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WE ♥ MACARONS

For this Valentine's Day, we're sweet on oh-so-fragile French dessert.

By Amy Sowder
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When you bite into a fresh French macaron, the delicate outer layer crackles.

Fault lines in the pale rose macaron succumb to your teeth and tongue, giving way to a soft, airy almond meringue.

Your senses tingle with pleasure as your tongue touches upon the smooth orange-blossom buttercream sandwiched inside.

This is a French pastry like no other, exciting dessert lovers from California to New York the last five years, eventually taking hold of hearts in Southwest Florida.

Pretty much every pastry chef and salesman call it the "new cupcake" as the dainty delicacies appear more and more behind glass cases in our French salons, bakeries and cafes. Oh, and they're gluten-free.

"The macaron is the craze today," said Norman Love, the award-winning chef and founder of Norman Love Confections in Fort Myers and Naples.

American chefs are tweaking the traditional French macaron by creating crazy flavor profiles, stenciling, marbling and adding more texture.



Pastry chef Nathaniel Reid pipes macaron batter into heart shapes at Norman Love Confections.

Le Macaron French Pastries opened at Miromar Outlets in Estero in November, offering flavors such as basil white chocolate, candied ginger chocolate, Colombian coffee, passion fruit dark chocolate and crunchy praline.

"But vanilla is their favorite," said keyholder Sierra Harlan about her customers. Le Macaron's product is made in the Florida company's St. Armands Circle store in Sarasota.



Pastry chef Nathaniel Reid, left, removes trays of freshly baked macarons from the oven under the watchful eye of chocolatier Norman Love. PHOTOS BY SARAH COWARD / THE NEWS-PRESS



An assortment of freshly made macarons at Norman Love Confections.

Identifying a macaron

These pastries are not to be confused with the American coconut cookie, often hay-stacked and dense, sometimes dipped in chocolate. That's a macaroon.

French macarons have a deceptively simple list of ingredients: almond flour, egg whites, sugar and powdered sugar.

Perhaps the most famous

macaron maker is Ladurée, which has only one shop in the United States, on Manhattan's Madison Avenue.

Opening in 1862, the Parisian café invented the double-decker macaron in the 1930s, in which two macarons sandwich a buttercream, jam or creamy ganache filling. The macaron itself came to 16th-century France by way of Queen Catherine de Medici in Italy.

The colorful sweets are be-

tween \$1.50 and \$2.10 a piece at Southwest Florida's Norman Love Confections, Lush French Bakery, Le Macaron French Pastries and Grain de Café.

"It's a nice contrast of crispness on the outside and softness inside with the cream," said pastry chef Nathaniel Reid, a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. Reid took his macaron love from the St. Regis Hotel in Dana Point, Calif., to Norman Love Confections in Fort Myers in 2010.

"Two and a half years ago when I started making them here, people thought they looked like little hamburgers or Whoopie pies," Reid said with a smile, wearing a chocolate-colored rubber apron reaching down to his ankles.

Parents who buy macarons for their children at Lush French Bakery call them crabby patties, said downtown Fort Myers bakery manager Kara Bernier.

"Families like to get them for their kids, even though they're actually really sophisti-

THESE ARE A FEW PLACES TO BUY AND TRY MACARONS:

» **Norman Love Confections:** 11380 Lindbergh Blvd. off Daniels Parkway, Fort Myers, call 561-7215; and 3747 Tamiami Trail N., Naples, call 687-7215; visit normanloveconfections.com.

» **Lush French Bakery:** 1514 Broadway at First Street, downtown Fort Myers, call 561-0306; 13550 Reflections Parkway, Suite 4-401, south Fort Myers, call 454-9100; and 20461 S. Tamiami Trail, Unit 20, at Broadway Avenue, Estero; visit lushfrenchbakery.com.

» **Grain de Cafe:** 8803 Tamiami Trail N. just south of Vanderbilt Beach Road, Naples; call 594-8081; visit Grain de Cafe on Facebook.

» **Le Macaron French Pastries:** 10801 Corkscrew Road, Suite 183, at Miromar Outlets in Estero, call 949-7001 or visit lemacaron-us.com.



Check out a raspberry-rose macaron recipe, a photo gallery and video of pastry chef Nathaniel Reid making macarons at news-press.com/taste.

cated," Bernier said. Lush's master baker, André Gratesol, makes the macarons, which go to the three Lush bakery locations.

Making macarons

Named 2010 pastry chef of the year at the U.S. Pastry Competition in New York, Reid handles the way macarons are made at Norman Love Confections.

More than a week before the Valentine's Day holiday rush, Reid started on a batch of raspberry-pink macarons filled with a white chocolate-chantilly buttercream that whispered of orange blossom water.

"The shell has nothing to do with flavor. It's just the vessel and for texture," he said as he began boiling the raspberry sugar syrup to drip it into the whirling KitchenAid standup mixer.

The egg whites, sugar and syrup whipped into a pink frothy cloud, later combining with almond flour and powdered sugar to form a pink paste for a pastry bag.

Reid piped perfect 4-centimeter circles onto the stencils showing through a Silpat non-stick baking mat. He smacked the bottom of the cast-iron baking tray so the puffy pink circles flattened and smoothed out.

The macarons baked in a rotation rack convection oven

for about for 13 minutes, although every recipe detail depends on the weather, the chef's eye and intuition. Reid opened the oven a couple times and waved the hot air out so humidity didn't damage his macarons.

"There are so many variables with this cookie, it makes people crazy, so they stop," Love said as he watched Reid's macarons round up smooth and shiny. Each macaron sported a spongy ring, called the "foot," a true sign of a chef's ability.

Pulling the tray out, Reid picked one up with his middle finger and thumb, checking for a loose, yet firm wiggle to the macaron. He then paired the macarons to create the sandwiches, pressing lightly.

Outside the Norman Love pastry kitchen, in the salon where customers lined up at the counter, Cape Coral couple Jamie and Mandy Kagol tried a few macarons with Mandy's parents, Roger and Nyla Goossen, visiting from St. James, Minn.

"Wow," said Jamie Kagol, 39, as he bit into a strawberry-lime macaron. "It's very soft with a kind of crunchy exterior and then you get the filling inside. They're light-tasting."

Nyla Goossen's favorite is the vanilla cassis, or black currant, version.

"The flavor is, is, it's right there," said Goossen, 53. "It's kinda like a marshmallow."