. “Is it made from Pinot Gris or Pinot Blanc?” I stared at him for a long time—I don't know why; the knowledge wasn't going to present itself suddenly—before

conceding that I had no idea. ("Next time," Goldfarb said, "tell him you'll find out.") I added too much ice to the drinks. I added too little. My first cocktail, some Goldfarb conceit with pages of instructions, took me thirty minutes to make; sweat was pouring down my face when I delivered it up.

Why do people drink these things in the first place? Why ruin alcohol with syrups and sugars? Why not? I could imagine Goldfarb replying, and in fact his cocktails were predictably unpredictable liquid variations of his desserts. Their names were metaphors, or states of mind, like Not Your Mother's St. Tropez (a gin-and-tonic with blood orange—"You can never overestimate the power of freshly squeezed fruit") or Black and White (a coconut concoction with cocoa-bean alcohol—"All the great bartenders made their own alcohols"). A drink called Mr. Clean used a pine liquor that smelled powerfully of a basketball court.

It was when I seemed finally to be getting it right that I was getting it most wrong. I was on top of all the orders. I was preparing items and watching the length of the whole bar, filled now with about two dozen people. My ignorance, so distressing in the beginning, had receded to insignificance in the face of everyone else's. "What should we order?" six women, co-workers at a bank, asked in unison. The menu baffled them.

"Everyone likes chocolate," I said. They were relieved and grateful.

"And what should we drink?"

"What doesn't go with champagne?" I felt proud on Goldfarb's behalf that I had increased the value of their order by a ninety-four-dollar bottle.

He took me aside: "You are too frantic. You've got too much adrenaline. You don't understand. There is no fourth wall here. There is no kitchen to hide in. Everything you do is on view. You have to be relaxed. Easy. Listen to the music. You are the atmosphere. Do you understand?" He paused, clearly convinced that I wasn't understanding. He was trying to be polite. "And the advice you keep giving? Do me a favor. Don't." Ignorance was at the heart of the experience he was trying to create. "Don't tell

them what to do. Step back. The idea is dessert."

"What is this dish called Red?" someone asked.

"Four variations on a color," I said neutrally. I didn't describe the elements or how they were prepared—how a jello was an unexpected expression of dried hibiscus, the flower having been soaked for twenty hours in water and then reduced



to an essence of tropical otherness—or how little sugar was in any of them. ("I hate sugar," Goldfarb confessed. "But I can't run a restaurant without it. Americans think they need it. It's an addiction. My ideal dessert would have none.")

Dish after dish arrived.

People were perplexed but challenged, teased: things were being put in front of them that they'd never seen before. They tasted them and were surprised: by a flavor or a combination or a texture. I studied the person on each stool. Each was a display of pleasure. Goldfarb, I was starting to see, had found a different purpose in what he was now making. In the beginning, he'd been the angry radical, like one of those postmodern playwrights, provoking his audience, patronizing them, knowing better. But now, back in business (and giving the lie to F. Scott Fitzgerald's lament that in America there are no second acts—the catlike Goldfarb has had nearly nine), he was enjoying the members of that audience. He wanted to make them happy. The desserts were no longer subversive gastronomic experiments. They were also not conventional. But what were they, then? I stepped back again and took in the bar. No one was leaving, even though by now almost everyone had finished eating. Someone asked for another drink. I poured glasses of wine. I made two coffees. An hour later, many people were still there. They were lingering. I understood: the idea was dessert. The need it satisfies is not biological. It is social. In some fundamental way, Goldfarb was now making desserts as traditional as the first plate of sweetmeats and dried fruit at the end of a Renaissance meal: giving people a reason not to say good night. Not just yet. ♦