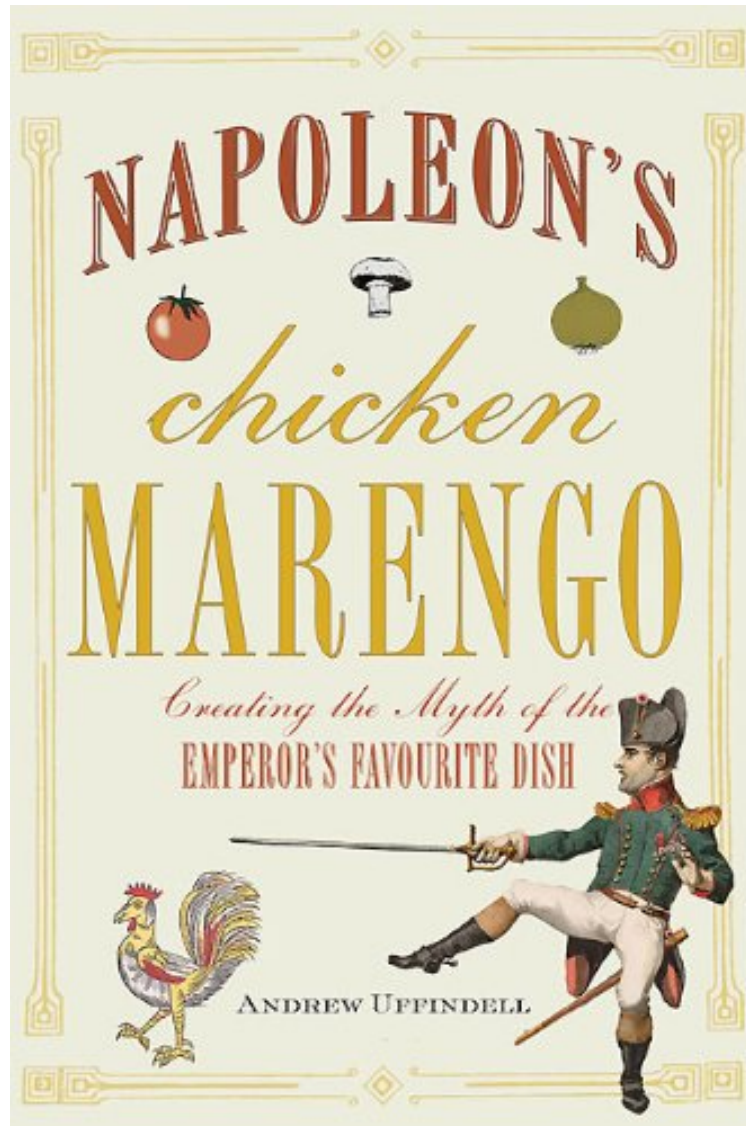


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Napoleon's Chicken Marengo: Creating the Myth of the Emperor's Favourite Dish

Andrew Uffindell

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Andrew Uffindell : Napoleon's Chicken Marengo: Creating the Myth of the Emperor's Favourite Dish before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Napoleon's Chicken Marengo: Creating the Myth of the Emperor's Favourite Dish:

0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A fine dish, but watch for the bonesBy Avon Napoleonic FellowshipI like food and eating. I am even the cook of the house, but am not a "foodie", so the title of this book did

not immediately appeal to me. I began reading it because the Marengo campaign is one that holds particular interest to me and it is a battle that I am hoping we will play as a wargame in the future. Having begun my reading of the book feeling "luke warm" about it, I was more than pleasantly surprised and found it to be, in the main, an engaging read. "Napoleon's Chicken Marengo" is a balanced critique of the events prior to, during and after the battle, with particular emphasis on its place in history. Over the course of the book, Andrew Uffindell slowly reveals the multitude of myths, stories and mis-conceptions that have arisen from the battle. These have their origins in Napoleon's own re-writing of the battle--which Uffindell contests was done by Napoleon as he used his idealised version of Marengo in the development of his art of war--through to his contemporary and subsequent enemies attempting to discredit him for political or personal reasons. Throughout the book Uffindell uses the Chicken Marengo dish as the back-drop to the history of the battle and its place in the psyche of Napoleonic France and beyond. The book reads like a series of essays that are connected (at times only loosely) around the theme of Marengo: the battle and the dish. The many stories and anecdotes that Andrew Uffindell relates in each chapter provide much "colour", although at times the writing is verbose and he seemed to be making much of little, so I was left to wonder at the relevance. This, combined with a chapter structure that is not always logical, made the book long-winded and repetitive in parts. Despite these criticisms, most of the stories, while seemingly asides at first, reward the reader with an item of interest or a humorous or quirky observation. For example, the story of Colonel Jean-François Jacqueminot and a group of friends, former aides of Napoleon, poking fun at newly-returned royalists after Napoleon's first abdication in 1814, by pretending to be émigrés and protesting a menu that included poulét à la Marengo (pp 116-120), or the British orator who, overhearing someone say that beer had defeated Napoleon, said "beer and wine met at Waterloo... wine red with fury, boiling over with enthusiasm,... rose thrice against that hill on which stood a wall of immovable men, the sons of beer. You have read history: beer gained the day" (p 127). I had a particular chuckle at the description of the aversion of English tourists to French food with sauces compared with their stodgy, "natural" dishes (pp 128-131). My biggest criticism of the book is not what it includes, but what is missing. Where is the description of the battle? Uffindell seems to assume that the reader knows the battle well. I am a 'student' of Napoleonic history, but would have liked a 'refresher' description of the battle of Marengo that pointed out the areas of greatest contention. This is especially needed as a great detail of the battle is clouded with uncertainty and the perpetuation of myths and half-truths. One example of this is the supposed destruction of the Consular Guard, which has been repeated as recently as in the Osprey Campaign series publication "Marengo 1800--Napoleon's day of fate" (Hollins and Hook 2000). In his questioning of various participant's versions of the battle, Uffindell seems to miss the key point that an individual's recollection of battle is influenced by his position on battlefield as well as smoke, noise and generally limited visibility. Even in the rarefied environment of a wargame it can be difficult to recall all of the details of an action and opinions vary as to what occurred! The selection of paintings and photos in the centre plates of the book, which are all in black and white, provide excellent support to the text and all are clearly reproduced. In addition to these are clear, detailed black and white reproductions of famous paintings of individuals and units that are found at the end of most chapters. They are a welcome inclusion, reminiscent of the history texts of the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries, which add greatly to the overall appeal of the book and the reading experience.

This remarkable work tells the story of Chicken Marengo, and cuts through the tangle of myths that has sprung up around it. Supposedly created on the evening of Napoleon's victory at Marengo, the dish rapidly conquered Paris, and became a renowned symbol of French haute cuisine. The author sets the dish in its context explaining the nail-biting drama of Napoleon's Marengo campaign and the remarkable frenzy of rejoicing unleashed in Paris by the news of his victory. The author argues that the dish is part of a wider myth that Napoleon spun around the battle itself. Uncomfortably aware of just how close he had come to disaster, he rewrote the official account of Marengo. Determined to exploit the political impact of the victory to the full, he portrayed it as a masterly maneuver, rather than a near-defeat salvaged largely by luck. Napoleon's Chicken Marengo demonstrates the persistency of popular myth in shaping perceptions of pivotal events. Uffindell sheds startling light on Napoleon's extraordinary and yet elusive character, and reveals just how effectively he spun a myth around the amount of food he ate in order to project a positive image of himself. A whole cast of other, unforgettable characters enlivens the story of Chicken Marengo, from Napoleon's bickering generals, to celebrity chefs, colorful adventurers, acclaimed artists, fabulously wealthy eccentrics, and famous writers such as William Makepeace Thackeray.

Napoleon's Chicken Marengo is a fascinating and very informative account of a battle, a culinary dish and Napoleon. The author has weaved these separate stories into one very readable narrative. It is a unique take on these stories and I would recommend this book be in any library of books on Napoleon. - The Waterloo Archive
About the Author Andrew Uffindell is one of the leading experts on the Napoleonic era. He is the author of many books and articles in this field, including The National Army Museum book of Wellington's Armies; Napoleon's Immortals, Napoleon 1814 and Waterloo Commanders.