The perfect meal, according to chef Bernard Loiseau, was one where you tasted only the purest flavors. There was never more than three tastes on a plate: the main ingredient; a simple sauce to reinforce its essence; and two independent side dishes, designed for that ingredient alone. Each dish was served on the best china with the best wine in the best crystal and delivered with grace, charm, and a personal touch.

After more than twenty years in the business, Loiseau had earned three Michelin stars for his perfect country inn, La Côte d’Or in the Burgundian village of Salieu. He had taken his company public, the first chef ever to do so. And he was one of the most famous men in France. Then, on February 24, 2003, he went home and shot himself.

Loiseau’s death sent shockwaves throughout the country. This was France, after all, “a nation that virtually defines itself by food” (p. 26). And Loiseau wasn’t just any plastic celebrity chef—a Rachael Ray or Emeril Lagasse—though his name was plastered across ready-to-eat meals and cookware. He was the pinnacle of the French culinary establishment.

Or was he? In his compelling biography of Loiseau, journalist Rudolph Chelminsky argues that Loiseau’s deep-seated insecurity that he simply could never compete with France’s Paul Bocuse, Alain Ducasse, and, of course, the Troisgros brothers with whom he trained was well founded. Unlike most of France’s great chefs, Loiseau didn’tslave in the great masters’ kitchens for years before starting out on his own. At the age of twenty-one, he was chef de cuisine at Claude Verger’s surprise hit on the outskirts of Paris, La Barrière. The following year, the Gault-Millau guide gave his restaurant a respectable fifteen out of twenty and called him a “remarkable chef” who offered “a menu full of invention, a cuisine that is simply admirable” (p.113). Loiseau’s star was rising.

Perhaps too fast. As he swilled champagne with celebrities and called journalists “tu,” his competitors were learning from the great masters, perfecting their technique, which would help them develop their own styles. Throughout his career, Loiseau lived in fear that it would be discovered that “le style Loiseau wasn’t all that revolutionary. Bernard’s menus were replete with classics of French cuisine, and more specifically the great tradition of Burgundian cooking, but it was all dramatically lightened up” (p.186). To cover up, Loiseau, the savvy businessman, realized his only way to compete was to challenge his peers in a manic game of perfectionism.

Manic, of course, is the key word. Loiseau suffered from acute manic depression. When he was up, he could do anything. But when he sunk into despair, he simply couldn’t defeat the idea that he was simply a pretender to the French culinary throne.

If The Perfectionist were simply another tale of a battle against depression, it would be far less interesting than it is. Through Loiseau, Chelminsky, who has lived in France and covered food for more than thirty years, provides a lively history of the Michelin guide and its role as supreme gastronomic arbiter, the impact of changing road systems on country restaurants like Loiseau’s Côte d’Or, and quite a bit of insight into the French psyche.

For example, one reason the Michelin guide was such a success, Chelminsky points out, is because founder André Michelin understood how much the French love to sound off. Rather than seeing them as passive readers, he turned them into consultants, or collaborateurs. In the back of each guide was a report sheet so that anyone who had discovered a hidden gem or just had a particularly good meal could inform the Service de Tourisme. “One hundred thousand readers, 100,000 informers,” [Michelin] exulted, and they didn’t even pay for the informers’ stamps” (p.54).

Some of the best tidbits, however, come in Chelminsky’s scholarly but ever-amusing footnotes. Early on, we learn that young Bernard, like many French children, loved to skim the skin of fat that rises to the top of boiled milk and spread it on bread for a snack. We also learn that culinary genius Michel Bras uses the same trick to incorporate into his dishes a sort of Proustian memory of childhood for his French guests. In a discussion of high-end restaurant economics, Chelminsky points out that one of the great costs is “gastrokleptcy,” the stealing of cutlery and other serving items and decoration: “A Lyonnais matron once tried to cop a candelabra from Paul Bocuse’s place,” Chelminsky reports. “Jean-Michel Lorian remembered a similar lady in Joigny who walked out with a toilet brush in her purse. An alert waiter spotted the crime but they didn’t pursue the matter, and let her have her precious souvenir” (p.260).

At times, the book can seem slightly repetitive. To explain Loiseau’s manic highs and lows Chelminsky tends to fall back on explanations like “so there it was, Bernard being Bernard” (p.285). But the sweeping history of French kitchens, brilliant anecdotes, and Chelminsky’s personal friendship with Loiseau make The Perfectionist a joy to read. The author’s conclusion may be that nothing can ever be perpetually perfect. But his book comes pretty close.

—Jane Black, Food Editor, Boston Magazine