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Opening extract from

Madame Pamplemouse and her Incredible Edibles

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Chapter One

In the city of Paris, on the banks of the river, tucked away from the main street down a narrow, winding alley, there is a shop. A small, rather shabby-looking shop with faded paintwork, a dusty awning and dark, smoky



windows. The sign above the door reads 'Edibles', as it is a food shop selling all kinds of rare and exotic delicacies. But they are not just rare and they are not just exotic, for this shop belongs to Madame Pamplemousse, and she sells the strangest, the rarest, the most delicious, the most extraordinary, the most incredible-tasting edibles in all the world.

Inside, the shop is cool and musty-smelling, lit only by candlelight. In the flickering shadows, great bunches of sausages and dried herbs, strings of garlic and chilli peppers, and giant salted meats hang from the ceiling. Rows of cheeses are laid out on beds of dark green leaves and all around there are shelves winding



up to the ceiling, crammed with bottles and strangely shaped jars.



But look closer and you'll find these aren't just plain sausages, they're sausages of Bison and Black Pepper, Wild Boar and Red Wine, and Minotaur Salami with Sage and Wild Thyme. Among the dried meats there are Salt-Cured Raptor Tails, Pterodactyl Bacon, Smoked Sabre-Toothed Tiger and Rolled Tyrannosaurus Rex Tongue. The cheeses are of an unimaginable smelliness, some dating back to medieval times, and each of the pots and jars have their contents written in fine, purple letters: Scorpion Tails in Smoked Garlic Oil, Crocodile Kidneys in



Blueberry Wine, Cobra Brains in Black Butter, Roast Piranha with Raspberry Coulis, Electric Eel Pâté with Garlic and Prunes, Great White Shark Fin in Banana Liquor and Giant Squid Tentacle in Jasmine-Scented Jelly.



Underneath the shop, down a winding spiral staircase, at the end of a long, dark corridor, there is a door. A door that is forever kept locked. For it is behind this door that Madame Pamplemousse cooks her rarest delicacy, a delicacy sold in the tiniest little jar with a label upon which nothing is written. The label is blank and the ingredients are a secret, since it is the single most delicious, the most extraordinary, the most

incredible-tasting edible of them all.

But even though Madame Pamplemousse sells the most delicious food ever tasted, her shop is by no means famous in the city of Paris. And nor would she ever want it to be. For she makes enough to get by and is happy each day to awake at dawn, drink a small black coffee and open up her shop, serving her customers and meeting with her suppliers. And come sundown she likes nothing better than to sit on her balcony above the rooftops with her cat, Camembert, discussing the day's events over a bottle of Violet-Petal Wine.

Camembert was a stray that had wandered in off the streets one night after a particularly vicious encounter with a pack of Siamese.



During the fight, Camembert had lost one of his eyes, but this was nothing compared to what happened to the Siamese. Suffice it to say, he had since become known as a cat you don't mess with. From the first, he and Madame Pamplemousse had taken an instant liking to each other, and they lived together in perfect harmony, even though he would sometimes upset the customers by threatening to bite the ones he didn't like.

One person Camembert disliked intensely was a big pig-like man called Monsieur Lard. Lard ran a restaurant in the centre of the city – a big, flashy restaurant called the Squealing Pig. The problem with the restaurant was that

although Lard thought his cooking some of the finest in Paris, it was, in fact, absolutely revolting. Whatever he cooked either turned out too greasy, or too sugary, or too fatty. The other problem was that Lard used to treat his customers in a way that was even greasier than his cuisine. On one occasion, to impress a Hollywood film star who had stopped by for a light lunch, he served up a whole baby lamb deep-fried in batter and smothered in orange syrup, which had the unfortunate consequence of making the film star violently sick.

Monsieur Lard had a team of chefs working in his kitchen, many of them excellent, but only a fool would dare criticise Lard's very own 'Specialities of the House'. For Lard's only real

talent was to make people afraid of him. Experienced cooks, who had worked in some of the best and busiest kitchens in Paris, wobbled like jellies and began dropping things the moment Lard entered the room. Even the restaurant's Head Chef, once a talented cook, had been reduced to a quivering wreck after years of Lard's bullying and from being forced to prepare such revolting recipes as Pig's Ear Pizza, Kidney Burger with Double Cream, Offal and Seafood Sausages or Crab Ravioli in a Warm White Chocolate Sauce.

By far the best chef at the Squealing Pig was, in fact, Lard's niece, a girl called Madeleine. Madeleine was sent by her parents each summer to stay with her 'big jolly uncle'.



When she told them her uncle was not really jolly but a greedy, fat bully, her mother nearly fainted and her father told her not to be so selfish. So ever since, while they went off on safari or a round-the-world cruise, she would be sent to work in the kitchens of the Squealing Pig. This usually involved doing a lot of smiling. Lard was obsessed with smiling. Everyone – the waiters, the waitresses, the cooks and even the cleaners behind the giant kitchen doors – was required to smile at all times.

The restaurant actually did quite well from

rich tourists and passers-by, who assumed the food had to be good since it was so expensive. And apart from Lard's Specialities, it was all quite palatable. But this wasn't enough for Monsieur Lard. More than anything he wanted to become famous. He wanted to be recognised as a great chef.

Sadly for him, this wasn't going to happen. Probably because he was actually the worst chef the world had ever known. And the harder he tried, the more repulsive and ridiculous his cooking became. Until one day he made a remarkable discovery, and that discovery was due entirely to Madeleine, his niece.



Chapter Two

Apart from smiling, Madeleine's main job at the Squealing Pig was washing-up. An awful lot of washing-up. Despite being the best chef in the whole kitchen, she was never allowed to cook, under

strict instructions from her uncle.

This was ever since the day she had made soup.

Madeleine had been cooking since she was quite young but had picked up a good deal from working in the kitchen. The soup was a deliciously light, lemony broth flavoured with fresh herbs. She had made it for her uncle in an effort to please him.

At first Monsieur Lard had devoured it greedily, spooning huge ladlefuls into his mouth so that dribbles ran down his chin. But as soon as he found out who cooked it, he paused mid-slurp, his face darkening.

'What's wrong, Uncle?' she said. 'Did I use too much lemon?'

Lard spat the remaining contents of his mouth on to the floor. 'Don't muck about in my kitchen!' he bellowed.

'But I wasn't mucking about, I promise! I cooked it for you specially!'

He chuckled, shaking his head. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'You can't cook!' And then he lifted up the entire soup cauldron and tipped it out of the window.

The truth was she had made him so violently jealous he would never allow her to go near a cooker again. So instead she had to scrub the plates, pots and pans – giant heaps of them stacked up to the ceiling and every one covered in slimy fat. As a special treat on Saturdays she might be allowed to clean out

the fridges instead or empty out the bins. Or sometimes, if she was very lucky, she might be sent to fetch supplies.



One day, while checking the stock cupboard, the Head Chef found they were clean out of Mixed Innards Pâté. This was a mixture of various unnamed body parts of various unnamed animals, cured in fat and dyed bright pink.

No one liked it much except for Monsieur Lard, but he was rather partial to it, so they could not run out on pain of death. When the Head Chef found the cupboard was bare he let out a piercing scream. But Madeleine, seeing her chance to escape the kitchen, offered to go

and fetch some more.

Usually this meant a trip to the nearby market, which was a straight walk down the riverbank. But Madeleine preferred the slightly longer route round the back streets. The Squealing Pig was in the city's busiest district, but the back led out into a maze of narrow lanes and winding alleys. At this time of day they were normally quiet, except for the occasional rat, but that didn't bother Madeleine. After all, they minded their own business just like her.

Strangely, this day she found the streets entirely empty of rats, but what she did see was a cat: a long white cat suddenly darting across her path. It scampered up ahead of her

until it stopped at the end of the street.

She thought she recognised it. Sometimes, while washing dishes at night, she would see a white cat perched on the wall above the dustbins. In the moonlight she had first mistaken it for an owl. Believing it to be the same one, she called out.

'Monsieur? Wait up, please, Monsieur . . .'

But it had already gone, disappearing round the corner. For some reason, she decided to follow it. Turning the corner herself, she came on to a steep, narrow lane running uphill. Above her, rows of washing were hanging between shuttered windows and wrought-iron balconies, and the afternoon sun shone bright on the white sheets.

At the top of the hill she found herself in a quiet, dusty cobbled street, mostly empty but for a shop. A small, rather shabby-looking shop. And there was the white cat, scurrying across the road. Then the most bizarre thing happened and Madeleine wondered if her eyes were playing tricks. For when the cat reached the shop, it appeared to rear up on its hind legs, open the front door and walk through it.

Creeping up to the window, Madeleine peered in, but it was so dark and smoky all she could see was the orange glow of candle flames. The door, however, was ajar, and so she went inside.

It took a moment for her to adjust to the





candlelight, but what she noticed first was the smell. A cool, musty odour, like the air in an old church – but one that was made entirely out of cheese. She could detect a deeper, spicier note beneath that was warm and exotic and reminded her of a Middle Eastern spice bazaar. But that was not all, for Madeleine had a highly developed nose; there was also a scent like lavender that has been drying in hot sunlight.

Then, suddenly, from out of the shadows a woman appeared. Madeleine nearly screamed.

'May I help you, Mademoiselle?' said Madame Pamplemousse.

'S-s-sorry, Madame,' said Madeleine, edging

towards the door. 'I was on my way to the market; I came in here by mistake . . .' And she made to go, when she was stopped by the woman's voice.

'What to buy, Mademoiselle?'

'Pâté, Madame.'

'Ah yes,' she said, 'I have just the thing.' And from below the counter she produced a small bottle containing a dark green substance. It had a label on which was written in fine, purple script:







Madeleine wasn't quite sure what to make of this. Many people might have taken it for a hoax or some kind of joke. Madeleine, however, never doubted it was made from genuine sea serpent; it was simply that this was not the kind of pâté she had been sent to buy.

'I'm sorry, Madame, but I think there's been some mistake.'

'You said pâté, Mademoiselle?'

'Yes, but –'

'That is the finest pâté currently available.'

'But I have such a small sum,' said Madeleine, showing her money. 'I couldn't possibly afford . . .' But before she could finish,

Madame Pamplemousse had already reached over and plucked the money from her hand. 'That will be quite sufficient, thank you.' And the next instant she was gone.

She did this so quickly it took Madeleine a couple of seconds to realise. But there was no mistaking it: the woman was nowhere to be seen and the shop had fallen silent.



Except that it wasn't silent. It struck Madeleine it had never been silent from the moment she had walked in. All around, in the shadows, there had been a patter of little noises, like gasps or tiny whispers, and a faint, persistent wheeze. Just then she heard a

sudden growling and something slithering across the floor. Remembering the mention of sea serpents, Madeleine bolted straight out of the door.

