

Just say it this way: Mmmacaron

nlofing@sacbee.com

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The smooth outer dome of the macaron splinters on first bite, its crispy shell contrasting with the texture of the chewy inner layer and melding perfectly with the smooth, creamy filling.

The subtly sweet flavor of almond fills the palate and conjures visions of Versailles and the voice of Maurice Chevalier. For such a little cookie, the French macaron sure is a grand experience in decadence.

French macarons – sandwich cookies composed mainly of meringue, ground almonds and sugar – have been delighting Parisians for centuries and are gaining popularity as scores of American foodies fall in love with the chic confections.

And they're becoming quite the sought-after commodity in the Sacramento region.

At Mirabelle European Pastry Cafe in Fair Oaks, French macarons are among the top five most popular desserts. There, beautiful trays of caramel, chocolate, raspberry, vanilla, pistachio and orange macarons adorn the glass display cases, begging diners to indulge, one sumptuous bite at a time.

"They are very popular," owner and baker George Aivazian said. "The people who know them, they will buy dozens of them."

Macaron cookbooks abound, and many authors are including macaron recipes in general baking cookbooks too, wrote Denise Bates, group publishing director at Octopus Publishing Group, in an email. The publishing house released "Macarons" (Spruce/Octopus Books, \$12.99, 64 pages) by Bérengère Abraham last month.

"There's no doubt that macarons are a growing trend," she wrote.

Could those sweet little macarons knock the equally cute cupcake off its perky perch? Probably not, she said.

"The whole cupcake trend has sparked a general appetite for innovative, cute, clever cakes of all kinds – and macarons really fit that bill," she said. "... The idea that it's a small treat rather than a larger, indulgent cupcake is a key part of their appeal."

Tina Cao fell in love with macarons – not to be confused with the more densely textured coconut macaroons – four years ago at

Bouchon in Yountville.

She had no idea what the cute, pastel-colored hamburger patty-looking cookies were. One cookie later, the 32-year-old was hooked.

She travels back to the Napa Valley, where she used to live, every few weeks. Friends think she comes to visit them. They're the added perk – her real reason is to savor the delicate texture and flavor of Bouchon's macarons.

"The key is getting a nice, crunchy and chewy sandwich cookie, and the ganache has to be thick and creamy without being greasy," she said.

When Cao visited Paris in August, she immersed herself in the culinary culture and went on a quest to find the perfect macaron. (The last syllable rhymes with "lawn" or sometimes "loon" in U.S. English.)

Its origin is disputed, but according to Larousse Gastronomique, macarons were created in 791 in a convent near Cormery in central France. It's also thought that the cookies made their French debut around 1533, when 14-year-old Catherine de' Medici of Florence married Henry II of France and brought her Italian pastry chefs with her.

Now, macarons can be found throughout France; variations abound depending on region. The Paris macaron, two almond meringue cookies filled with buttercream, jam or ganache, was created by Pierre Desfontaines at the famous pâtisserie Ladurée.

Cao tried macarons at Ladurée's shop in Versailles and at Angelina near the Tuileries Garden, but it was at Pierre Hermè where she found her estimation of macaron perfection.

"Pierre Hermè had some really exotic mixes of flavors that were really good," she said, adding that the pâtisserie is a bit more modern and avant-garde, offering flavors such as rose, yuzu and isphahan. "Beyond the cookie, the packaging is adorable."

Though she can easily procure almond meal from the store at Blue Diamond Nut & Gift Shop in Sacramento (she works for the company), Cao has yet to try to make macarons at home.

"I know it's hard to make!" she said.

Indeed they're tricky, said Tom Hahn, co-owner of Ginger Elizabeth Chocolates in midtown, where macarons are second only to the chocolate confections in popularity. Hahn and company offer four flavors – almond, salty caramel, chocolate and a seasonal flavor – for \$1.50 per macaron.

"They don't necessarily take a lot of skill; it's more just having to know a bit about baking," he said.

Baking times can fluctuate depending on ovens, and humidity can play a key factor in a macaron's success. Or failure.

"At different times of the year, we have to alter the recipe slightly," he said. "That's the thing that gives people the biggest issue when they're trying it at home."

Abraham, in "Macarons," advises home cooks to follow some simple rules to ensure success. Separate the eggs a day before using them and age the egg whites in the fridge, enabling the macarons to hold their shape.

Allow for "shell drying" time – rest the piped outer layers for at least an hour before baking, which will help proper rise and

guarantee a perfectly crunchy crust, she advised.

When that crust crumbles into the airy, chewy inner layer and melts with the buttercream filling upon first bite, those measured steps and careful technique become evident. And success will never have tasted so sweet.

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Call The Bee's Niesha Lofing, (916) 321-1270.