

Sweet Surrender



What comes to mind when you think of dessert?

To some, they bring sweet joy. Happiness, to them, comes in the form of a decadent chocolate cake smothered in chocolate fudge, so gooey that it goes everywhere around your mouth. Or perhaps joy emerges from cracking the caramelised top of a perfectly torched crème brûlée. There's nothing quite so comforting like digging into a moist sticky date pudding in the middle of winter – unless you're more of a biccies and tea person.

Usually eaten at the end of a meal, now you can choose to have sweets as your starter, main course, or – if it makes you happy – a three-course meal in itself. Not just slabs of cake dusted with icing sugar, a sprig of mint, and half a strawberry cut in the shape of a fan – the final course in a meal is getting people excited about finishing a meal. It is no longer about ending dinner on a sweet note; it's about translating an emotional connection to something onto a plate. It has become about flavours that transcend cultures, traditions, and expectations.

Welcome to the rise of the dessert.

"Europe stole a little bit of her heart, which she has poured into Tartine."

In March of this year, Melbourne was on CNNgo's list of World's 10 best cities for foodies. Part of Melbourne's charm – according to the good folks at CNNgo – include "Weird dance moves, alien visits, retro art and fine dining," and you can't really argue with that. At times, you may even find them all combined – and they work, in some strange way.

Melbourne's charm comes from its eclectic mix of culture and cuisine. Turn a street corner and you'll find a sushi shop, a Danish waffle stand, or perhaps a taco truck. Cupcakes and macarons are on display in stores that look like they've been transported straight from Paris' Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

Now, pastry chefs from around the world have come to Melbourne to set up shop. Le Petit Gateau's Executive Pastry Chef Pierrick Boyer has over twenty years of experience, helming kitchens in Italy, Boston, New York, and now Melbourne. Café Rosamond's Dessert Chef Pierre Roelofs pioneered Melbourne's first and only dessert evening, Executive Chef of Burch & Purchese Sweet Studio Burch and Purchese hails from the United Kingdom, but churns out amazingly delightful sweet treats from his South Yarra studio.

The list of Melbourne-based talent doesn't stop here. There's Clara Lee, a Masters of Psychology student whose pantry isn't simply stocked with instant noodles. Instead,

her interest in baking has brought her places she's never dreamed before.

Then there's Peter Ling, who is involved in the family catering business. Not content with focusing on Asian banquets, Peter took an interest in French patisserie after trying the holy grail of macarons from Laduree in Paris. He then took a course in macaron-making in Paris itself, brought his knowledge of the delicacy back to Melbourne, and started Little Feat Macarons.

Noah and Timna Fried are the husband-and-wife duo behind Malvern patisserie Sweet Crumble. Coming from families who love their dessert, Noah and Timna always preferred the final course of a meal. But it wasn't until a trip to Europe and the United States that they decided, Hey, why not do something similar back home? And thus Sweet Crumble was born.

Jan Maskiell has been in the business of food for over thirty years, as the owner of Tartine Tuckshop Takehome Catering in Armadale. After travelling around Europe in a Campervan for a year, she returned to Australia inspired and determined to recreate her experience. Europe stole a little bit of her heart, which she has poured into Tartine.

They may come from vastly different backgrounds and have various specialties in the kitchen. But one thing is for sure: they are passionate about bringing the best they can offer to the discerning palate Melbournians possess.



L-R: Clara fulfilling an order for a macaron tower; homemade strawberry muffins; biscotti for tea. Photos: Clara Lee

Melbourne vs. Food

Veterans in the food industry know Melbourne was not always known for its prominent food culture.

"Nobody has ever been terribly complimentary about Australian cuisine." - Michael Symons, 1982

A journalist named Nehemiah Bartley once divided Australia according to these nicknames:

- » Cornstalks (NSW)
- » Cabbage Patchers (Victoria)
- » Bananalanders (Queensland)
- » Apple Islanders (Tasmania)
- » Croweaters (South Australia)

It seems Victoria has outgrown its childhood nickname, graduating from a land of "cabbage patchers" to one with plenty of vegetable variety (or otherwise) to offer.

Part of Melbourne's charm is its reputation as a cultural melting pot (pun intended). Data collected in 2006 showed that 35.8% of the population was born overseas. Over a third of those who call Melbourne home are not actually from Melbourne, and with this comes a new wave of culinary inspiration.

Now, we don't just have the lamington, pavlova, or peach melba. The after-meal treat isn't simply gelati or fruit salad, but – to borrow a cliché – the possibilities are endless. Melbournians now have the option of purchasing a box of macarons from chefs or cooks who have trained in France. They can buy a box of cupcakes that would not look out of place in New York's famed Magnolia Bakery – and may even taste better than those from there. Or, if it takes their fancy, they could even choose from a three-, four-, or five-course dessert menu to keep their sugar levels up.

Soon, visitors to Melbourne won't just be here for the food. They have come to have their cake and eat it too.

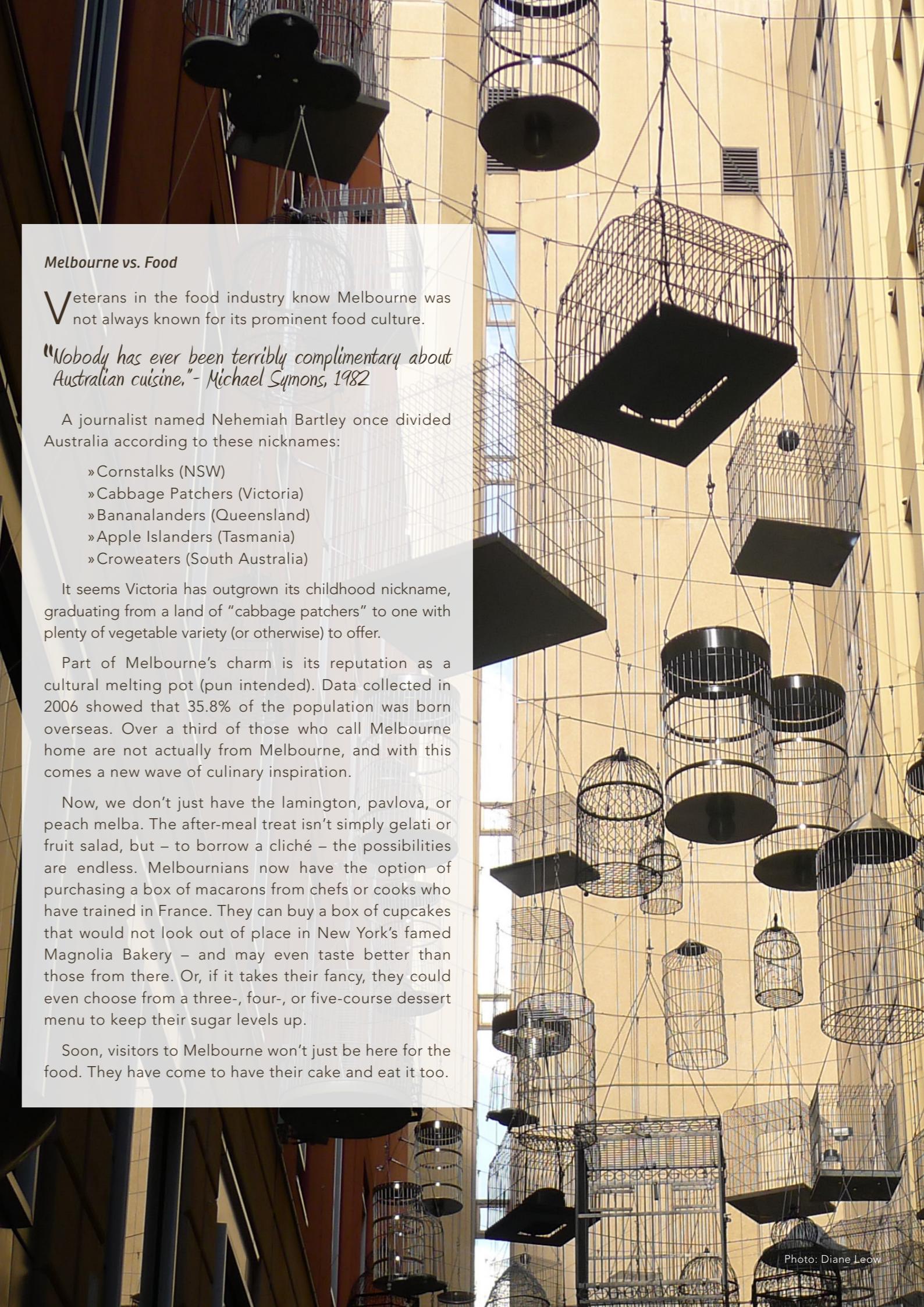


Photo: Diane Leow



Cakes of the Past: Boring. Heavy. Stodgy.

Those are words commonly used to describe Australian dessert of the past: tall, heavy cakes. Stodgy puddings. And most of all, really boring. There was nothing exciting about the final course of a meal other than the promise of some ice-cream, pancakes, or just cake.

There are now an incredible number of bakeries in almost every suburb in inner-city Victoria, offering a variety of delicacies. Just in the city, one can find at least five cupcake bakeries. Macaron stores are aplenty, with La Belle Miette in Hardware Lane as well as Little Feat Macarons on Little Collins Street.

But Melburnians did not always have easy access to a large array of cake. "It was always [pancakes] at Stokers in Ivanhoe," says Peter Ling, owner and pastry chef of Little Feat macarons. "There wasn't really much else."

Famous bakeries of old include Keith's in Brighton, Paterson's in Windsor, and Ferguson's.

Jan tells us a little bit of her childhood, "They did things like vanilla slices and little mushroom tarts and napoleon slices; they were like what I grew up with."

Ferguson's is an institution, having been in business since 1901. Their first specialty was the hot cross bun, before their birthday cakes started gaining popularity. Ferguson's began making a name for themselves by having the best-designed

birthday cakes in Victoria, winning competitions. They soon began branching out by making Aussie beef pies, and are now known for their mudcakes.

Ferguson's enjoys a glowing reputation as one of the longest-standing bakeries in Victoria as they celebrated their 110th anniversary in August 2011.

Keith Cakes in Brighton has been around for over 40 years, and the Crawford family is proud that it remains a family business. Andrew Crawford is the pastry chef and Linda Crawford leads the front of house team.

Unfortunately, Paterson's stopped serving up cakes and sweets in June 2010. Yet another Melburnian institution, they provided many with sweet memories for 94 years before closing its doors.

This is perhaps a sign of the times, where quality and variety becomes more important for the discerning consumer. Jan remembers these bakeries fondly, but notes that people today – herself included – will prefer something other than an old-fashioned cake.

"They might go to somewhere to Keith's and Patterson's for the nostalgic thing... they'd go there occasionally, but I say mainly people are looking for a really nice cake or a really nice dessert," Jan says of the consumer today. "They will go to specialty cake shops."



The Pavlova

Besides stodgy, heavy cakes, Australia is also known for the pavlova and the lamington.

It has been said that the pavlova is not simply a meringue and cream cake. A seemingly simple cloud-like sweet treat somehow epitomises the way history and cooking come together. In describing the pavlova's rise to fame, Michael Symons describes in his book *One Continuous Picnic* that the pavlova's "arrival is a tale of boom versus bust, and Australia versus New Zealand. It involves two converging stories: that of a grand hotel, and that of a small settler who turned into a cook."

Indeed, the pavlova has somewhat become Australia's national dish. Inspired by the Russian ballerina, whose dainty steps echo the varying textures in the actual dish, it represents more than a chef's idea of art translated onto a plate.

Conceived at the end of the Great Depression, its creamy consistency and luxurious fruit topping may seem in great contrast to typical Depression staples such as powdered milk. But it is also a testament to Australia's recovery from the economic slump; the basic ingredients of egg white and whipped cream are congruent with the rapidly growing dairy industry in Western Australia of the time. The passionfruit was an obvious choice to top the pavlova with, as it already made its appearance in cake icings and flavouring of sweets for a while, and was considered a "reasonably sophisticated embellishment".

As for its contentious history with New Zealand, Symons' research uncovered that our neighbouring country did in fact have a pavlova recipe published prior to the invention of the dessert. However, their version of the pavlova excludes an essential ingredient from the Aussie version: cornflour. Where the Australian version asks for one part of whipped cream, the New Zealander version calls for



Pavlova, topped with fresh passionfruit. Photo: Clara Lee

two. Some New Zealander pavlova recipes exclude vinegar, which is yet another quintessential ingredient in the Australian version.

There are also international variations of the Pavlova. Jan says that Tartine's menu offers a roulade – a flat meringue filled with cream and fruit, which is then rolled up – in the summer, and accepts special orders for it as well.

"It's quite a stunning dessert, or for people to have for a 21st birthday cake," Jan says.

Perhaps the true history of the pavlova will be uncovered eventually. But for now, this is what we know: it tastes great, is a huge part of Australian culture, and helped put Australia on the culinary map.



Lamingtons. Photo: Trudy Guo

This unique combination of chocolate and desiccated coconut is indisputably quintessentially Australian.

Dainty Desserts – The Lamington

The 1920s became a time of defining the male and female roles at home in an Australian context. The men took rations to work – food that could last, like salted meats and breads – and drank till closing time at 6 o'clock. Women were encouraged to add to civilisation by serving up sweets at home.

Some of the sweets on the list include lamingtons, cornflake nutties, cream puffs, butterflies, rainbow cake, brandy snaps, ginger nuts and drop scones. (I intend on making this list into a vintage-looking image, complete with this list. Thought it might be interesting visually).

Recipes for lamingtons first appeared in recipe books after the First World War. The chocolate-and-desiccated-coconut-coated cake is most likely named after Baron Lamington, who was governor of Queensland from 1895 to 1901. Another pretty back story to the lamington is that the word could refer to a "lamina" of gold, referring to its apricot jam filling so the left-over cake used in the recipe will remain moist.

Today, lamingtons are still a beloved Aussie sweet. This unique combination of chocolate and desiccated coconut is indisputably quintessentially Australian.

Combining ingredients for a cultural melting pot

Forty years ago, Melbourne was not this smorgasbord of delightful food it is today, as Jan remembers.

"In those days, the chefs were mainly Swiss or Australian, and there was a gap from the Australian chef and somebody who would come in from Europe. Now, it's all changed and a lot of Australian chefs are as good as any European chef, because of their training, their interest and travel overseas, so they've managed to gain more knowledge."

Thereafter, members of the Greek, Turkish, Italian and Lebanese community began moving to Melbourne, bringing with them their wonderful heritage, stories, as well as recipes.

Jan recalls when the Melburnian dessert scene began changing.

"Especially like Greek, Turkish, Lebanese – those sorts of cakes, we never had in Australia. We had some idea [of] petit fours, and different sorts of cakes from France. Then a few French cake shops opened in the early years, then German, then Brunetti's over in Carlton: the Italian. It was all those different cultures that all brought their dessert; it's all very diverse than what we were used to having. So obviously people tried to be like them, and there's a market for them," she explains.

Then the 80s and 90s saw Vietnamese and Asian migrants moving to Melbourne, bringing yet another element to the Australian dessert scene.

Pierrick Boyer especially loves the cultural melting pot that Melbourne has become.

"I was with Vietnamese friends at their house and of course I brought two different cakes... She made a sticky rice with fresh mango and coconut sauce, I love that kind of flavours. I really could eat that every day honestly."

With his experiences and love of Asian flavours, Mr Boyer considers his creations to bear an Asian-Japanese influence. Macaron flavours on display include Yuzu with black sesame; green tea, white tea and more. While Le Petit Gateau's signature cake is a brownie with passionfruit Jelly, his other popular cakes include a green tea white chocolate mousse with a blackcurrant jelly and black sesame biscuit. The use of green tea, black sesame, and yuzu clearly shows Mr Boyer's love for Asian ingredients, bringing two cultures together to create a sweet delight.



Little Feat macarons: What's your little feat? Photo: Diane Leow

Bringing a piece of Europe home

Wanderlust is perhaps the core ingredient of the sudden influx of specialty cake shops in Melbourne.

Paris charms its visitors with the Eiffel tower, the lilting beauty of the French accent, and perhaps the lure of duck confit. For Jan, Peter, and Timna, France captured their love for dessert so much, they longed to bring a piece of Europe home with them.

Jan's fell in love with Europe began 35 years ago, when she and her husband decided to give up their business in Sydney. They did what most would consider to be a crazy decision: packed up their family and possessions, sold their house, and experienced Europe like a local in a campervan for an entire year.

"We bought all our ingredients and we used to cook in our campervan on a camp stove. We used to shop in the markets so you got really lovely fresh produce," she smiles which reminiscing about her travels. "We decided we wanted to put into practice what we'd seen overseas. That's basically what we did."

After her travels, she walked along the streets of Melbourne – Carlton's Lygon Street and St Kilda's Acland Street – trying to recreate her European experience. While it came fairly close to her memories, she decided she wanted something different and opened Tartine.

She emphasises that 30 per cent of what Tartine has to offer is sweet, while the other 70 per cent go toward savoury meals. Jan believes she pioneered a take-home meal system, where customers can walk in, purchase some Italian meatballs and a pudding, place them in the oven and have a restaurant-standard meal in the comfort of their own home. Tartine is the fruit of her European travels; it encapsulates her love of good food and her heart for travel.

One may not necessarily equate Asian banquets with macarons, but that's exactly what Peter Ling, owner and chef of Little Feat macarons, does. After returning from

a macaron course in Paris, he continued working full-time in his family business specialising in eight to ten-course Chinese banquets, while baking on the side.

"I kept practising for about ten months, [practising] twice a week with my sister. We made about three batches about every time we do it, and we just kept refining the process," he says determinedly.

His hard work paid off when Little Feat opened along Little Collins Street late last year. Peter continues to be very stringent about the product he puts in the window, often throwing away batches he deems not good enough. His weathered, calloused hands from baking thousands and thousands of macarons are stained with food dye as he strives towards making the perfect macaron.

On his store's name, "People who bake macarons will know that to achieve the feet is to make the macaron. So it's my take on the word "feat": a small accomplishment."

Similarly, Timna Fried, owner of Sweet Crumble Patisserie in Malvern, was inspired by her travels to Europe and the United States.

Growing up, Timna's household was all about food.

"We're the type of family that talks about the kind of food we're going to have. We discuss recipes, we cook together, we eat together, we talk about what we're going to eat next," Timna says, while imitating the opening and closing of pot lids with her hands. "Yeah, we're big foodies," she beams.

But what she loved most about her dining experience while overseas is the tantalising cupcake and macaron – and the fact that one could have a great deal of variety on a plate.

Timna explains, "Everything's portioned, everything's individual: a finished product. You know, even if it's just this big it's just perfect as it is. That's what I love about desserts."



Delightful little morsels that are as good as those in France. Photo: Diane Leow

A love affair with the kitchen

Mr Boyer believes that the many pastry and dessert chefs in Melbourne bring a passion to this city, adding to the cultural and culinary vibrancy to an already exciting place for food and dessert. Reality television also provides the impetus for home cooks to venture into their kitchens and try something new on a regular basis.

"The pastry direction [here] is really changing from the last few years, and Masterchef is really a big part of that. It is really about bringing passion and, you know, what can be done when possible," he says.

Timna started out as a home cook herself before the conception of Sweet Crumble. She tried a recipe a day from a collection of cookbooks, developing a repertoire and eventually even accepting orders.

"Masterchef, I think, has changed the Australian dessert [scene] forever," she proclaims.

Clara's interest in baking started before Masterchef Australia even hit the screens. Her love affair with the oven began when she was nine, when her mother first bought her Betty Crocker pre-mix packs. After Clara was through with them, she decided to look into what went into a Betty Crocker box.

Fast forward a few years and that curiosity has led her to many a kitchen-adventure here in Melbourne.

While seeking to satisfy her cravings for familiar pastries and buns back home at first, Clara eventually branched out to popular desserts like macarons and entremets, often wowing her friends and family with her patience and ability to combine unassuming ingredients to make something pretty – that tastes nice to boot.

"Melbourne is a very food orientated city," Clara muses. Easy access to fresh ingredients, a plethora of cake and dessert shops and reality television all provide her with fresh perspective each time she bakes.

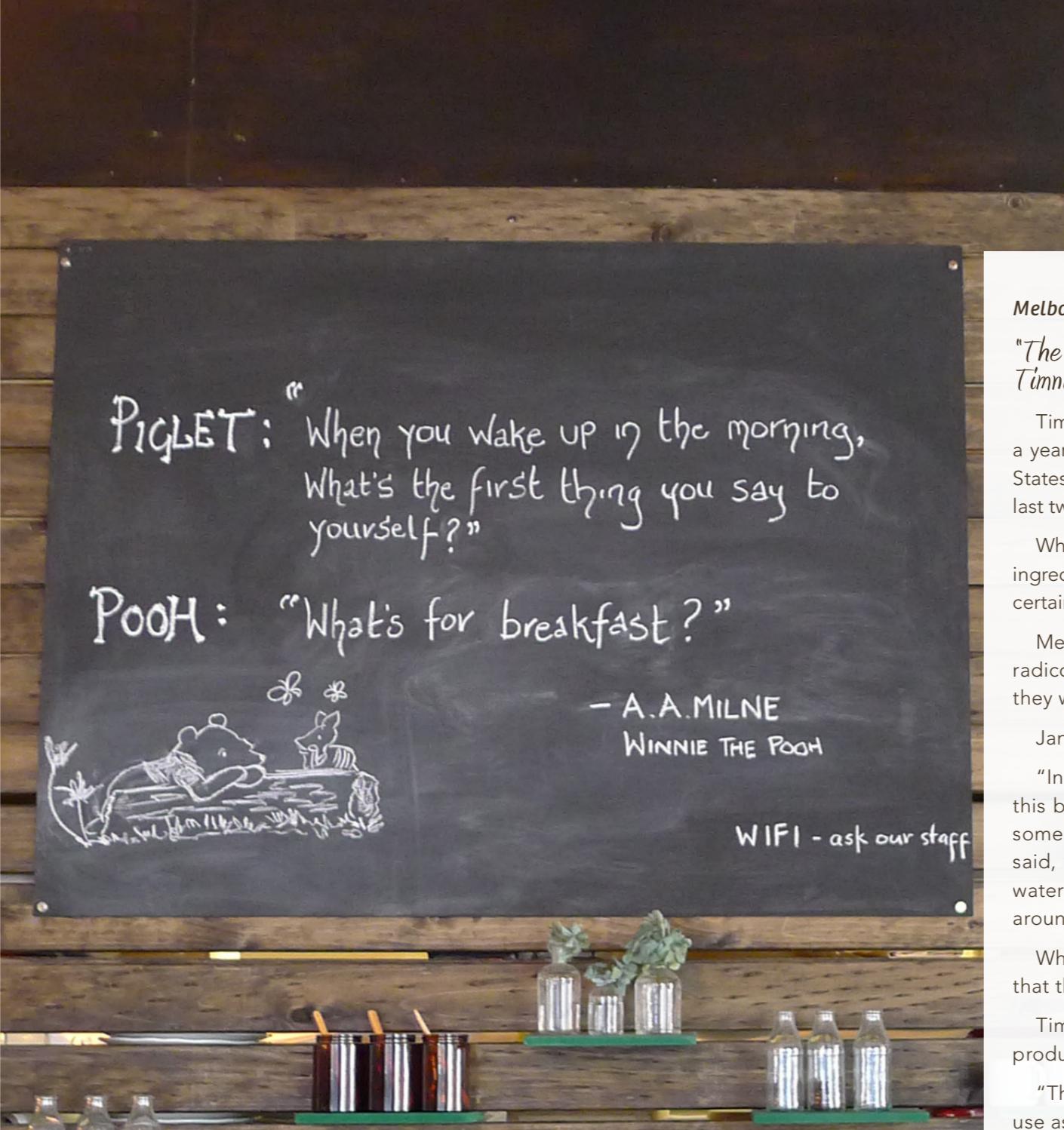


Photo: Diane Leow

Melbourne: A Food Lover's Haven

"The landscape of food and dessert in Australia has changed drastically," Timna nods while sipping on a latte.

Timna's background takes her around the world. She grew up in Kenya, spent a year in Israel for university where she met her husband, moved to the United States for a year before settling in Melbourne, which has been her home for the last twelve years.

What she offers at Sweet Crumble are desserts that are made with kosher ingredients. Some of their products are dairy or gluten-free, so those who have certain product intolerances can still experience the joy only a cupcake can bring.

Melbourne has indeed undergone a food revolution. While rocket and radicchio are two common ingredients found in most supermarkets today, they were considered specialty ingredients three decades ago.

Jan recalls a time when sourcing for certain ingredients was a challenge.

"In those days, I remember going to my wholesale supplier saying, 'I had this beautiful leaf when I was in Italy and it's very peppery. Can you get me some of this? I'd like to use it in my salads.' They'd return themselves and they said, 'It must be watercress.' And I said 'No, it's not watercress; I know what watercress tastes like. It's like long and leafy.' Finally after a lot of messing around, we found out it was rocket. No one knew about rocket [then]."

While the use of rocket is not encouraged in most desserts, it goes to show that the multicultural hub that Melbourne is today did not always exist.

Timna, Mr Boyer and Clara all agree that Victoria now has an abundance of produce, as well as a focus on sourcing ingredients locally.

"The organic, local scene is now more important," Pierrick Boyer says. "I use as [much] local produce as possible."

Clara also agrees that Melbourne is a great place to come up with new desserts, simply because of the wide variety of fresh produce Melbourne has to offer.

(insert graphic of Clara's menu?)

Despite Sweet Crumble's focus on developing products that are kosher, Timna also appreciates the accessibility to ingredients here.

"Melbourne's such a food place, you've got all these wonderful artisan gourmet products that you can get from everywhere."

One product Timna was very excited to find is a freeze-dried fruit powder used in Sweet Crumble's marshmallows and cupcakes.

"We found this amazing company in the Mornington Peninsula, they freeze dry fruit and vegetables... and you get these powders that are so intense in flavour," she exclaims excitedly at her find. Indeed, when you bite into one of Sweet Crumble's raspberry marshmallows, they are pillow-soft with that slight tartness of a raspberry.

Would you like a four-course dessert meal, sir?

The fine-finishing experience has now been extended to dessert as well. When asked if she thought dessert would one day take over main meals, Jan laughed, "As much as you will have them as part of a meal, they're not going to be a main meal substitute. I don't think you'll go and have an entrée macaron and a main something else and then a dessert."

"You'd have to really love dessert to go and do that. That would probably be the next step."

By that standard, Melbourne has moved into the next stage: dessert degustation. Chef Pierre Roelofs of Café Rosamond in Richmond provides a dessert evening every Thursday.

Much like a degustation menu in a fine dining restaurant, there is no menu. Dessert enthusiasts simply turn up at Café Rosamond's doorstep waiting to be surprised by the menu for the night. If they have a particular allergy or an ingredient they simply don't enjoy, Chef Pierre can leave it out.

Café Rosamond does not accept bookings for these dessert evenings, which have proven to be very popular, even garnering a mention in The Age's 2012 Good Food Guide.

Some courses may intrigue – the first course is usually served in a test tube – which others are more familiar. One particular dish served in early May was a wonderfully moist banana bread with fig jam, and pistachio crumb, which was comforting for a cold night. On the other hand, a slightly unconventional dish Chef Pierre served up was a plate with cherry, balsamic, chocolate and mash potato elements. The combination may sound strange (potato in a dessert?) but the flavours balanced out surprisingly well.

Perhaps that is the point of the dessert degustation. It is for those who are looking for something more than what everywhere else has to offer. It is for those who have the patience to wait for plate after plate of sugary goodness; for those who are not afraid to try something previously inconceivable.

Presenting... Australia's Next Top Sweet Treat

Macarons. Cupcakes. Dessert Degustations.

What else is next on the menu for Melbourne?

Pierrick Boyer is straightforward with his answer, "It's hard to tell; I don't have a crystal ball. Therefore from experience I think it will be a classic; something that's been around for a long time that will come back, [with] media exposure that will make people talk about [it]."

Other trends to move toward would be providing consumers with more gluten-free, dairy-free, and even sugar-free options.

While Sweet Crumble already offers such options, Timna believes that there will be more options to choose from in future.

"I think there will be more things that come up and become the "it" dessert... If anything, the direction will go to a more natural, more organic [focus]."

Peter is also of the opinion that the dessert industry in Melbourne will continue to rise.

"Once our economy gets even better, then people will splurge a bit more and spoil themselves a bit more," he says confidently.

Either way, when the next big dessert emerges, it will probably be something irresistible. It will add another dimension to Melbourne's already sophisticated food scene. And Melburnians will probably give in with sweet surrender.

*Much like a degustation menu
in a fine dining restaurant,
there is no menu.*



Give in with sweet surrender. Photo: Diane Leow