




Flour Power



CUPCAKES
FROM
VANILLA
BAKE
SHOP

OPPOSITE:
MACARONS
FROM
PAULETTE
MACARONS



Craving bear claws or
baklava? *Macarons* or
macaroons? A sturdy rye
or an ethereal challah? Here
are L.A.'s top 20 bakeries

by Margot Dougherty

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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PRECIOUS FEW DILEMMAS CAN'T BE ameliorated by the wonders of a croissant pulled straight from a wood-burning oven, a French tart whose glistening fruit is cradled in custard, or even a humble brownie finessed with a pecan-studded caramel top. Bakeries and their offerings make a multipronged advance on our senses: The very existence of a fresh loaf of sublime dark bread brushed with gold signals celebration. Ripping into a few slices slathered with butter makes us just plain happy. ➔

AMANDINE

BEHIND THE register, an aproned baker with a wood paddle swishes sourdough rounds from one part of the stone oven to another. Fruit tarts with Carmen Miranda uppers, gâteaux with chocolate shavings, and loaves of cheesecake marbled with blueberry and strawberry share residence in the refrigerated cases near the entry, but it's the *viennoiserie* on the opposite counter, warm enough to emanate the alchemic perfume of high-quality butter baked with flour and sugar, that demands immediate attention. These croissants are easily the best in the city, their paper-thin outer layers crisp and blistered with that butter, their pliant insides rolled with cinnamon or wrapped around almond paste or chocolate—or both. Their berths, butcher paper-lined baskets, underscore the earthy elegance that defines this sort of French baking. ➔ 12225 Wilshire Blvd., West L.A., 310-979-3211 or amandinecafe.com.

BOULE

THE OFFERINGS have dwindled at this high priestess of patisseries, and we miss the dance of playfulness and precision in founding pastry chef Michelle Myers's initial, larger selection. Much of the space is taken up by chocolates, but the baked goods that remain are top-of-the-line, from the *canelés*, whose

thick, dark crusts give way to silken cake centers with a barely audible crackle, to the gorgeous *macarons* flavored with grapefruit and pink peppercorn, Earl Grey, or chocolate and black olive (a surprisingly coherent combo). ➔ 408 N. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., 310-289-9977 or boule.com. Also at 413 N. Bedford Dr., Beverly Hills, 310-273-4488.

BREADBAR

EACH OF THE hand-shaped loaves at this growing chain of cafés belongs to one of seven families of dough. The raisin-walnut and olive breads are descendants of the "Tour de France" clan, while the *curcuma*-hazelnut is of the "Golden West" tribe. The sweetly aromatic buckwheat *ficelle* (a thin baguette) showcases a grain we rarely see

these days, but it's the more glamorous squid ink-dyed *pain de mie*—a black Pullman-style loaf with thick strokes of gold leaf on its shiny dome—that's the showstopper. ➔ 8718 W. 3rd St., L.A., 310-205-0124 or breadbar.net. Also at 602 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica, 310-395-9490, and Westfield Century City, 10250 Santa Monica Blvd., Century City, 310-277-3770.

CAKE HOUSE

PART PATISSERIE (check out the crepe layer cake oozing whipped cream and berries), part Korean bakery, Cake House has a stultifying number of breads, neatly wrapped in cellophane and displayed on tables that span the width of the shop. Pastes made from chestnuts and beans are hidden in soft rolls,

sweet cheese lines a Danish, and coffee scents a coffee cake (how did we not think of that before?). The steamed green tea bun, an individual-size cloud of bread with a sprinkling of peas and a dab of pea paste, flirts with sweetness before dissolving on the tongue.

➔ Koreatown Galleria, 3250 W. Olympic Blvd., Koreatown, 323-766-0404. Also at 11301 Olympic Blvd., West L.A., 310-914-0404.

DIAMOND

THIS FAIRFAX cornerstone hasn't changed much in its 65 years, and neither have the recipes—why mess with perfection? Friday and holiday lines are long as the observant and the discriminating wrestle over possibilities: chocolate-laden *babkas*, buttery cinnamon *rugelach* (twisted rather than rolled, with a croissant-like crispness), coffee cakes, cheesecakes, jam-rich palm-size *hammentaschen*. Diamond's fluffy and regal challah, which can be employed for transcendent French toast, may well be the best in town. A slight woman named Ruth has been behind the counter for 42 years. She'll ask how you want your pumpernickel or (excellent) double-corn rye sliced—medium thin or medium—and as she guides the bread through the machine's humming jaws, it may occur to you that Diamond is the antithesis of L.A.'s image and the quintessence of its soul. ➔ 335 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A., 323-655-0534.

EMIL'S SWISS PASTRY

IN 2000, Isabelle Champigneulle, who is French, and her husband, pastry chef Christian Kaufmann, who is Austrian, bought Emil's Swiss Pastry. Perfect, says Champigneulle, because "Switzerland is between France and Austria." A few months ago they moved to a spanking-new shop that provides a peppier vantage point for their pan-European confections: *parisienne* cakes with chocolate whipped cream layers, sugar-dusted napoleons, almond paste-filled bear claws (often gone before noon), apple-crammed strudels. Emil's French-style fruit tarts combine puff pastry, vanilla custard, and a collage of fruit, but our



BOULE

FOOD STYLIST: LIESL MAGGIORE. PHOTO (THIS PAGE): COURTESY BOULE



CRANBERRY-WALNUT
BREAD FROM EURO PANE

THE TWENTY BEST BAKERIES

favorite, the Swiss version, with a short crust and plum, pear, or apricot slices in a mattress of marzipan, is exquisite. » 11551 Santa Monica Blvd., West LA, 310-473-6999 or emilisswisspastry.com.

EURO PANE

SUMI CHANG'S café is a neighborhood focal point that's seldom without a stroller or two parked tableside while their operators ogle the possibilities. Chocolate croissant? Pear cake heavy with fruit, brown sugar, and butter? Dense, cupcake-shaped brownie? Ahhh, maybe almond toast: a fat slice of brioche moistened with lavender, almond extract, and marzipan and topped with a raft of sliced almonds. Chang's experience at La Brea Bakery makes itself evident in breads like the cranberry-walnut loaf. "It's great with cheese," she says, popping one into a bag. Perhaps. But the yeasty nut-and-fruit medley really doesn't need any company. » 950 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, 626-577-1828.

JIN PATISSERIE

THERE'S GENERALLY a moment of pause when a ribbon-tied Jin gift box is presented for the first time: It somehow seems brutish to dig into Kristy Choo's elegant confections. Should they just be shel-lacked and put on a mantel? Nah. Her whimsically adorned green tea

cake (green tea *bavarois* with a heart of red bean paste rising from green tea sponge) is, like her Oriental, a cocoa-sprinkled assembly of chocolate mousse, coconut cream, praline paste, and roasted almonds, conceived with immediate extinction in mind. Grab a bag of sesame seed-trilled chocolate bark, wafer

thin, before you go. » 1202 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice, 310-399-8801 or jinpatisserie.com. Also at Inter-Continental Los Angeles Century City, 2151 Avenue of the Stars, Century City, 310-789-6485.

JOAN'S ON THIRD

THE SHOP'S expansion allowed for the addition of more baked goods to Joan's tony larder. As much as we admire, and consume, the Cloud cupcakes whose chocolate-dipped marshmallow icing reaches dizzying elevations, we're newly infatuated with the Betty Crocker-style cakes, whose precise layers are mortared with butter cream frosting. But the pantry's true marvel, its confectionery belly dancer, is the hazelnut-meringue cake with a midriff of quivery apricot whipped cream, a barely stable arrangement showered with powdered sugar. » 8350 W. 3rd St., L.A., 323-655-2285 or joansonthird.com.

LA BREA BAKERY

THE MORE THAN 100 styles of rustic breads at L.A.'s iconic bakery—shaped into rounds, baguettes, sandwich loaves, and rolls, suffused with rye or rosemary, studded with nuts, olives, or raisins, or blanketed in Parmesan—share the heritage of a wild-grape-fed starter yeast developed by Nancy Silverton in 1989. Silverton, co-owner of Mozza, sold the bakery and its industrial kitchens, but she keeps a hand in the old-world shop, whose shelves radiate her genius for making premium artisanal food seem essential rather than indulgent. Pignoli, macaroons, and almond cookies that seem born of serious stock, Italian candies and fruit pastes, conspire with a knockout twice-baked sour cherry brioche, accented with marzipan and orange water, to keep the screen door swinging all day long. » 624 S. La Brea Ave., L.A., 323-939-6813 or labrebakery.com.



LA BREA BAKERY



JIN PATISSERIE

LA PROVENCE PÂTISSERIE

CROISSANTS (with fillings of chocolate, almond, and Nutella, no less), tarts, scones, muffins, and macarons (chocolate, pistachio, caramel *fleur de sel*) draw a breakfast and coffee-with-a-snack crowd to the distressed wood tables at this mini-mall café, and with good reason. But the dessert that blew us away, that made us rethink the autumnal gourd with a profound and precedent-shattering awareness, was the pumpkin pie with chocolate ganache, a partnership that makes a debutante out of a deadweight dolt. Imagine a pumpkin-redolent mousse set in a puff pastry crust that's been cushioned with a schmear of chocolate. True, the pie's seasonal, but it's also exceptional, and when Thanksgiving rolls back around, you're going to want it. » 8950 W. Olympic Blvd., Beverly Hills, 310-888-8833 or laprovencecafe.com.

PAULETTE MACARONS

THE COLUMNS of stunning multi-colored macarons arranged along a tiered, gleaming white shelf give this place the look of a closet museum. Pastry chef Christophe Michalak's *premier cru* models are more pillowy than most, and he lays his ganache filling with a generous hand. The purity and range of the flavors, from Madagascars vanilla to Colombian coffee to "sweet wedding almond," as well as the cheerful gift boxes, make this L.A.'s macaron destination. » 9466 Charleville Blvd., Beverly Hills, 310-275-0023 or paulettemacarons.com.

PLATINE

JAMIE CANTOR started her L.A. baking company after working for two years at the French Laundry in Napa. Her new retail space opens this month, but long-standing private and commercial clients know all about her custom-shaped iced sugar cookies, caramel-and-nut-topped brownies, bite-size lemon meringue grahams, baby *pots de crème*, and, well, the list goes on. Cantor's creations, many of which are lilliputian versions of favorite hits, are the work of a sophisticated

talent in the service of simple pleasures. » 10850 Washington Blvd., Culver City, 310-559-9933 or platinecookies.com.

PORTO'S BAKERY

GUAVA HAS YET to make inroads in American cuisine (although the trees grow well in L.A.), but its jam is elemental in Latin American pastries. Porto's, the 38-year-old family-owned Cuban restaurant and bakery, showcases the fruit in crescent-shaped empanadas, sugar-sprinkled turnovers, and highly touted pies. The *postres* deserve all the message board praise they receive, but they aren't the only sirens here. We're suckers for the elephant ears, their myriad layers pressed into a sweet, crunchy substantive-

ness, and for the luminous *coquitos en almibar*—Ping-Pong balls of coconut paste encased in a golden candied shell. The shortbread kisses, filled with *dulce de leche*, melt on impact. » 315 N. Brand Blvd., Glendale, 818-956-5996 or portosbakery.com. Also at 3614 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank, 818-846-9100.

RÖCKENWAGNER BAKERY

NOBODY IN TOWN tops Hans Röckenwagner when it comes to pretzel bread. The German-born chef twists it traditionally, weaves it with cheese and bacon, minimizes it in baby poufs (which lend themselves to a quick nosh of a sandwich), and maximizes it with 14-inch family-friendly *bâtards*. These are confident



3 SQUARE CAFÉ + BAKERY

loaves, with burnished dark brown exteriors just thick enough to protect the soft white bread within. » 12835 Washington Blvd., L.A., 310-578-8171 or rockenwagner.com. Also at 311 Arizona Ave., Santa Monica, 310-394-4267, and 3 Square Café + Bakery, 1121 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice, 310-399-6504.

Single Minded

WHEN JUST ONE DESSERT MEANS BUSINESS

Beard Papa's

The name, the cartoon logo, the sheer silliness of a chain (started in Japan) dedicated to palm-size cream puffs—what's left to do but open wide? The original *choux* pastry coddling a dollop of cold vanilla cream still trumps the gussied-up flavors, but go ahead and have your cookie-crust or chocolate-covered puff loaded with chocolate pastry cream. Dusted with powdered sugar, these are a kick. » For locations in Southern California, go to beardpapas.com.

Fulfilled

Japan's *imagawa-yaki* are fat little pancakes cooked in what look like muffin cups and stuffed at the last moment with assorted fixings. At Fulfilled, L.A. native Susumu Tsuchihashi puts his *Ima* through the fusion filter, serving them with the traditional *azuki* bean filling as well as with banana and Nutella or goat cheese, fig, and honey. The *azuki*-green tea latte is stellar. » 9405 S. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, 310-860-0776 or fulfilledpastries.com.

Sprinkles Cupcakes

Exec pastry chef-owner Candace Nelson set off the cupcake wackiness and still turns out the best. When our hankering for the frosted ones surfaces, this is where we go. Why? The thoughtful (as opposed to crazy) flavor combos, whether a classic Madagascars bourbon-vanilla cake with chocolate-cream cheese icing or a spiced *chai* cake with vanilla-chai. Love the Web site, too. » 9635 S. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, 310-274-8765 or sprinklescupcakes.com.

Xooro

It's not just the spelling of *churro* that got a makeover in what looks to be the first shop in a chain. Spain's doughnut, tube shaped and ridged, gets piped out here in chocolate as well as in the traditional vanilla. Fried in rice oil, which creates a light but crunchy crust, it's filled and then rolled in chocolate, nuts, or coconut, shot through with Nutella or pastry cream, and popped into nifty canisters for safe traveling. » 125 Broadway, Santa Monica, 310-260-2919 or xooro.com. ♥



SUSINA

SARKIS PASTRY

GLENDALÉ'S FIRST Armenian pastry shop, which opened in 1983, sells baklava in every guise: *bourma* with glistening whole pistachios, shredded *kataifi* filled with walnuts, finger baklava rolled around ground cashews. The display cases span the Middle East with *zulumia* (squiggles of deep-fried dough) and yards of cookies: walnut-stuffed *nazuk*, macaroons, tahini. Less-mainstream specialties include a transporting *asht-sarayan*, a layered

bread pudding lined with the rose water-scented pastry cream called *ashta* and smothered with crushed pistachios, and *halawet el jibn*, pinwheels of sweet cheese and ashta drizzled with syrup. » 1111 S. Glendale Ave., Glendale, 818-956-6636 or sarkispastry.com. Also at 1776 E. Washington Blvd., Pasadena, 626-398-3999.

THE SENSITIVE BAKER

THE DESCRIPTION sounds oxymoronic, if not deceitful: a rich, chocolatey, eyes-involuntarily-close-as-you-chew-it brownie with a backdraft of superior cocoa that's wheat free, dairy free, kosher, and pareve. Sandee Hier's brownies, like her bread sticks, bagels, muffins, cookies, and pizza (made with cashew "cheese"), never hint at the dietary restrictions considered in their creation (see sidebar below). The bagels have that good bagel chewiness, garlic wafts from the

hand-shaped bread sticks, and it seems impossible that butter isn't the snickerdoodles' primary ingredient. Although the kitchen is geared to restore indulgence to the diets of those who are lactose or gluten intolerant, nothing emerges from its ovens that wouldn't hold its own in a crowd of cream-filled, wheat-laden alternatives. » 10836½ Washington Blvd., Culver City, 310-815-1800 or the-sensitive-baker.com.

SUSINA BAKERY

JENNA TURNER went through the wringer after she opened her shop, which she originally called Sugar-Plum Bakery, in 2001. A lawsuit brought by a similarly named outfit forced a change. She rebranded as Susina (new signage, new packaging), just as her pastry chef decamped for San Francisco. But Turner stuck with and triumphed in her plan for a European-style café that offered hearty breakfast pastries alongside elegant glazed fruit

tarts, apple and pear *tartins*, layer cakes, and fairy-size cookies, some of them no larger than buttons. Nothing, though, beats the caloric insouciance and textural wonder of Susina's individual banana cream pies, glorious whipped paeans to cholesterol set in chocolate-lined short-crust shells. » 7122 Beverly Blvd., L.A., 323-934-7900 or susinabakery.com.

SWEET LADY JANE

GRANTED, WE'VE heard our share of complaints about indifferent service from attitudinal staff, but the fact remains that Jane Lockhart's kitchen puts out some of the best cakes around. Triple Berry, her strawberry shortcake-inspired layer cake lathered with whipped cream and filled with blackberries, raspberries, and strawberries (an ideal wedding confection) may be the best known. But the shelves are filled with qualified competition: The Princess Cake, three butter sponge layers limned with pastry cream and raspberry preserves and enclosed in a Wedgwood green marzipan shell, ranks highest on our list. » 8360 Melrose Ave., L.A., 323-653-7145 or sweetladyjane.com.

VANILLA BAKE SHOP

THE CUPCAKE situation has gotten out of hand. Long queues, bitter rivalries, impassioned discussions about icing-to-cake ratios, the inexplicable veneration of red velvet (it's *dye*, for crying out loud). Still, it's hard not to get a little giddy when beholding this tiny affair's meticulously organized rows of mini- and full-size cupcakes: Meyer lemon and raspberry, toasted coconut, Mom's Birthday Cake (moist yellow cake, milk chocolate icing). Their little heads shimmer, pastel sugar crystals refracting infinitesimal shards of light from swirled frosting dos. Along with mod layer cakes that seem lathe finished—not a scintilla of icing breaking formation—VBS makes elfin renditions of icebox desserts (key lime or pumpkin pie, tiramisu, Dirt Cake) packed into shooter cups harboring itty-bitty spoons. » 512 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, 310-458-6644 or vanillabakeshop.com.

Free for All

NO GLUTEN, NO DAIRY, BUT TONS OF TASTE

SANDEE HIER WAS "MRS. DUNCAN Hines," she says, until her husband and three of their four children turned out to be sensitive to gluten, the protein in many grains that can trigger intestinal and neurological complications. In 2007, she opened the Sensitive Baker, a Culver City shop dedicated to gluten- and dairy-free breads and sweets.

Who comes to your shop? We get people who have MS, lupus, IBS [irritable bowel syndrome], celiac disease [a disorder in which gluten is toxic]. Many people with digestive disorders and nerve disorders go off gluten and casein—the protein in cow's milk—and it's popular to put autistic children on a gluten- and casein-free diet.

What sorts of substitutes do you use for wheat flour? We use rice flour and some starches to lighten it up—tapioca starch,

potato starch, and occasionally cornstarch, but a lot of people are sensitive to corn, too.

What replaces the gluten to keep your bread and bagels acting like bread and bagels? One item will have egg; one will have a little soy; a lot of things have almond meal. If someone's allergic to nuts, we'll say, "Here, have this, made with egg." If they're allergic to eggs, we'll say, "Have this, made with soy." People usually don't come in with just a gluten allergy. It's usually gluten in conjunction with something else.

What's the biggest seller? Everyone loves the brownies, and bread sticks are really popular, even with wheat eaters. But for gluten people—forget the brownies. They'll say, "Bread! I haven't had bread in five years!" Tears roll down their face. ♥



● CARAMEL-TOPPED BROWNIES FROM PLATINE