

Created by: Debra C. Argen

Chef Francois Payard makes French Pastry at New York Culinary Experience

Baking is both a science and an art; science in that it requires precise measurements to achieve consistent results, and an art, as it offers great creativity when it comes to design. With design as my muse, I took an excellent class with [Chef François Payard](#) of [Payard, François Payard Bakery, Inc.](#) and [FC Chocolate Bar](#) in **New York**, as part of the **New York Culinary Experience** hosted by [New York magazine](#) and [The International Culinary Center](#) to learn to bake and decorate to pastry-shop quality standards.

When it comes to the art of French pastry, to comment that Chef François Payard is inspired would be an understatement. A third-generation French pastry chef born in Nice, France, his many career achievements include the James Beard Foundation's "Pastry Chef of the Year" 1995, "Pastry Chef of the Year" 1998 by Bon Appétit Food & Entertainment, and a recipient of The French Government's prestigious "Ordre du Mérite Agricole" (Medal of Honor) 2004. In 2006, he became a member of Relais Desserts International, a professional association of the 85 Best Pastry Chefs in the World, and in 2010 received the Dom Pérignon Award of Excellence, which recognizes outstanding leadership, character, and work ethic in the hospitality industry.

He is a working chef who owns New York City based [Payard, François Payard Bakery, Inc.](#), and [FC Chocolate Bar](#), and [Payard Las Vegas at Caesars Palace](#), and is also a published cookbook author. He is a passionate chef who knows what it means to work hard every day and continue to hone and develop his craft.

For 2 hours and 15 minutes on April 28, 2012, I, along with approximately 23 other students, learned how to make the most famous French cookie, the chocolate macaron, which is a favorite of mine. I also learned to make and decorate an impressive chocolate cake decorated with macarons and fanciful hand-molded chocolate.



Chef Payard and Class

The students in the multi-generational class each had a different reason for attending, one young girl wanted to become a chocolatier and this was her first investment in her culinary development. In my team, Sonia Gherawo, a nurse by profession, loves to bake and took the class as a way of furthering her passion, and for Adam Hirsch and Sharon Feder, they took the class as a way of bonding. This was true for many others in the class, including mothers and daughters, a group of brothers, or other family members or friends who took the class as a way to learn, as well as create a lasting memory together. For me, it was about learning pastry art from a master chef.

Chef François Payard provided us with step-by-step instructions and an explanation for why each task was necessary so that we could easily replicate his results once we arrived back home. His teaching style was to first demonstrate, and then teach the class how to make it themselves. He explained in his charming, thick French-accented English, "It is not about what I can make, but rather what you can make when you leave." This is a great philosophy for a teacher.

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He explained that the secret to making macarons, those delicious sandwiched cookies, is the sugar. The cooked sugar must reach the perfect temperature in order for the recipe to work. Although you can of course, use a thermometer to test the temperature of the sugar, he wanted us to learn to do it as he did from his grandfather, by feeling it.

With an aluminum bowl filled with ice and water sitting next to the pan of boiling sugar, he taught us the art of submerging our fingers in ice water and then quickly putting them in the boiling sugar, and then putting them immediately back in the ice water. If he could form a soft sugar ball from the sugar on his fingers, the sugar was at the perfect temperature. If not, it needed to cook a bit longer, and then he would check it again using the dipping method.

I know this method may seem difficult, or perhaps even sound dangerous, however, with Chef Payard or one of the International Culinary Center chefs, Georges Parraud or Alain V. De Coster standing beside us, I learned that it was actually quite easy, and not as scary as it might seem. Of course, I graciously allowed my classmate Adam Hirsch to try this method before I took my turn. When Adam had not burned his fingers, despite going several times back and forth between the sugar and the ice water, I eagerly took my turn to try it.



Chef Georges Parraud

Chef Alain V. De Coster

Placing my very cold and wet fingers into the sugar for only a few seconds, and then placing my fingers back in the ice water, I am pleased to report that my fingers were in the same condition as before I attempted this magic act, and gradually the sugar did indeed form a soft ball.

Another secret I learned is that the almond flour needs to be dry. Since almond flour is made from ground

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almonds, the flour can sometimes get a bit moist from the oil in the nuts. If the flour seems a bit moist, you can dry it out in a warm oven before you use it for better results.



Chef Payard Piping the Macarons

As the macarons are sandwiched together, they must be the same size. We learned how to fill a plastic pastry bag fitted with a metal tip, with the mixture and pipe it onto parchment paper lined baking sheets or on silicone mats. If you like, you can trace circles on the parchment paper, and then turn the paper over, and pipe the mixture in the center of each of the circles.

Once you get the hang of controlling the amount you are piping, it is easy. When you have filled your baking sheet, Chef Payard explained that you rap the baking sheet on the counter to level the macarons and eliminate any peaks made when piping. The step next is letting let the macarons dry for about 15 minutes or until a skin forms, before baking them.



Macarons Waiting to be Baked

When the macarons are baked and cool, you fill them by using a plastic pastry bag fitted with a metal trip and filled with chocolate ganache. Pipe a small amount of filling onto a macaron, top it with another macaron, and lightly press the two cookies together.

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Filling the Macarons

Unfortunately, Chef Payard told us that unlike other cookies where you get to eat them immediately after you finish making them, macarons are best if they rest in the refrigerator for 24 hours after filling them.

The next day, remove the macarons from the refrigerator and let them sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving. Now, that I have learned the secret to making and of course, eating, macarons, I will definitely be adding them to my baking repertoire to dazzle my family and friends.



Sharon Feder, Adam Hirsch, Debra Argen

Chef Georges Parraud, and Sonia Gheerow

I also learned the secret of perfectly glazing a cake. You must use enough glaze to completely cover the cake, use a spatula larger than the width of the cake, and apply even pressure on the spatula as you work quickly back and forth to spread the glaze, to create a very smooth and professional look.

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Chef Payard Glazing a Cake

What I loved best about the class though, was learning the techniques to create impressive chocolate decorations. You need a very cold piece of marble to work the warm chocolate, and you need to be able to work quickly before the chocolate sets and becomes hard.



Spreading the Chocolate

Chef Payard recommended purchasing a thick piece of marble slab from Home Depot, and cleaning it. Place the marble slab in the freezer until it is very cold. Melt the chocolate and then quickly spread it onto the marble with a metal spatula in smooth motions to create a circle, then as the chocolate just starts to set, use the edge of your spatula to lift the chocolate circle up from the marble. Working quickly, gently shape the chocolate and *voilà*, you have a very interesting decoration for your cake.

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Lifting the Chocolate

He also showed us how we could put the melted chocolate in a plastic pastry bag and pipe the chocolate onto the cold marble, to create an open weave design, and lift it with the spatula, and shape it into a design, as well as how to create chocolate ribbons or curls.



Forming Chocolate into Decoration

To finish decorating our glazed cake, Chef Payard instructed us to put a few macarons around the side, place our chocolate decoration on top of the cake, and then lightly dust it with confectionary sugar, like he had done with his cake.

I got a little overzealous in decorating my cake with macarons, to which Chef Payard shook his head, and told me that I had too many on my cake. "*A/ors*" he said, "look at my design; see there is a space between the macarons. On your cake, you put too many, there is no space."

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Debra's Glazed Cake with Macarons

Feeling like Lucille Ball in the candy factory episode on television, I quickly remedied my design when he turned his head and I removed a few of the macarons from my cake, popped them into my mouth, ate them with great pleasure, and then my cake was ready. I placed my hand molded chocolate decoration on top of the cake, gave it light dusting with the confectionary sugar, and I thought that it was gorgeous.

I held up my cake for Chef Payard to check, and I smiled broadly with pride when he approved. He also teased me that I had made my chocolate decoration so high and that it would not fit in the Payard pastry box for me to take it home. *Alors*, like many things I learned that day from Chef Payard, that too, was correctible, he made two slits in the front lid of the box to keep the box from closing completely, and my cake fit in perfectly for me to take home and impress my family and friends with my creation.



Chef Payard and Debra with Her Cake

Having the opportunity to work alongside and learn the art and science of baking French pastry with a true master, Chef François Payard, was indeed an incredible experience, a memory that I will long cherish, and will fondly remember each time that I make one of his recipes.

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Proud Debra Taking her Cake Home!

Read the [Chefs' Recipes](#) section where **Chef François Payard** graciously shares his recipes for Chocolate Macarons, and Charlie's Chocolate Pudding Cake.

Read about other classes in the [Gastronomy](#) section and interviews and recipes from the other classes in the [Chefs' Recipes](#) section.

Visit **Luxury Experience's Facebook** page to listen to interviews with the chefs and see more photos from the event. www.Facebook.com/luxuryexperience

To attend the **New York Culinary Experience 2013**, please visit the **New York magazine** website: www.NYmag.com/nyce.

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