



Henry Fenwick

Irresistible delights in your Corner

Sometimes there's no point in struggling any longer. For months now I've been making detours on my way from Palm Springs to Palm Desert so I won't fall within the siren lure of the French Corner Café at Desert Crossing Center. The awful truth about that restaurant and pastry shop is that the brilliant pastry chef there, Almeric Davy, makes irresistibly good macarons, and almost equally irresistible pastries, and if I drove down that particular stretch of Highway 111 I couldn't prevent myself from stopping there.

But when owner Marc Davy told me that his brother had been working on new combinations for the holidays, I knew I had to taste them. Exploring the flavors and textures of a new Davy creation isn't just a pleasure, it's an education.

Lesson No. 1, it turned out, is called St. Tropez, because its taste profile pays homage to the south of France, the brothers' original home. The primary element is essence of violet, which I first tasted and loved in Toulouse. That was the best place to do it because Marc told me that Toulouse is the violet capital of France, and therefore presumably the world. The essence has a delicate, floral, musky flavor that has always been popular in confectionery (candied violets are a classic cake decoration in Europe). But Almeric balances that floral sweetness with a puree of black currant, layered into the cake. With its tart, vivid shock of taste the black currant is a perfect counterpoint to the violet. It is impossible to do justice to the crisp crust he uses as a base — light and crumbly and melts on the tongue. The macaron version, with the same flavors, is even more evanescent, vanishing in your mouth.

Lesson No. 2 is a pastry called The Louvre. It is an imposing chocolate and gold rectangle and has enough majesty to look as though it belongs in that palace/treasure house.

For this creation Chef Davy has been exploring the depths and richness of the different versions of chocolate that the famous chocolate manufacturer Valrhona offers. Davy has chosen Guanaja, one of Valrhona's eight Grand Cru chocolate varieties, made from the finest South American chocolate beans. Guanaja is perhaps the best known of the Grand Cru choco-

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lates. It isn't the absolutely most bitter of the Valrhona range, but it has an intensity that contains touches of chestnut and traces of fruitiness as well as the dark notes of chocolate at its most powerful. Alone it might be overpowering but Almeric lightens and sweetens the experience with a layer of caramel ganache, smooth and soothing.

The same elements are used in an alternative smaller pastry, Notre Dame, a gleaming dark chocolate tower with white sails. It's also going to be one of the five Christmas logs that the bakery will be producing.

For the New Year, Almeric is working on yet another new pastry. It doesn't have a name yet, but it will be a dark chocolate nougatine with champagne and citrus (lime and lemon). The champagne presumably



Yule logs are just one of the fresh pastries made by expert chefs at French Corner in Palm Desert.

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pays homage to the New Year celebration. "Call it the New Year pastry," said Marc, although I'm reluctant to do that and shorten its sales life. Every pastry, and especially every one that Almeric produces, deserves a chance to be immortal.

Meanwhile Chef Davy has also chosen a new butter for his croissants. It's called Beurremont, it's made in Vermont, it has very low moisture,

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and, Marc told me, is "very close to French butter." The low moisture means that the resulting croissant will be flakier and lighter. Whenever a new ingredient is introduced, it means a careful rebalancing of the other elements in a recipe, so in between working on the pastries the indefatigable chef has been adjusting his croissant recipe. Judging by the example Marc gave me to taste, I'd say he's reached his goal.

"He never stops," Marc said. "It's a passion. Even at home he's trying out new combinations, new tastes."

There's a touch of concern in his voice but mainly it sounds like brotherly pride. He has reason for it.