

## Romancing a Cookie: Making Macarons in Paris

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Galavanting in France, baking, macarons, paris



Ladurée macarons in its Paris shop window. Photo by

Kristin Conard. I arrived in Paris to cat-sit for a friend from graduate school. I'd been to the city before, but only for weekend trips, and I wanted to really dive in, to become French. I asked her where I should go to experience something really, truly French. Without hesitation, "You have to get some *macarons*," she said. "And you have to get the best, from **Ladurée**."

I think most Americans, or at least most Americans I know, think of macarons as coconut macaroons – the chewy cookie that shows up at bake sales or in plastic sleeves at grocery stores. But in France, they are macarons, perfectly round shells with frosting in the middle. These are French cookies, Parisian cookies. They're elegant and refined, sweet without being overwhelming and come in flavors like blackcurrant, violet, licorice, spice, orange blossom and mint.

Even the name is more exciting in French. Not the "ew" sound at the end, but an elegantly guttural "own" sound (as in "I own you – I'm better than any other cookie in the shop").

I went to Ladurée the next day and bought an entire box of eight small cookies. Quality over quantity.

Closing my eyes, I sighed; it was like life couldn't get any better. I was eating my first macaron, and I was in Paris. I left the shop, slowly munching my treats from the pale green box – they were both crispy and creamy with the delicate flavor of almond. I had fallen in love.

I knew I wouldn't be able to bring enough macarons home to satisfy my newfound lust for the sweet treats, so I searched for a bakery class so I could make them on my own. I found one at [La Cuisine Paris](#) and quickly booked one of the twelve open spots in the class. Opened by an American man and French woman (what man could resist falling prey to a macaron-making French woman?), they had cooking classes in both French and English, and at least twice a month, they were macaron classes. I couldn't wait.

Outside the large, slightly ominous door, a young woman approached me. "Are you here for macarons?" she asked. I nodded, and she grinned at me conspiratorially, obviously excited to be on the verge of knowing the secrets of the French cookie. "Me too."

We walked in together, myself and Anna, a girl from Vermont who was studying in Paris for the summer. It was like walking into the comfort and warmth of my own house, if my house had candles in silver candleholders on the dining room table, black and white checked floors, high-end professional style kitchens and windows overlooking the Seine. We made our way to a place at the long wooden table with the other students. I popped on my plastic apron and set about taking diligent notes on the macaron making process as our chef, Justin, originally from Texas but trained in Paris, led us through the steps of making dark chocolate and raspberry white chocolate macarons.

Step one was sifting almond flour. I learned this is what makes macarons a high-end treat: There's no "real" flour, just finely-ground almonds. Next we were separating the egg whites, a messy task but one of vital importance. "If one bit of yolk gets in the mixture," said Justin, in his odd mix of Texas twang and French lilt, "the whole batch will be ruined."

Anna and I exchanged looks: we could not ruin these.

"The trick is that there are so few ingredients, so there's no way to cover up flaws. You get it right or you don't." Justin was not exaggerating: macaron shells are simply made of egg whites, almond flour, and sugar. Each step requires a bit of pampering and love, whipping the egg whites into meringue, heating the sugar until it threads but not until it boils or burns.

We used professional caliber chef equipment, and I began to fantasize myself staying in Paris forever, enrolling in a bakery course and opening my own pastry shop. This fantasy quickly dissipated when we were handed the pastry bags of dough. While Justin made perfectly matching concentric circles, I made a variety of oval shapes, none smooth and none of them matching. But, bless his patience, he was endlessly supportive, and kept repeating, "It takes practice, just keep going."



Making macarons in Paris. Photo by Kristin Conard. I added the decadent chocolate fillings (how could one go wrong with butter, dark chocolate and sugar?) to the light pink shells fresh from the oven and took a cautious bite.

I'd done it. I'd made macarons.

And this was a French secret I couldn't wait to show off to my friends at home.

### **La Cuisine Paris** **80 Quai de l'Hotel de Ville**

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**Kristin Conard** is an editor at **Matador Nights** as well as a writing instructor in New Jersey by way of Kansas, New Mexico and England. As a child, she wanted to be a librarian, because she thought that the librarian was the one who got to write all the books in the library. Her obsession with reading and writing has continued, and when she is not grading papers and lesson planning, she is working on a collection of essays and planning her next trip.

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