

# The Sweet Life of Macarons

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Sometime in the early 2000s, cupcakes seemed to become the most popular dessert in America. No one can say with certainty why, but cupcakes being featured on popular television shows, and the media very likely had something to do with it. As a result, specialty cupcake shops were opening up everywhere. But after about a decade of cupcake popularity fading, an elegant but unexpected pastry stepped into the spotlight, speaking the language of love and sweetness. That new but not really new pastry was the macaron.

Although macaron is the French word for macaroon, the macaron is a very different dessert (Gisslen, 2017). In North America, the macaroon is a common coconut-based cookie dessert that resembles the French macaron in appearance. The French macaron, however, is almond or meringue-based and is usually filled with jam. Macarons originated in Italy, but some scholars believe they travelled to France in the 1530s via Catherine di Medici, an Italian noblewoman who was queen of France from 1547 to 1559 (Garber, 2014).

In spite of this migration, macarons wouldn't become particularly widespread outside of royal court until 1792, when two Benedictine nuns, forced from their convent and needing asylum during the French Revolution, made a living selling macarons. Those nuns became known as “the macaron sisters,” and their recipe of ground almonds, egg whites, and sugar was passed down in secret for over a hundred years. Then, in the early 1900s, a bakery and tea salon in Paris called Ladurée created a meringue-based version of the macaron to accompany their tea service.

By consistently maintaining high quality standards and production over many years, Ladurée and a couple of other high-end patisseries have allowed the macaron to retain its elevated status in the world of desserts. One of those patisseries, Fauchon, expanded the number of flavors available in the 1980s. Then, in the 1990s, Ladurée even began releasing new flavors by the season, like new clothing lines, and advertising macarons in upscale French fashion magazines (Garber, 2014).

In recent years, all this focus on creating ever greater macarons has caused a sort of sweet war amongst the great French patissiers. Some of the battles waged in this war were the release of the black licorice macaron, the savory macaron clash in which the fillings are foods like salmon or cheese, and even the vintage chocolate combat. All of these skirmishes were fought in the French pursuit of true macaron excellence. This pursuit brings us to an unexpected competitor, Jean-Marie Auzou, the great French chocolatier who opened his own macaron factory in 1998. His love of macarons began as a reward from his grandmother. “If we were well-behaved, she gave us macarons for our afternoon snack. I'll always remember the flavors of her macarons. What a reward that was way back then!” (Loomis, 2010).

The care taken to create Mr. Auzou's macarons is inspiring. He uses eggs from chickens he knows, and only uses almonds from southern Spain, which are ground

into a delicate flour. Also, he only colors his macarons with natural food-based items like real pistachios or plant extracts. There are no artificial colors. By design, the process is slow, as Mr. Auzou feels that this pace is the best way to achieve culinary excellence for his patrons: “I want my clients to be as happy to eat my macarons as I was to eat those my grandmother used to make” (Loomis, 2010).

After reading about Mr. Auzou and all the care he takes to make his amazing macarons, I was seriously ready to taste them. My first stop brought me to Joyce Bakeshop, located at 646 Vanderbilt Avenue in Brooklyn. From the outside, the first thing I noticed was the green, wooden storefront, which gave the little shop an old-world, mom-and-pop type of feel. As I approached the door, I could already smell the sweet air of delicious baked goods.

Inside, it was very busy. I heard Thanksgiving desserts being ordered, children and families laughing, and the excited chatter of many happy people. There were a few small dining tables, but they were all occupied, which was a shame because I was feeling hungry and wanted to sit and eat immediately. When I finally reached the display area, I was overwhelmed by the variety of colors, shapes, and smells of cakes, tarts, and other amazing looking desserts.

As I spotted the macarons, my first thought was that they looked like cute little cookie sandwiches. They were reasonably priced at \$2.50 a piece, so I ordered one orange-flavored and one raspberry-flavored. The cookie's texture felt like something between a cookie and a cake with filling in the middle. I bit into the orange one. It was extremely sweet, like solid cotton candy with cream in the middle: much too sweet for my taste. Next, I tried the raspberry one. Like the orange one, it was also a bit too sweet, except it tasted like it had raspberry jam inside. Although I was disappointed by my initial taste test, I had not given up. It was time to try again.

From the outside, Charlotte Patisserie definitely stood out with its all-white storefront. Inside, it was very modern, with clean lines and a layout clearly designed for functionality. For seating, there were a few white chairs inside and a bench out front. The desserts looked like beautiful art pieces with intricate designs elaborately displayed. Like Joyce Bakeshop, it was also packed with a steady mid-day crowd, families, and lunch breakers.

I purchased two macarons for \$2.00 a piece, which was a bit cheaper than Joyce's. Both were really well made, colorful, and had a structure identical to the macarons from Joyce. I chose a green pistachio flavor and a yellow passion fruit flavor. The pistachio macaron did taste like pistachio and had the same soft texture as Joyce's macarons, but it was again entirely too sweet for me. Finally, I tried the passion fruit macaron. It was also very sweet but tart, which was again not to my liking.

Now, despite the fact I wasn't a fan of the macarons from either Joyce or Charlotte, I would still recommend both bakeshops, as I found a few other goodies from each which I loved. However, I will likely not be buying macarons again. So for those who love macarons, I wish you the best. In terms of quality, availability, and variety, there's no better time to indulge than now.

## Works Cited

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