



Story by Frank Barnett
with Mart McCann

French Pastries
on Our Left Coast

— *Ooh la la!*

Photography by Frank Barnett

Of course hunters and fishermen are used to getting up while it's still pitch black outside, but those of us who can't imagine getting out of bed before the sun is up can only marvel at someone like Pascal Tisseur, who arrives at La Petite Provence in southeast Portland, Oregon, each morning around 5 a.m. to start baking, among other things, the cheese brioche with which I start most mornings.

By the time I arrived with my assistant at 6:30 to start shooting the accompanying photographs, the wholesale orders baked in the wee hours of the morning had been carefully packed for delivery. Crusty loaves and fragrant baguettes were bound for restaurants and coffee shops throughout metro Portland.





“French restaurant” still means white linen tablecloths and sauce Béarnaise to some of us, but the 21st century version is likely to be a friendly bistro where business breakfasts take place right next to mothers with children in tow. While writing about coffee (“The Beverage of Commerce”) several issues ago, it occurred to me that coffee was only part of the story. The old breakfast staples, coffee and a doughnut, have been replaced by trendy and tasty cappuccino and croissants.

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On the day of my visit, soft rock (French, of course) was playing in the dining room; by 8:00 lively conversation had all but drowned it out. A hearty breakfast accompanied by fresh-baked bread seems the perfect way to start a cold spring day, just as pastry and coffee are a pleasant way to end it.

The pastry counter attracted a crowd on the go with a tempting selection of classic breakfast fare as well as Pacific Northwest interpretations of familiar favorites, including marionberry scones and hazelnut brioche, and creations with such fanciful names as Blueberry Papillon, Monkey Love, Pyramide du Louvre, and Coconut Bamba. The latter is a delicious hemisphere of rum and white chocolate mousse with mango and coconut atop meringue, although I confess it is also reminiscent (in appearance only) of the Hostess Snowball our mothers used to pack in



our lunch boxes. Again, no comparison to these delicate French delights. The Pyramide du Louvre, Pascal's creation, is made of chocolate ganache, coffee, and vanilla mousse on a chocolate coconut biscuit, something architect I.M. Pei is unlikely to have imagined when he designed the Louvre's modern new gift shop in the central courtyard of that venerable museum.

Monsieur Tisseur matched my mental image of a French baker to a T. He is tall and slender, with dark hair and mischievous eyes. A proud member of the Academie Culinaire de France, he began his career as a 14-year-old apprentice in Lyon. My younger son, Elliott, was an exchange student there in the late 80s, so Pascal and I began to chat about our families and how it seems true that everyone is separated by only six degrees. At the age of 29, he moved to the United States and has been making bread and pastries at La Petite Provence since its beginning 14 years ago. With partners Didier and Alain (don't those French names just make you want to say "ooh la la"?) Pascal now bakes for four locations—two in Portland, one in nearby Lake Oswego, and one in the Dalles.

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For all practical purposes, the French invented dessert. The word itself is derived from "desservir," which means "to clear







the table,” and France still has more bakers per capita than any other country. The made-for-one pastries that are so familiar now were first made in the early 19th century. Antonin Carême, publisher of *Pâtisserie Royal* and possibly the first celebrity chef, began baking individual-sized cakes, making it possible to buy several pieces of different cakes instead of a whole one. The idea caught on and many chefs began creating their own signature pastries. One of the best-known French pastries, the Napoleon, is made of several layers of puff pastry alternating with a sweet filling, typically pastry cream, but sometimes whipped cream, or jam. It is usually glazed with icing or fondant in alternating white and brown (chocolate) strips, and combed. Ironically, it

has nothing to do with Napoleon Bonaparte; the confection was first made in Naples, and something was lost in translation. So much for my childhood visions of Napoleon, mounted on his elegant steed, clutching a pastry under the double-buttoned military uniform.

Artisan bread and classic French pastry may seem like opposite ends of the baking spectrum, but the chef’s passion infuses both. Pascal admits a preference for pastry, and given the latitude for creativity it presents, I can’t blame him. Who wouldn’t enjoy concocting something as delightful as *Monkey Love*, a combination of white chocolate mousse, banana, and chocolate ganache on a coconut biscuit?

On the day of my photo shoot, Pascal was bustling around his busy kitchen as bread came out of the oven and moved to the shelves of the retail store, which were brimming with at least a dozen different kinds, some including fresh herbs and others containing olives or raisins. Is there anything that smells better than a bakery early in the morning? And nothing provokes the memory more vividly than one's sense of smell. One of my most pleasant memories is of wandering into a boulangerie in a little French village and watching the baker put one loaf at a time on the cooling racks. I bought a loaf and broke through the firm crust to a soft, steaming center. Nothing could have tasted better.

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Just say the word “baguette” and it's almost impossible not to recall Elliott Erwitt's photograph of a young French boy with two of the slender loaves strapped to the back of his bicycle, as he rides down a tree-lined lane receding in the distance.

Pastry production was also in full swing. Even though the staff was busy preparing apricot tarts and croissants by the tray-fuls, they were proud to share their kitchen with me and didn't seem bothered at all by my studio lights and other photographic equipment. In that kitchen, craft more than just approaches art; it is a high culinary artistic achievement with a proud tradition. As tarts were assembled with a variety of richly-colored fruits, it was almost as though they were being painted



with strawberries, pineapple, grapes, blueberries, and kiwi fruit, resulting in incomparable still-life creations just waiting to be enjoyed. Sculptural details, such as a chocolate version of the Eiffel Tower, graced fondant-covered cakes. One of the bakers showed me the mold used to make three-dimensional roses—this is the Rose City—and then there's the sinfully delicious confection called Opera, made of biscuit jaconde, chocolate ganache, coffee butter cream, and coffee syrup, and then topped with its name written in elegant sugar script.

Portland and Seattle, its rainier cousin to the north, have become rising stars on the food scene, and you may have to travel some to discover bakeries and bistros like those in the Pacific Northwest. Clearly, the Left Coast has gained a reputation that actually rivals the Left Bank of Paris when it comes to the creation of great pastries, food, wine, and specialty coffees. I don't anticipate running out of culinary subjects to write about and photograph any time in the near future. Lucky for me, since the creators of my favorite subject matter regularly insist that I try this or sip that as I scurry about photographing and writing for yet another issue of *The Contemporary Sportsman*. 

