

MACARON



MAGIC

LA PETITE DÉLICAT
specializes in macarons,
the wildly popular French
cookie that comes
in a kaleidoscope
of colors and flavors



By Louis Guida
Photos by David Coyle



Sylviana Herrin's career as a macaron entrepreneur started with a birthday party for her daughter.

“You don’t want to overmix, and you don’t want to undermix,” Sylviana Herrin instructs six women standing around her at a table in the kitchen of her shop, La Petite Délicat, on National Avenue near downtown Lexington. It’s a Saturday afternoon in January, and the women are here for Herrin’s class in macarons, the small, color-saturated sandwich cookies long linked — in conventional thought, at least — to France and haute-bourgeois chic.

The class, which Herrin offers twice monthly during most of the year, is a three-hour affair that covers everything macaron — from theory, and preparation to baking and consumption. Herrin is focused and her instruction is nonstop. She starts her students — today they’re mostly career professionals of various ages — with printed information and recipes. Most of them then begin taking

copious notes based on her verbal directives.

She gets going by heating sugar and water in a large, high-sided saucepan. As they come to a boil, she beats egg whites in a commercial mixer until they’re foamy. When the sugar syrup reaches 240 degrees Fahrenheit, she carefully adds it to the egg whites as they’re whipping.

“You have to know when to stop,” Herrin tells her group about the meringue being whisked. “Stiff peaks.”

“How do we know when it’s ready?” one student asks. “You want a nice bird beak,” Herrin responds, then detaches the beater with a large dollop of the finished meringue on it from her mixer and holds it up to the group to illustrate how it resembles, well, a bird’s beak. “That’s perfect.”

From industry to industrial kitchen

Herrin seems born to macarons, but they’ve been part of her life for only five years. And the growing business she’s created from them is a story of entrepreneurial serendipity.

A native of Jakarta, Indonesia, she came to the United States

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Herrin leads a macaron-making class, which participants soon discover is extremely challenging. “It’s all about the technique,” Herrin explains.

to attend college — first the University of Kentucky, then Eastern Kentucky University, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in industrial technology in 2005 (she already had a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Trisakti University in Jakarta). After graduating from EKU, she married — her husband, David Herrin, is an engineering professor at the University of Kentucky — and worked in Lexington as a quality engineer and materials analyst for Webasto, an international company that makes roof, heating, cooling, and battery systems for the automobile industry.

In 2012, while on a corporate career path, her life turned. The catalyst was her daughter Kiara’s second birthday party. “I wanted to make something special for it,” she says. One night before the party, while her daughter was asleep, she decided that something would be macarons, which she remembered as “beautiful pastries” she

had tasted for the first time in a hotel cafe in Cairo, Egypt, about a year earlier.

Her qualifications? “I love baking. I liked to bake when I was little. My mom did and does some catering work, and that helped me.”

Although Herrin was out of practice — she hadn’t done much baking while pursuing her career — her daughter’s



Herrin demonstrates the right consistency of the meringue: like a “nice bird beak.”



birthday macarons turned out well, and the party (chronicled on her website, www.lapetitedelicat.com) was a success... and then some.

“A guest said, ‘These macarons are really good. You should sell them.’ That was my lightbulb moment.”

Soon after, Herrin began making macarons “almost every day.” Her birthday batch, she quickly discovered, involved some beginners’ luck. “Making macarons is so challenging,” she says. “It involves a lot of trial and error. I kept at it, trying to find the right recipe, until I could get them right consistently.” (She settled on the Italian method, in which the meringue that’s key to macarons is formed by whipping egg whites with a hot sugar syrup instead of with granulated sugar, as in the alternate French method.)

Herrin knew still photography, and during her recipe tests she



Herrin helps a student pipe batter into 1½-inch rounds on parchment-lined sheets.

photographed her best batches. She began posting the photos and offering her macarons on the e-commerce website Etsy. “People started ordering from states all over the country. I got good notices. And then I started panicking about keeping up with the orders.”

But she did keep up, and in early 2013 her business was born and quickly took off. (Herrin initially named it La Petite Sucré, but changed it for trademark reasons

to La Petite Délicat.) She rented commercial kitchen space, first in Winchester, then in Lexington; continued selling on Etsy; and began selling at the downtown Lexington Farmers’ Market on Saturdays. She was making — by herself and with the help of a few friends — and selling online and at the market about 1,000 macarons on holidays such as Valentine’s, Easter, Mother’s Day, and Christmas.

In December 2015, she rented a com-

mercial building in Lexington’s Chevy Chase business district, and built her own kitchen and opened a retail location there. “It was risky,” Herrin says, “but we did really great.” In April 2017, however, she had to move after her location was sold and later leveled to make room for a supermarket parking lot.

A month later she found and moved into her current location, a 2,000-square-foot building in the gentrifying National Avenue district. The space was much larger than her previous one, and to make her numbers work, she subleases part of it to Nate’s Coffee for a cafe. (She had served Nate’s at her Chevy Chase location and knew owner Nathan Polly.)

In five years Herrin’s production has doubled. She now makes — for retail, web-



Delicate filling goes between the shells to form “sandwiches.”



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site, Etsy online, and corporate clients — an average of 1,500 to 2,000 macarons a week. She has one full-time and six to seven part-time employees. And her gross sales — not only from macarons now, but also from house-made scones, croissants, and quiche; space rentals (a loft for parties, showers, and workshops); kitchen rentals; merchandise (prints, calendars, and T-shirts); and a percentage of coffee sales — have doubled in the past year and are up about 500 percent since she started her business.

All about the technique

Herrin began offering her macaron-making classes two years ago, in part to show customers what goes into the cost of her confections — \$2.25 for a single macaron, \$24 for a dozen. “People come in and think they’re so expensive,” she says. “But after they finish the class, they understand why. It’s a very labor-intensive process.” (The class costs \$110.)

If they hadn’t already known it, that understanding quickly became apparent to Herrin’s students this January. “This isn’t a piece of cake,” one of them says, as she combines the perfectly formed meringue with a previously prepared mix of almond flour, confectioners’ sugar, and egg-white powder; a bit of water; and purple food coloring (their first macarons are blackberry).

The resulting batter is then piped into 1½-inch rounds onto



Achieving
uniformity
requires
practice
and skill.

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parchment-lined trays — Herrin demonstrates the proper method with a pastry bag — racked to dry at room temperature, baked in a double pan, cooled, and sandwiched with a piped filling.

“I love making these,” Herrin tells her class. She’s motivational. “It’s just fun.”

By the end, students have made five different macarons — filled with blackberry jam, salted caramel, or house-made dark chocolate ganache or vanilla or strawberry buttercream. Altogether, the ingredients are few and simple. But the method is complicated. And precision and detail — temperatures, timing, measurements, even the color of the parchment paper — are crucial.

“You have to nail that technique,” Herrin tells her class, summarizing her core message as her students stand beaming above the 40 finished macarons each will take home. “Do not improvise.”

Given her background and experience — and personality — that seems easy for Herrin to say. “I like everything precise. I try to loosen up a bit, but I admit I’m a perfectionist. I am.” **KM**



Captivating colors and flavors are part of macarons' appeal.



Customers of all ages enjoy La Petite Délicat's macarons.

EXOTIC ORIGINS

Though almond-based confections have antecedents in ancient Persia, macarons likely trace more directly to ninth- to 11th-century Arab and then Norman Sicily and shared culinary links there to durum wheat-and-egg pasta. Those links are evident in the etymology: The French macaron is derived from the Italian *maccherone* (provenance before that is unclear).

In the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these almond sweets spread beyond greater Sicily. First there were marzipans made with almond paste. Then lighter ones, including amaretti and macarons, made with almond flour and egg whites began to appear. Monasteries and convents baked them. In 1533 Catherine de' Medici is said to have brought them to the French court. In 1792 their current birth legend sprouted: Two Benedictine nuns, driven from their convent during the French Revolution, baked them from a secret recipe and sold them to survive.

Macarons (and amaretti) through these ages were rustic confections — small, round biscuit cookies, crunchy outside and soft inside. They were often sold in pairs with their flat sides together. Around the turn of the 20th century or earlier, accounts vary, a Paris baker (two claim credit) created a sandwich cookie by putting a ganache filling between two macarons. This “macaron parisien” was popularized by the family of one of the bakers at their pastry shop and tea salon, Ladurée, meringue shells were soon colored, and an upscale dessert trend was born. Now, Ladurée and Pierre Hermé, another luxe Parisian bakery, sell macarons at their boutiques the world over. And, at an opposite end of the food spectrum, McDonalds offers them at McCafes in France, Germany, and Australia.

Their international reach and traditional cachet aside, macarons might have become passé in their signature nation. A New York Times story in 2013 noted that in Paris hardly anyone talks about macarons any more. One French magazine, *Madame Figaro*, announced that “the cream-filled puff pastry has replaced the macaron” in the battle for French palates. And another, *L'Express*, declared that the éclair has “rendered the macaron old-fashioned.”

A final point: Though they share the same culinary roots and their names are often used interchangeably, macarons and macaroons are different. Macaroons were first made in the late 1800s in the United States as a variant of macarons using grated coconut in place of almond flour. Each confection has its partisans, and each has a national day — it's in March for macarons and in May for macaroons.