

French Corner earns its accent

What sort of dessert do you eat during the holidays? I'm still not sure what is considered the most American Christmas sweet course — maybe it's because the ethnic influences are so diverse, maybe it's because Thanksgiving seems to trump Christmas in terms of traditional American family meals.

In England, you eat Christmas Pudding with a brandy butter sauce — it's rich and heavy and drenched in alcohol and I love it, but it does have a soporific effect, especially as the finale to a classic Christmas dinner. If it's possible to have too much of a good thing, then this might be it.

I've sometimes in the past opted for a French alternative, the *Bûche de Noël*, or Yule log. Classically this is a rolled-up cake with a chocolate butter cream filling and icing. It's probably a wiser choice than plum pudding, lighter, with a broader appeal.

Even wiser might be the *Bûche de Noël* that the French Corner Café is currently offering. Rather than a sponge cake, it's a mousse. It looks like a yule log — a very stylized and glamorous one — and it comes in a variety of flavors. So far I have only tried two, the chocolate ganache and the apple and cinnamon, and both were delicious. They'll also be making a French New Year's specialty in



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the first week of January, the *Galette des Rois*, or King Cake. This is a cake, made in the north of France from puff pastry and in the south from a brioche dough, but in both cases filled with frangipane. It celebrates Epiphany (Jan. 6) and is generally served for several days surrounding the festival. It comes with a ceramic "fève," sometimes a bean, sometimes a charm or trinket, and whoever gets it in their portion is crowned king for the day.

The bistro is emphasizing the season still more in 2011 by serving a different French classic dish each month as a special: Beef Bourguignon in January, cassoulet in February, pot au feu in March and bouillabaisse in April.

If you're not quite up to a major entrée, they are also introducing a happy hour small bites menu, from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m. with smaller versions of some of their most popular dishes, such as sautéed sole, mussels, crepes and chicken piccata.



COURTESY OF THE FRENCH CORNER BAKERY

Pastry chef Almeric Davy of the French Corner Café, who trained with renowned Paris chef Pierre Hermé, uses Hermé's recipes and techniques and imports ingredients to make his macarons

But the heart of the place is the extraordinary quality of the pastries. There are two French pastry chefs at work there all the time, working with real passion. One of them is owner Marc Davy's brother Almeric, who has worked in Switzerland and France, and who trained, among other places, at the renowned Pierre Hermé.

When talk turns to French pastries — as it often does in my house — there is one huge question above all others.

Who makes the best macarons in Paris and therefore by extension the world?

There are really only two contenders for the "best" title, Ladurée, on the Right Bank, established since 1862, and Pierre Hermé, on the Left Bank, who actually worked at Ladurée before starting his own place.

Both make macarons more delicate than eggshells, melting

exquisitely on the tongue. Many, many people think that the upstart Hermé has snatched the title, mainly due to his adventurous ways with flavors. I belong with this camp.

Almeric Davy makes macarons using Pierre Hermé recipes and techniques, imports the same ingredients that Hermé uses, and turns out macarons that are the closest thing you will find to those of the master unless you go to Paris (or London or Tokyo) to sample the Hermé product for yourself. I wouldn't discourage anyone from doing that if they can, but in the meantime Palm Desert is a lot closer, and you don't have to be strip-searched to get there. Joyeux Noël!

French Corner Café

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