

Learn to make sweet macarons

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Donna Lussier of La Petite Patisserie, 157 E. King St., ho...

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Despite her French last name, Donna Lussier has not been to France (yet, she says) but she creates for her customers dozens and dozens of delicate light and airy French macarons on a weekly basis.

"I practiced a long time, over a year and a half, before I offered them" in her boutique bakery, La Petite Patisserie, 157 E. King St. After graduating from the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, Lussier opened a stand at Central Market.

She likes to make her labor-intensive, gluten-free cookies and enjoys macarons most with a cup of tea, but adds that they are the perfect cookie for anytime.

"They are the 'it' cookie right now," she says, laughing. She often plays French music in the background while making them.

Since La Petite Patisserie is a "boutique" bakery, customers should call ahead and/or order if they want a particular flavor or quantity. Favorite flavors there are raspberry, salted caramel, almond buttercream and pistachio. Others are pink champagne and seasonal ones such as coconut cream and pumpkin spice.

The history of macarons is unclear and indicates that what is called a French macaron evolved through the ages. One bit of lore says that Catherine de' Medici brought them to France in 1533 when she married Henry II.

The French macaron has similar ingredients to a coconut macaroon but is very different. Confusion reigns when some sources spell the French macaron with two o's. Both start with egg whites and sugar but the changes are evident when you bite into the airy macaron — the meringue "shatters," as one fan describes— and then into the more chewy coconut macaroon.

French macarons' availability at Rice and Noodles, 1238 Lititz Pike, may seem an unusual pairing, but Vy Banh, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Ninh Banh, and sister, Alys Truong, and her husband, Bernard Truong, explains.

"The French influence on Vietnamese cuisine and culture is so strong, that we thought that having macarons would make a perfect balance with our food," Banh says.

Banh and her sister are third-generation restaurateurs. "Our grandfather began this restaurant empire in Saigon prior to the Vietnam War. Our parents fled to the United States at the fall of Saigon and eventually opened the first Vietnamese restaurant in New Orleans in 1982.

"We started making the macarons about two years ago and decided to offer selling them once we perfected the art of baking them," Banh says.

She was introduced to them "many years ago when my mother's sister from France would bring some on her visits to America. I ate my first macaron in America at a French pastry shop in New Orleans."

Banh says that macarons have been a hit with customers. "It has been hard keeping up with the demands."

Her flavors include buttercream: pandan, strawberry, coconut, mango, taro root, Vietnamese coffee, pistachio, hazelnut, toasted almond, red velvet, mango, banana, blueberry/raspberry;

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chocolate ganache: crunchy peanut butter, strawberry, coconut almond, mint chocolate and salted caramel

"We also offer seasonal flavors. The most popular are the buttercream pumpkin spice and the salted caramel," Banh adds.

Lia Stucchi, one of the owners of La Dolce Vita, 9 N. Duke St, says they started offering them about a year ago because customers began requesting them. She had her first macaron in Long Island, N.Y., prior to relocating to Lancaster in 2005. The most popular, she says, are ones with chocolate filling or raspberry filling.

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