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Feathery, fluffy, addictive: 6 iconic European cakes

Warning: Just looking at photos of these classic desserts may cause instant weight gain. But we bet you can't stop

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani 24 December, 2012

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Two pastry chefs, one question: what are your favorite European cakes?

Roger van Damme and Eddy Van Damme (no relation) are pastry chefs with extensive European training.

The former is one of Belgium's most innovative pastry chefs and was named Chef of the Year 2010 by French restaurant guide Gault Millau.

The latter is co-author of "On Baking," an internationally acclaimed book on the craft of cake and pastry making.

Here are their not-to-miss European pastry selections.

Sachertorte, Austria



Whipped up in haste, devoured in seconds.

The sachertorte is a dense chocolate sponge cake subtly moistened with apricot jam and covered with rich chocolate ganache.

The most celebrated of Viennese culinary delights (December 5 is National Sachertorte Day in Vienna), it was created by accident.

“It was created on the spur of the moment in the kitchen of the Hotel Sacher in Vienna by an apprentice pastry chef whose boss was suddenly taken ill right before the arrival of a very important guest,” says Eddy.

The cake was such a sensation that it became the subject of a decades-long legal battle between the descendents of the chef who created it and the owners of the hotel where it was first served.

Gateau St. Honore, Belgium



Texture is just as important as flavor in this Franco-Belgian bun.

This feathery dessert comes bursting with whipped cream and studded with caramel and chocolate-dipped cream puffs.

Named for the patron saint of bakers and pastry chefs, the Gateau St. Honore originated in France, but Roger van Damme highly recommends the Belgian version.

According to the chef, due to the friendly rivalry that's always existed between Belgium and France, many Belgian pastry chefs have raised the bar on the St. Honore, working hard to create amazing medleys of tastes and textures that are the hallmark of this puff pastry delight.

Macaron, France



Delectably crunchy-chewy.

Roger and Eddy don't hesitate in choosing the macaron as the best French dessert.

These colorful meringue puffs that are filled with buttercream, jam or ganache date to the sixteenth century and were brought to international fame by Paris-based patisserie Laduree.

"Making the perfect macaron is a very subtle art," says Eddy. "They're so delicate, so tricky to prepare and perfect, that they're a challenge for even the most accomplished of pastry chefs."

The most difficult part? Not getting them to crack on top, says Roger.

Black Forest cake, Germany



In international pastry circles, there's an ongoing argument over the provenance of the Black Forest cake.

Was it really named for Germany's Black Forest region and first created in those environs? Or can the French claim it as another of their own?

While variations of this rich chocolate cake exist throughout Europe (even Sweden has its version), the German Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte is a standout, according to Eddy.

While you argue about where it's from, we'll have another slice.

Like all Black Forest cakes, the German variation is made of moist chocolate cake and whipped cream, with layers inlaid with cherries.

What sets it apart is the addition of Kirsch Wasser, a liqueur made from tart cherries. It's the perfect kicker to temper the sweetness of the whipped cream and chocolate, leading to "an explosion of tastes that together make the Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte a real classic," says Eddy.

Limburg pie, Holland



Is it a pie? Is it a bread? Who cares? Let's eat.

These fruity cakes from the south of Holland are soft and simple, usually whipped up by mixing eggs and milk with bits and pieces lying around the kitchen, including spice-filled Speculoos cookies.

"The Limburg Pie is not crispy, its more like bread," says Roger, "but it still has a very expensive taste."

On a cold day, thick fruity slabs of Limburg Pie -- bursting with apricots, apples or cherries -- pairs beautifully with a cup of steaming coffee.

Carac, Switzerland



COURTESY MICHA L. RIESER

Tastes better than it looks.

Swiss pastry chefs have traditionally made liberal use of almonds and hazelnuts in their creations, with rich results.

“Nuts are the most expensive ingredients in baking, and they give a sense of luxury to cakes and pastries,” says Eddy.

The Swiss carac pastry is particularly nutty and luxurious, a standout item in most pastry shops across Switzerland.

The shell of the small tart is filled with a dense, dark chocolate ganache thickened with finely crushed almonds, while the top of the pastry is embellished with an eye-catching fluorescent green sugar icing.

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'Limburg Pie' isn't from Holland, it's from The Netherlands. Holland consists out of two provinces in the west of the Netherlands, whereas Limburg is from the south-eastern part of the country. Limburgish brother in law is fuming here :) It'd be the same as claiming as that Haggis is from Wales.

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