



PEAK PERFECTION

As French tastes shift back to comforting classics, the **soufflé** is once again on the rise.

by Lindsey Tramuta

THE LUNCH PLATES at Les Fables de la Fontaine, a contemporary bistro in Paris's seventh arrondissement, had been cleared. The tables were brushed clean, and fresh silverware set neatly in preparation for the dessert course, the primary reason for my visit. I couldn't help but notice one of the servers waiting expectantly near the entrance to the dining room, his eyes fixed on the kitchen door.

Moments later, David Bottreau, the bistro's owner, pushed through the door holding a small bamboo tray. On it sat a pearly white baking dish and an oval bowl filled with one perfect scoop of sorbet. Nearby diners craned their necks to watch as Bottreau walked quickly to my table and gingerly deposited the dish in front of me with an emphatic "Le voilà!" An inch above the edge of the piping-hot ramekin rose the crisp golden puff of my dessert: a pineapple-lychee soufflé.

Now I was center stage. Bottreau stood back and watched as I lifted my spoon and pierced the pillowy top layer. I heard a faint

The soufflé plays a starring role at **Alain Ducasse's Champeaux**, a contemporary brasserie that serves several versions of the classic dish every day.

crack and watched as the crisp edges caved in to reveal the soufflé's cream-colored molten center. I spooned a dollop of sorbet into the mix

and took my first bite: hot and cold, sweet and tart—it was like an ethereal cloud. As Bottreau walked away, I could practically feel the entire room breathe a sigh of relief. I wondered: Does a dessert really need to be this stressful?

Yes, if it is to be done correctly. "The countdown begins the second the dish leaves the

4 MORE WAYS TO GET YOUR SOUFFLÉ FIX IN PARIS

1. Divellec

At his seafood restaurant, the award-winning chef Mathieu Pacaud serves a simple, universal favorite: chocolate soufflé with decadent vanilla ice cream. 18 rue Fabert, 75007. divellec-paris.fr

2. Le Soufflé


This first arrondissement restaurant has been a temple for soufflé lovers since 1961 with a menu composed entirely of savory and sweet soufflés that change with the seasons. 36 rue Mont Thabor, 75001. lesouffle.fr

3. Champeaux

At Alain Ducasse's modern brasserie (pictured) the soufflés of the day appear on a board just like the one that lists train arrivals and departures at the Gare du Nord. Forum des Halles La Canopée, 75001. restaurant-champeaux.com

4. 114 Faubourg

Among the sweet standouts at this Michelin-starred brasserie—located in the Hôtel Le Bristol Paris—there's none more iconic than the late Laurent Jeannin's dark chocolate soufflé served with house-made cognac ice cream. 114 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 75008. lebristolparis.com



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oven,” the late pastry chef Laurent Jeannin once told me. (Jeannin’s dark chocolate soufflé with cognac ice cream is still a winter staple at the brasserie 114 Faubourg.) Made from whipped egg whites folded into a flavored egg base, a soufflé rises when the air bubbles trapped in the egg whites expand as they are exposed to heat. Those bubbles begin to shrink the moment a soufflé leaves the oven, which means it must be served within minutes, before the top layer begins to deflate.

Part of the trick is nailing the egg whites. Whip them too quickly and the texture will be off. Cease whipping them before they can form a stiff peak (called the *bec d’oiseau* for the way the whites curve like a bird’s beak when you remove the whisk), and the soufflé may rise lopsided, if at all. Add to that a host of other variables such as the temperature and texture

Clockwise from top left: The pineapple-lychee soufflé at **Les Fables de la Fontaine**; a soufflé gets a final dusting of sugar; **Alain Ducasse’s Champeaux** restaurant.

of the *crème pâtissière* (the soufflé’s egg yolk base) or an improperly prepared baking dish, and it can be over before it even begins.

But that ephemeral nature is what makes the dessert so magical and intense, Jeannin told me. “Its very conception demands that it be made to order and then consumed immediately. That’s part of its legend.”

The soufflé, which takes its name from the French verb *souffler* (“to puff or blow”), is attributed to an 18th-century French cook, Vincent La Chapelle. But the dish didn’t become popular in France until the early 19th century, when the country’s first celebrity chef, Marie-Antoine Carême, included it in one of his cookbooks. More than a century later, Julia Child introduced both sweet and savory soufflés to American palates, writing in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* that the dessert soufflé in particular is considered “the epitome and triumph of the art of French cookery.”

But about a decade ago, as tastes shifted away from rich, old-fashioned fare in favor of lighter,

produce-driven, and often conceptual dishes, recipes such as the soufflé fell out of fashion.

Now the pendulum is swinging back to Gallic classics. “The soufflé is an example of *la cuisine bourgeoise*—everyday cooking that’s neither too rustic nor too esoteric—that’s making its comeback,” says the chef Virginie Basset, who was awarded the prestigious title of *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* in 2015 in part on the strength of her savory soufflé. “We’re going back to simple, recognizable dishes that reassure.”

Even established chefs known for their forward-thinking styles are embracing the dish once again. When Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse opened his brasserie Champeaux in 2016, the soufflé occupied a prime spot on the menu. And young chefs use the soufflé as a canvas for experimentation. The pineapple-lychee version I enjoyed at Les Fables was developed by 23-year-old chef Julia Sedefdjian, who has also used coconut, mango, and other fruits.

As I scraped the last crispy morsels from the bottom of my ramekin, I gave thanks that France’s most evanescent dish has found a way to endure. **A**

Les Fables de la Fontaine: 131 rue Saint-Dominique, 75007. lesfablesdelafontaine.net