

Sweet cakes



PASTRIES AND FRUIT WAKE UP MEDITERRANEAN MORNINGS

by Seánan Forbes

In the Mediterranean, breakfast means pastries, cookies or sweet bread. Elsewhere, chefs bring these items to the table in traditional and unexpected ways. Gina DePalma, pastry chef of Babbo in New York City, is an expert on Italian breakfast pastries, naming brioche *con crema*, served with jam or, in Piedmont, Nutella; Calabria has twice-toasted anisette-seeded bread called *frese*; Torino's *gianduja*; during Sicilian summers, there's gelato stuffed into brioche;

and Florence's *bomboloni* (doughnuts) and *budino di riso* (rice pastries).

Genovese pastry chef Elisabetta Carretta of Hand Made Food in London grew up on *cornetti* (dense croissants), brioche topped with *crème pâtissière*, and a local specialty: *focaccia alla Genovese* (\$4, recipe, p. 83). Babies cut their teeth on it. Children have it with milky coffee; adults with cappuccino—and, Carretta remarks, “focaccia and white wine is what the [dock workers] would eat at 7am.” In Tuscany, DePalma adds, you’ll

Focaccia alla Genovese, \$4, Chef Elisabetta Carretta, Hand Made Food, London. RECIPE, p. 83. find *schacciata*, focaccia topped with grapes and sugar or, in Liguria, raisins and almonds.

Simple substitutions have powerful effects. For brunch, Megan Neubeck, sous chef at Terzo Piano in Chicago, makes orange rolls (recipe, plateonline.com). “They’re [like] cinnamon rolls,” she says, “but we roll them in orange zest instead of cinnamon.” To customers, the shape is familiar, and the scent evokes Sicily.

The French are equally enamored of their breakfast pastries. After more than two decades in America, Chef-Owner Jacques Torres still loves croissants—as do his customers. Behind the scenes, Torres’ croissant (\$1.80, recipe, plateonline.com) is turned into *pain au chocolat*, cheese Danish, or matched with fruit or almonds; change the shape and the dough gives different textures.

Growing up in the Loire Valley, Sebastien Rouxel, executive pastry chef of the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group, looked forward to Wednesdays. There was no school, and Rouxel’s grandmother left out a fresh bag Viennoiseries. “It was always exciting,” Rouxel recalls. At Bouchon Bakery in New York City, he says, “I’m trying to bring a bit of my childhood into what I do every day.”

Memories of home inspired Fatima Marques to open Natas Pastries in Los Angeles; she missed the pastries of her native Lisbon. At all hours, Marques’ customers buy Portuguese sweet bread, *natas* (\$1, recipe, plateonline.com), baked in an oven imported from Portugal. “*Natas* have to be baked around 350 degrees C, which is like 700 degrees F.”

FRUITFUL TOUCHES

Of course, man cannot breakfast on bread alone. In both his Restaurant Michael Smith and Extra Virgin, in Kansas



Churros & Chocolate

In Spain, dipping batons of fried dough into thick hot chocolate is a morning ritual—and a late-night one. As Daniel Aguera, culinary instructor for the Market District, chef-consultant to Vivo Restaurant in Bellevue, Penn., and a native of northern Spain observes, chocolate and churros are popular when late night becomes indistinguishable from early morning (a good thing to note if yours is a 24-hour or late-night restaurant).

Michael Smith, chef-owner of Extra Virgin in Kansas City, serves churros as dessert (\$5, recipe, plateonline.com). “That’s a big seller,” Smith says. “In the summertime, we serve them with chocolate sauce. In the winter, we use hot chocolate. Sometimes, we’ll do a more upscale presentation, with a little cinnamon nut crunch as a garnish.”

Even without the extras, Smith’s dessert wins fans. The ramekin of chocolate offers diners the choice of pouring or dunking (or, if they’re generous, sharing). It’s an interactive, engaging sweet, whether patrons are ending a meal or taking a break from an evening walk.

Churros with chocolate sauce, \$5.

Chef-Owner Michael Smith, Extra Virgin, Kansas City, Mo. RECIPE, plateonline.com.

City, Chef-Owner Michael Smith’s *zeppole* may be plain, stuffed with fresh cherries, served with fruit sauces...whatever works. “I’ve traveled through Spain and Italy,” Smith says. “I worked in France for almost five years; I’m okay with figuring out where it goes on the plate.”

At Pulino’s Bar & Pizzeria, in New York City, Sous Chef Beth Ann Simpkins celebrates Italy’s beloved Nutella. She folded puff pastry around the hazelnut-chocolate paste and hazelnuts, and put it in the oven. When she took it out, “It looked like a little baby with a huge belly. We [started] calling it a fat baby,” she explains.

Simpkins also uses the restaurant’s wood-burning ovens for pancakes. “They are cooked without flipping, and they puff up. It’s the definition of a pancake,” she says. Winter varieties include chestnut with pears, while buckwheat with

rhubarb and ricotta is served in spring.

Cindy Schuman, pastry chef of Chicago’s Sepia, also associates the Mediterranean with fruit. For brunch, she created a *Napoleon* with berries and cream (\$6, recipe, plateonline.com).

“You’ve got fresh fruit, cream and crunchy in every bite,” Schuman says.

Pastries don’t have to be elaborate—or only served in the morning. In America, Mediterranean breakfast sweets have migrated to other meals. As DePalma observes, “What goes on here is different from what goes on in Italy.” And that’s fine as long as your customers are as happy as a fat baby brimming with *gianduja*.

Seánan Forbes’ favorite Mediterranean breakfast is *pain au chocolat*.

✱ For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.

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