

Croissant king and queen

When Laurent Haumonte set out to impress his girlfriend with his newly acquired patisserie skills, the idea turned to disaster. He adventurously chose an Opera Gateau, with layers of almond sponge, ganache and buttercream beneath a chocolate glaze. To make an even fancier version, he melted chocolate on top of the cake and the result was stunning — until the buttercream beneath got too warm and oozed out of the sides. “I lacked some understanding of the science,” he admits. “I was really mad at myself.”

To be fair, only a brave and romantic man would attempt to equal the proficiency of the woman who is now his wife. New Zealand-born Sonia Haumonte studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and served her apprenticeship in high-end kitchens of that city of love making luxury desserts.

The couple came to Auckland in 2009 and, recognising a gap in the market, opened Patisserie Vaniye in Parnell, where they create French desserts with a contemporary aesthetic.

Elegant and detailed, the array of tarts, cakes and individual-portion treats are set out like jewelled artworks, but many locals come not for these sweet indulgences, but for the baguettes and croissants.

It's almost impossible to believe as you pull open the crust to reveal a melt-in-the-mouth texture that each croissant contains only one teaspoon of butter. Sonia Haumonte swears it's the quality of that butter that makes this feat of flavour possible.

“In New Zealand most butter is sold ready salted, whereas in France it's the opposite,” she explains. When salt is added to butter, it can turn rancid faster plus it's more likely to absorb all the odours from the fridge. “We never use salted butter for baking.”

Sonia works her magic using a pared-back palette

of ingredients — white flour, butter, salt and a little sugar and water. Butter with a flexible consistency is also important since she rolls this between the layers of dough. Leaving it to rest and breathe between rolling is a key part that takes a practised eye.

“A croissant must be flaky and messy to eat on the outside, with a just enough air and texture inside. It's a delicate balance,” she says.

Baked in batches of just 30 per day, they are modest in size — not the giant, puffed-up versions often seen. The history of the croissant is debated, but Sonia believes the idea came from Turkey, and the French “perfected and complicated it”. She enjoys the fruits of this complication every morning with coffee, served with nothing else to distract from that buttery taste.

Although he has a full-time job in telecommunications, Laurent is up at 5.15am to craft his small, slender but perfectly formed baguettes. The process begins the day before to allow the gluten in the dough to develop during the night. “And a longer ferment means more flavour,” he says.

He uses a combination of white and rye flour for a taste that has some edge to it but is not as sharp as sourdough. Then he folds and forms the dough into a rustic, cylindrical shape for baking. Inside he aims for a texture that is not too dense but has random air bubbles through it.

“One challenge every baker faces in Auckland is the humidity in the air,” he explains. “While you may have a lovely crust in the morning, it will lose some of its crunch during the day.”

Which is why he suggests eating the baguette as soon as possible: “A sign of a good baguette is always if you have torn off the ends to eat before you've even got the bread home.”

For Bastille Day, the couple will

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enjoy a “nice meal” as usual with fine wine, finished off, perhaps with a baguette.

“It's traditional in France to eat bread after a meal — to wipe the plate clean,” says Sonia.

Treating yourself to a crusty loaf is the perfect way to celebrate because, as Laurent reminds us, the revolution began because there was not enough bread for the citizens. “So they went to Versailles to ask for bread, which is when they discovered the gap between how they were living and how indulgent the French royalty were.”

● Visit Vaniye Patisserie at www.vaniye.com



Sonia and Laurent Haumonte are renowned for their perfect pastries.