

Paris's sweet somethings

By Lindsey Tramuta



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARISSA FAY

Pâtisseries in the French capital have become fetishists for single products - selling and specialising in just one delicious temptation

Parisians approach sweets as joys that don't need to be confined to special occasions. You can hardly scan a street without clamping your eyes on treats of all colours and sizes, glistening in shop windows and beckoning impressionable gourmands. These are the corner pastry shops of our imaginations, but they have been joined by a more modern style of pâtisserie and chocolaterie that plays with fresh tastes and ideas: blackcurrant chocolate ganache at La Maison du Chocolat, perhaps, or "Le Lipstick Pastry" fruit-topped almond tart at Des Gâteaux et du Pain.

So what comes after creating new recipes and riffing on old ones? Specialisation. Not just focusing on one genre of pastry - chocolate tarts or choux-based desserts -

but winnowing the selection to one, sole dessert. The much-loved *macaron* helped pave the way for this approach. Pierre Hermé, Pain de Sucre and Jonathan Blot at Acide showed sweet-lovers that though simple in form, the macaron had endless possibilities. Olive oil, vanilla and slices of green olives; foie gras and chocolate; white truffle and hazelnut - the combinations are sometimes curious but always intriguing.

More recently, Christophe Adam, éclair master of Fauchon fame, sustained the charge of single-product shops with L'Éclair de Génie, his wonderland of rainbow éclairs in raspberry passion fruit, lemon yuzu, Madagascar vanilla or mascarpone salted caramel. Popelini, La Maison du Chou and Profiterole Chérie followed, with recipes developed entirely around the cream puff. You might say the cream puffs at Popelini have dethroned the king-of-cute macaroon. Parisians are beguiled by the varieties Lauren Koumetz

A café for chocolate lovers

Michelin-starred chef Cyril Lignac, whose pastry shop La Pâtisserie has made its mark on the 11th arrondissement, launched a chocolate-focused outpost in 2016 - his personal contribution among the phalanx of chefs working to preserve French savoir faire in chocolate making. Lignac devised La Chocolaterie as an alternative to the jewellery-box preciousness of most chocolate shops. "Everything here is meant to be accessible," Lignac says. "People can come drink our home-made hot chocolate, share a pastry, read the paper, and stay a while comfortably. It's designed to be an everyday café for chocolate lovers."

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dreams up: coffee, rose with confit raspberries, salted caramel, pistachio with confit morello cherries, not to mention the *chou du jour*.

Meringues have also found a space to shine. Lille pâtissier Frédéric Vaucamps brought his shop, Aux Merveilleux de Fred, to Paris. Credited with popularising the century-old *merveilleux* recipe - an ethereally light, layered meringue mound coated with sweet whipped cream and enveloped in coatings from chocolate flakes to caramelised hazelnuts - that originated in his native northern France, Vaucamps prepares them in exactly the same fashion as when he first began churning them out in 1982.

"Focusing on one thing allows us to be competitive as pastry chefs. I used to have a regular bakery, and *le merveilleux* always outsold my other pastries." So not only was it a smart business move to listen to his clients but it also allowed him to dedicate his attention to perfecting the pastry, thereby establishing him as *the* reference.

Vaucamps' shops all have discreet wooden storefronts, counters in Rojo Alicante marble, a crystal chandelier over the open kitchen, murals inspired by 18th-century art. The *merveilleux* are prepared in front of customers. The modern twist lies in the recipe, far less rich than the original.

As a business, single-product shops make sense. "With a poor economy, many of us asked ourselves how we could make profitable what is effectively a *métier de passion*," Jonathan Blot says. "Not only that, but people are looking for the best, so we have a resurgence of specialists. Experts in éclairs, in madeleines, in meringues - it is reassuring to customers."

For sisters Fiona Leluc and Fatina Faye, the single-product format fit their nostalgia for the *sablé*, a shortbread biscuit as tied to the French identity as the chocolate-chip cookie is to Americans'. It takes pride of place at Bontemps, their two-year-old neo-retro pâtisserie, in the form of bite-sized sandwich cookies filled with creams flavoured with gianduja, orange flower, lemon, coffee, passion fruit, bergamot and Madagascar vanilla. "We don't just work with flavours considered traditionally French, because we love peanut, banana, mango - we listen to our cravings!" Leluc says.

Bontemps has found a loyal clientele. The adjunct mayor of the 3rd arrondissement, whose office is across the street, came into the shop one day while I was eating some mini *sablés*. She said how proud she was of what the women had contributed to the neighbourhood: "Their shop is my antidepressant!" she told me. Mine too. **FT**

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