In the opening scene of the play *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand, first performed in 1897, "orange girls" at a Parisian theater in the 1640s make their way through an audience of soldiers, society ladies, noblemen, and riffraff, selling orangeade, raspberry cordial, syllabub, macarons, lemonade, iced buns, and cream puffs. The handsome soldier Christian de Neuvillette and his friends sample their wares, drink wine, and eat from a buffet. A poet and pastry cook named Ragueneau banter-barters an apple tartlet for a verse. Then the poet and militia captain Cyrano arrives, and in a glorious, idealistic act, spends his year's salary to get a bad actor kicked off the stage. The orange girls offer the hungry man nourishment, but he eats only a grape and half a macaron, staying to true to a kind of restraint that defines his character. Food, in other words, plays a major role in the play—one that culminates in act 4, when Roxane, the woman both Christian and Cyrano love, arrives at the Arras front in a carriage stuffed with a feast for the starving soldiers: truffled peacock, a haunch of venison, ortolans, copious desserts, ruby-red and topaz-yellow wine.

I've seen three versions of *Cyrano* this year—a 2021 movie starring Peter Dinklage, with an original score by the band the National; a staging of the play at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, starring James McAvoy; and the 1987 Steve Martin movie—and in none of them did I pick up on a food theme. Its absence, I thought, must mean something.

The original *Cyrano de Bergerac* was a period piece, set in 1640 but written in 1897 by a successful Paris playwright who has fallen into obscurity in our time. (I found only a single academic biography on Rostand, though his mustache alone deserves a tome.) The plot is a love triangle. Cyrano loves Roxane, but he believes she cannot return his love because of his huge nose. Roxane has a crush on Christian, because of his pretty face. Christian, tongue-tied and insecure, can't provide Roxane with the intellectual stimulation she seeks, so he allows Cyrano to write letters to her, signing them as Christian. Roxane falls madly in love—but with which man? It's a perfect romantic comedy that taps into universal themes. Anyone can identify with the lover's fear that they cannot be loved due to a fatal flaw, physical or otherwise. But its influence on Parisian society in the late nineteenth century was highly specific.

At the time in France, religious participation was waning and the national spirit was depressed by a loss in the Prussian War. Cultural achievements like the great works of Racine, set in Alexandrine verse, seemed a thing of the past. Rostand seized this old form in order to advocate a "return" to an idealized past whose values were chivalry and romance, military prowess and bravado, wit and culture. French decline could be reversed, he suggested, with bold individuality and Cyrano-like *panache*. (That word literally meant the plume on a musketeer's hat until Rostand transformed it into a national virtue.)

As the plot develops, Cyrano chooses artistic integrity over patronage, and he throws himself into battles that he cannot win. As a lover, he sacrifices everything, and he wins Roxane's heart only on his deathbed. By today's standards, it's a tragedy—we believe talent should be rewarded, soldiers shouldn't be sent on foolish missions, and that one-sided relationships are delusional. But Rostand intended Cyrano's fate as a triumph: he sticks to his ideals. To a nation with no real-world victories to celebrate, this concept of a victory achieved through spirit and attitude was powerful and moving.

The message found its audience and the play was a sensation, becoming not just the most successful play of its time but one of the most successful plays of any time, according to an introduction by the translator Carol Clark in my Penguin Classics edition. Songs were written, audiences learned passages by heart, plates and ashtrays with huge noses on them were produced. On the hundredth night of the original run in 1897, the supporting cast from Ragueneau's pastry shop walked out into the audience, handing out cream puffs. The effect on French society was such that Clark speculates that the French victory a few decades later in World War I could in part be attributed to ongoing *Cyrano* mania, as French soldiers took him as a role model when facing overwhelming odds.