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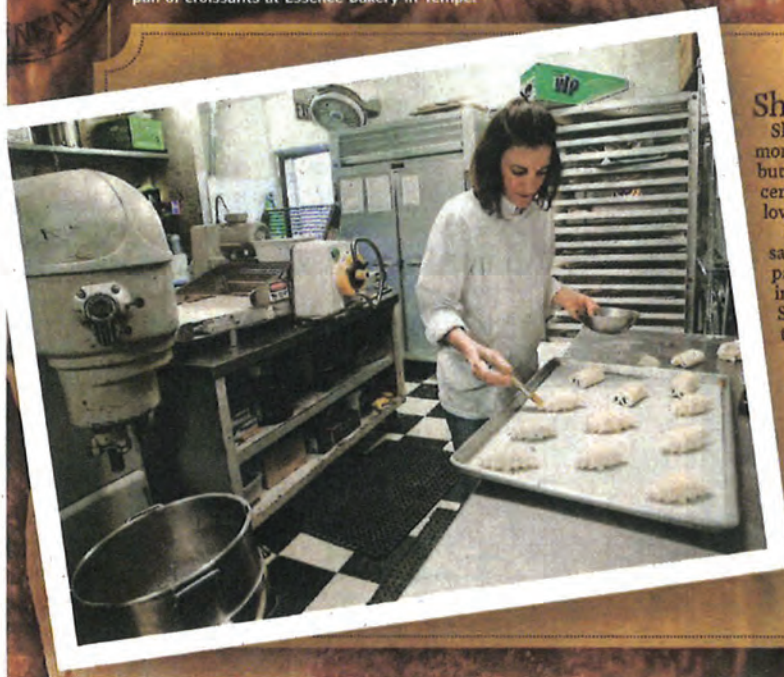
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SECTION E

FRANCOPHILE SUMMONS FRENCH
CROISSANT SAVANT FOR GUIDANCE,
BRINGS BUTTERY SLICE OF
PARIS TO ARIZONA

of Layers LOVE

Owner Eugenia Theodosopoulos prepares a pan of croissants at Essence Bakery in Tempe.



By Jaimee Rose | THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

She wanted Phoenix to taste like Paris.

She wanted to pull a batch of croissants from the oven each morning and set them on the counter in her bakery, a beacon of butter and flour. She wanted the shattering crust, the collapsing center — memories of all those French breakfasts spent falling in love with her husband, sharing croissants at a cafe.

In Paris, Eugenia Theodosopoulos helped cater parties at Versailles. She learned French at the Sorbonne. She polished her pastry skills at Ecole Lenôtre, which would be like hanging out in the invention room at Apple if you wanted to be an engineer. She practiced macarons, napoleons, mille-feuille. It felt like a thousand layers of heaven.

But her Parisian husband wanted to move to Arizona.

They did.

She still loves him.

And so, croissants.

She needed them — these ethereal ghosts so difficult to make that few American pastry chefs have succeeded.

"My husband tells me there's the easy path and the hard path, and I always choose the hard path," says Theodosopoulos, 45. Sometimes, she talks while wielding a 10-inch chef's knife, leaning close to whisper, "You have to be a bit crazy to be in this business."

See **CROISSANTS** Page E4

Francophile learns to make perfe

CROISSANTS

Continued from E1

She learned to bake in her family's Ohio diner. At 13, she was in charge of at least 25 daily pies. These days she finishes her 6 a.m.-3 p.m. jag at her bakery, then goes to the gym to spin like a banshee. After, at home, she cooks dinner. Every night.

"I didn't want to make mediocre croissants," she says. "I wanted to make croissants like you have in Paris."

Croissants require the perfect (French-style) flour, the perfect (French) butter and even a mixing bowl that's cooled just so. If the milk is a half-degree too warm, or if the dough stays in the fridge five minutes too long, or if it's 110 degrees outside in Arizona, the entire enterprise can upend.

To achieve them without the implied presence of the Eiffel Tower and zinc rooftops would be a geographic feat. But in a Tempe strip mall where pizza and Ethiopian cuisine keep company, Greek-American Theodosopoulos is feeding Arizonans 200 perfect pieces of Paris each day: flaky, glorious buttergasm that require three flours, Celsius-Fahrenheit mastery and a phone call to an African king. Continental wrangling, indeed.

Crowns

His majesty was offered an apology. The French pastry savant he'd hired to consult on treats for the castle had to cancel and was coming to Essence Bakery in Arizona instead to teach his friend Eugenia to make croissants. (Please understand, the African monarch cannot be identified because one never wants to tick off a king.) Jean-Louis Clément, 62, is the pastry god that star chefs Joel Robuchon and Alain Ducasse call when they need help with a crust. An instructor at the École Lenôtre, Clément is invited all over the world to share his prowess at a rate of about \$2,000 per day. Even the French presidential palace requests him.

He is one of 32 living pastry chefs who have achieved the M.O.F. designation, which stands for Meilleur Ouvrier de France, or "best craftsman." Since pastry is religion in France, this also translates as king of the world. The competition is held every three years, and the chefs prepare

for all 1,095 days.

"There could be 500 contenders," Theodosopoulos says, "and sometimes, nobody is good enough to win."

"He's a really, really big deal."

She called Clément, promising the Grand Canyon. He came for a week in January, promising the croissants he baked at Lenôtre in Paris. She had been a student, then a translator, then a friend. He came for free.

"French people, once you're friends," Theodosopoulos says, "they never let you go."

And Theodosopoulos? Once you've talked to her for 10 minutes, you want the option of talking to her for years.

("My family," says Gilles Combes, Theodosopoulos' husband, "likes her better than they do me.")

On the first day, Clément arrived in Theodosopoulos' compact kitchen with his notebooks, his thermometer and his chef's coat. Flour and magic hung in the air. He speaks only French. Theodosopoulos translated into English and Spanish for her staff: "Bonjour, enchanté."

They could see on her face that this was something special. Her friend was Paris, in Arizona.

French mix

Together, Clément and Theodosopoulos went over the recipe: butter, flour, salt, yeast, water, sugar, milk. Seven ingredients, but also air and time, pressure and temperature, and 100 ways to go wrong.

"The croissant is the most difficult sweet dough you can make," says Clément, through a translator.

The secret ingredient "is how you make them," Theodosopoulos says. "I needed him for all the technique. I needed him to help me devise strategies" for what to do in the summer when the kitchen is 90-plus degrees, she says.

Has she ever made croissants before?

Yes, she says, in Paris, "I made them with him."

Theodosopoulos showed her teacher the butters she'd found: one imported from Normandy, and a coup at 84 percent butterfat. The other was 83 percent fat. Conventional American butter, at 80 percent, has enough extra water in it to ruin a croissant entirely.

Then she showed him her bread flours. French flour is something different, Theodosopoulos says, and she couldn't replicate it on her own.



COURTESY OF EUGENIA THEODOSOPOULOS

Eugenia Theodosopoulos with friend and French pastry chef Jean-Louis Clément.

and hamburgers appeared on menus at croissanteries. The croissant was how the French fought back.

"The previously plain, buttery roll was split open lengthwise and garnished, sandwich fashion, with every imaginable filling from ham to chestnut cream," the "Oxford" reports. "The spread of these establishments, in which plain croissants were sold as well, strengthened the French attachment to what is considered a national food."

Let us imagine the indignation when, in the '80s, Burger King brought the Croissant-wich to France.

Let us witness Jean-Louis Clément's consternation when Theodosopoulos' husband took him to Costco and showed him the croissants sold in bulk, squished together in a plastic case. "Oh, mon Dieu," Clément exclaimed.

Buttergasm indeed

On the morning of day two, Clément pulled a square of dough from the fridge and assembled the staff.

"Touch it, touch it," the maestro exclaimed in French, grabbing hands and pulling them with happy eyes toward the croissant dough. "Un cousin d'amour," he purred — a love cushion.

It was time to make the layers. The success of a croissant rests upon dichotomy: a deep, caramelized, shattering shell that enfolds tunnels of air. This means butter ... more butter ... cold butter that melts in a hot oven, creates steam and works with the yeast to puff dough into flaky, layered bliss.

First, Clément sent the chilled love cushion through the sheeting machine. If the dough was too cold, it would split on the edges, and Theodosopoulos learned to thaw the edges for a second with her hand.

More butter came next, smeared onto the dough.

Clément showed Theodosopoulos how to fold the dough into precise thirds, sandwiching the butter between. If the butter wasn't cold enough, it would ooze when they put the dough through the sheeting machine. If the dough got too warm, it would melt the butter.

Clément put his hands into her flour bins, rubbing the powder between his fingers, deciding instantly on a mixture of three.

"He just knew," she says. "He just touched them and he said, 'We're going to try this, and then we're going to try this — and this one's going to be better.'"

The only difference between the first dough he planned and the second: that 1 percent of fat in the two butters.

He walked Theodosopoulos through the steps, and "the process was beautiful," she says, "the starter dough, the way (we) put the flours together — you could tell it was going to be a beautiful product."

He took the temperature of the room, the butter, the water, the milk and even the flours. Theodosopoulos wrote the figures down.

"I wrote everything down," she says.

They mixed salt and sugar and milk. They placed a cauldron-size bowl on a scale and weighed things into it: one of the bread flours, water, brewer's yeast. Theodosopoulos whisked it into a poolish, or starter dough, exhausting every muscle in her right arm. ("This is when you realize that going to the gym helps a lot," she says.)

They scraped the bowl down, placed it on a low table, sprinkled the second kind of flour over it and waited.

Scientific method

After each step, Clément would stop, hold up his index finger, and repeat his mantra: "C'est

tres important."

The life of these high-maintenance pastries teetered upon every degree, movement, minute.

"It matters how you put the flours in," Theodosopoulos says — the order and even the way Clément released the flour from his hand, gently enough not to break the fermenting poolish. It mattered if someone knocked the gigantic bowl with a stray elbow or knee and disturbed the rising dough. It mattered how long they waited for the poolish to rise.

"You have to be ready for it," Theodosopoulos says. "It can't be waiting for you, because it could turn on you like that."

Reading the signs that the dough is ready is as fussy a task as choosing a ripe watermelon.

One minute, there were cracks in the flour, signs that the dough beneath had grown.

"C'est vivant," Clément told Theodosopoulos. It's alive.

The next minute, there was the right kind of cracks in the flour, and it was time.

They added butter and the third flour to the mixing bowl. The milk was too cold, so they whisked it over a bowl of warm water, which made it a half-degree too hot, and back into the fridge it went.

Finally, the giant mixer spun everything around with a dough hook that would make Capt. Hook run.

They put the dough aside to rise while they rushed around the kitchen preparing other things: a cookie crust, cheese puff pastry, brioche feuilletée, the

other croissant test dough.

Clément wanted to teach his friend as much as he could.

"He had everybody working: Someone was chopping olives, someone was zesting oranges, someone was making pastry cream," Theodosopoulos says.

"I was his shadow, measuring everything out for him. We were not stopping for one second. I was writing down things, speaking English, Spanish, French. I was euphoric. It was so exciting, so exhilarating, because I knew it was something special. Everybody did."

Before they left for the day, they folded more butter into the two test doughs and set them aside to rise overnight.

Her staff told her they'd never seen her like this.

Theodosopoulos felt like she was in Clément's Paris kitchen again, her world cracking open, becoming an expanded place.

Back story

Americans love croissants because they're a symbol of France, and the French love croissants because they hate American hamburgers.

Though the croissant's origins are debated and celebrity-studded (Marie Antoinette!), the "Oxford Companion to Food" dates the first recipe for the modern croissant to 1906. For decades, it was what the French had for breakfast with coffee. Its rise as a symbol of France happened in the 1970s, when "le fast food" infiltrated Paris from the United States

Perfect croissant at the master's hand



Creating croissants: Essence Bakery owner Eugenia Theodosopoulos works the various stages of producing croissants.

MICHAEL MCNAMARA/
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

"You have to respect the temperature of the dough," Clément said in French.

They rolled, folded, rolled again, then cut the dough into measured triangles, working quickly to keep the butter from melting. Clément made a measuring stick out of cardboard to guide Theodosopoulos' cuts. She used the knife that was her father's, the knife she adopted when she was 18.

Some of the croissants were rolled around bars of dark chocolate, others were shaped into crescents. The pastries were christened with an egg wash to make them glisten, set into a proofing machine to rise, then brushed with egg wash again. Finally, into the oven they went.

"What is this temperature?" Clément asked in French. Theodosopoulos translated Fahrenheit into Celsius.

"Do not open the oven," Clément said to the hovering staff. "C'est tres important."

The kitchen smelled like hot buttered toast with chocolate drizzled on top.

They waited.

Textbook torture

As defined by pastry chef Jacques Torres — whose list of accomplishments is longer than a croissant recipe but includes the M.O.F. designation, work with Julia Child and Le Cirque, his own Food Network show and the title of pastry dean at the French Culinary Institute in New York — the perfect croissant goes

something like this:

"A good croissant is a look," says Torres, on the phone from his bakery in New York. "It has to be fluffy. It has to be high. It has to be shiny. It has to tell you, 'Eat me.' You have to want to grab that croissant and bite it. Then, when you take it, the croissant is a smell — very particular. A croissant is going to smell buttery, but also you're going to smell the fermentation of the fresh yeast. Then, you have the touch. You feel a little bit of butter — not too much — on your hands. Then pinch it a little bit, and ahhhh, the croissant is flaky — a little crust, but not too hard."

Then, he says, "put it in your mouth and bite it. You hear that flakiness, and then you have all those flavors exploding and then the croissant disappears."

"That's the perfect croissant," Torres says. "Are you hungry?"

In her kitchen in Tempe, Theodosopoulos raised a warm croissant to her mouth. It crumbled, flaked, gave in. She chewed through tunnels of chocolate and sweet-salty air. The butter left its sheen on her hands.

"I felt like, eating that chocolate croissant, I was on a street in Paris," she says.

She turned to her teacher. He looked so happy.

"These are as good as you get in Paris, in the best places," he told her.

They spent the week practicing, working out ways to combat the im-

pending summer heat (freezer, freezer and freezer again).

She fed him her Greek Caesar salad. He loved her spanakopita.

Together, they watched customers taste the croissants, swoon, come back for more. Theodosopoulos gave samples to friends like foodie farmer Bob McClendon, who rubbed his hands together with glee and then told everyone he knew.

"It was one of the best weeks of my life," Theodosopoulos says.

In the end, she and her husband took Clément to the Grand Canyon, which he pronounced "magnifique, incroyable."

Clément took piles of photos to show his French wife, who loves weird American institutions (Elvis, most of all).

On the way home, they ate bad hamburgers and talked about baking hot-dog buns. The next morning, before his flight, Clément had an hour, "and he wants to make hot-dog dough," Theodosopoulos says, "600 grams of this, 600 grams of that."

She measured. He mixed. Her husband took him to Sky Harbor, "and Jean-Louis called me from the airport, two times, to tell me what I should be doing with that dough."

She obeyed, equally obsessed.

Mr. and Mrs.

These days, Theodosopoulos also bakes almond croissants and raisin croissants and, on special Saturdays, crois-

sants layered with asparagus and Gruyere. A plain croissant is \$2, plus 75 cents if you want chocolate inside (and oh, you do, you do). At the Old Town Farmers Market in Scottsdale, Theodosopoulos can sell 500 croissants in four hours.

She has a customer — Mr. Croissant, she calls him — who comes every day. Mr. Croissant is Edgar Cardenas, young and lean, and says he and his girlfriend have lost weight on their croissant diet because it kills cravings all day.

Restaurant chefs ask Theodosopoulos whether they can buy them. Food critics use their best adjectives to praise them.

Theodosopoulos just wants to eat them, and does, almost every morning: a chocolate croissant at 8 a.m. She finds joy enough in that moment, a sliver of France she harnessed with her hands and brought to life on University Drive.

Theodosopoulos' husband is a lucky man. Someday, he will take her back to Paris for good.

"I made him promise," she says.

Meanwhile, they'll always have Arizona.

CROISSANTS BY EUGENIA THEODOSOPOULOS

What: Plain, chocolate, almond, raisin, chocolate-almond and, sometimes, stuffed with ham, asparagus and Gruyere cheese.

When: 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays.

Where: Essence Bakery Cafe, 825 W. University Drive, Tempe. (And at the Old Town Farmers Market, Brown Avenue and First Street, Scottsdale, which is closed for the season and will reopen in fall.)

Price: \$2 to \$2.95 each.

Details: 480-966-2745, essencebakery.com.