

## VALENTINE'S DAY FOOD



MADELEINE'S MACARONS

After attempting to make his wife's favorite French cookie, macarons, as a Valentine gift in 2020, Napan Dennis McIninch spent the shutdown months perfecting recipes with his daughter Madeleine. Their new business, Madeleine's Macarons, has a special box of Valentine macarons for 2021.

## La Vie en Rose Madeleine's Macarons

How a Valentine gift, fatherhood and a pandemic created a career for one Napa family

ELIZABETH SMITH

A transplant to California in the early 1990s, Dennis McIninch, born in New Jersey and raised on Italian food, never anticipated that marriage, a daughter and a pandemic would set him on the path to perfecting a famous French sweet, macarons.

Or that after he had mastered the art of making the dainty, buttercream-filled creations, it would become a family business in Napa Valley.

McIninch, early on, spent summers as a lifeguard on the Jersey shore and the rest of the year bussing and serving tables in Northern California. For more than 25 years, he worked his way through the ranks of Napa Valley restaurants. He was a server at the now-defunct Oakville Grocery Café, members' clubhouse manager at Silverado Country Club and Resort and waited tables at Tra Vigne for over a decade until it closed in De-

ember 2015.

At Tra Vigne where McIninch met his future wife, Aubrey. "The next to last day that Tra Vigne was open (December 20, 2015), I served a private party of 25 people for the 30th birthday of a second-generation winemaker. I was on a plane for New York the following morning," he said. "The next evening, I popped the question to Aubrey under the Brooklyn Bridge. I figured it was a good time to propose. And there I was, engaged and unemployed."

This employment setback did not deter McIninch from returning to Napa. "Over two-plus decades of taking in and appreciating everything that Napa Valley had to offer, I considered it home," McIninch said.

As a customer, he was particularly fond of Bistro Jeanty, which he had frequented in the past to

Please see LA VIE EN ROSE, Page C2



MADELEINE'S MACARONS

Maddie McIninch helps make macarons.

## Dinner for your Valentine

The one time that my wife and I went out for dinner on Valentine's Day, we got into a quarrel that simmered



KEN MORRIS

for days. I don't remember what we argued over but I still recall the ruined dinner so we haven't gone to a restaurant for a Valentine's Day dinner since then.

I'm receiving a constant bombardment of emails that promise Awesome Valentine's Day Gift Ideas but I think the best thing a person can offer is something from themselves. I feel that cooking is one thing that I do that contributes to our relationship, a way to quietly give love and respect. Or, maybe I just like

to cook. But, the point is I hope you shower your loved ones with affection by cooking a tasty meal this February 14.

### Smoked Salmon Mousse

Serves 4 (keeps well so you and your loved one can enjoy more of it the next day)

When we lived in Anchorage, Alaska, many times I came to work on Monday and someone would ask, "Hey, you want some salmon?"

Over a weekend fishing trip, they had filled up their freezer or didn't have a freezer, or some thought you should not freeze salmon. Yes, you can think that way when you can drive to the Kenai River and haul in your own salmon.

I'm telling you this to explain, we ate a lot of salmon in those days. One of our favorite ways of eating it was smoked. We've made this a hundred times over the years and never get tired of it, so this is a good reminder of our previous home.

- 1 6-ounce package of hot smoked salmon, skin removed and roughly flaked
- 1 cup cream cheese, left on the counter to make it easier to mix
- 2 tablespoons prepared horseradish
- 1 scallion, root removed and chopped
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
- 1/2 Meyer lemon, squeezed
- Kosher salt

Puree the cream cheese in a food processor until smooth. Add half of



DREAMSTIME

Smoked Salmon Mousse on toast.

the smoked salmon and pulse the food processor until it is somewhat incorporated. Add the other half and pulse a few more times. Add the horseradish, scallion dill, lemon juice and a firm pinch of salt. Let the processor run until the contents form a smooth, creamy texture. Taste to see

if you need more lemon or salt. Scape into an attractive serving bowl and chill in the refrigerator for an hour or two. Spread onto water crackers or pieces of toasted French bread.

Please see MORRIS, Page C2



MADELEINE'S MACARONS

Aubrey, Madeleine (Maddie), and Dennis McIninch have a new family business, Madeleine's Macarons.

## La Vie en Rose

From C1

impress a date. “Besides the *filet au poivre*, every item on the menu was new to me. I got the *filet*, but I also ordered foie gras and rabbit pâté and crêpe Suzette and I was hooked. It became my favorite restaurant in Napa Valley, and I would celebrate every birthday there.”

McIninch began working there in early 2016. Still, he had never heard of a macaron until last year. “If I were a talented and trained baker, which I’m not, and inclined to start a baked goods company, which I never was, the natural choice should have been to delve into the world of cannoli, biscotti and zeppole,” he said. “Heck, I had to Google how to properly pronounce ‘macaron’ and I’m not 100% sure that I have it down yet.”

Yet, because macarons are his wife’s favorite, for Valentine’s Day 2020, he found himself baking macarons for Aubrey and their 3-year-old daughter, Madeleine (Maddie). “(Aubrey) doesn’t remember the first time she had a macaron, but it somehow became a resilient participant in her birthday ritual. Every year she would meet her sister at Bouchon Bakery in Yountville for macarons and a heated game or three of Pente,” said McIninch.

This first attempt at making macarons was a near disaster. “With so few ingredients, I wrongly assumed that it would be easy,” he said. “Although the first batch resulted in no fewer than 80% of the final cookies being horrendously misshapen, a few turned out worthy of her tempered expectations.”

A month later, under the COVID-19 stay-at-home order, McIninch’s restaurant work came to a halt. For the next five months, he became obsessed with perfecting his macarons. McIninch and Maddie, spent countless hours in the kitchen practicing. “She and I baked together. She was eager to sift almond flour, pipe batter, and fill macaron shells with fresh buttercream.”

The added benefit of being home for five months was spending time with his daughter. “Those months allotted me the never, nor ever again, opportunity to spend irreplaceable time with Maddie,” he said. “I learned all the words to

the most popular ‘Frozen’ songs. When summer came, I enthusiastically ran through the sprinklers with her and hung a tennis ball in the garage, so she could practice her backhand.”

However, macarons were never far from his mind. “Maybe it was the challenge, especially considering how few ingredients were involved. What I wasn’t counting on were all the minuscule adjustments that would need to be made. Aging egg whites, drying out almond flour, obsessively weighing ingredients to the exact gram, reading books, watching countless videos explaining what macaronage was and when to know when you’re done. It was all so much work, but also, I was compelled.”

McIninch had found his improbable calling, even going so far as to play Edith Piaf in the background for inspiration “to give myself a fighting chance,” he said. “I would bake after everyone went to bed. I made hundreds of batches in my tiny oven, one half sheet pan at a time.

“Many nights the humidity would spike, inhibiting the formation of a proper skin on the piped batter, delaying the baking for up to two hours. I pulled far more all-nighters than I care to think about. Hundreds of batches, utilizing a dozen recipes, incorporating countless technique tweaks and equipment manipulation, resulted in slightly better macarons. When my Amazon silicone sheets weren’t releasing the cookies well enough, I desperately borrowed Maddie’s silicone craft mat. After washing the fingerprint and Play-Doh off, it worked fabulously! I quickly ordered six more.”

When Bistro Jeanty reopened on Aug. 1 the restaurant invited McIninch to return. Still in was in the throes of making macarons, he found himself baking four or five nights per week and working full-time at Bistro Jeanty. Co-workers learned of his macarons and began to buy them. Then owner Philippe Jeanty expressed interest.

With the name Madeleine’s Macarons, McIninch and Aubrey launched their website on Aug. 17 and were granted the LLC the following day. For the next couple of months, McIninch continued to bake and work at Bistro Jeanty.

Once ordering began, he had to make a choice. “The pressure of filling orders and working full-



MADELEINE'S MACARONS

Dennis McIninch making macarons for his new business

time at the restaurant was taxing my health, happiness, and well-being, so I put my two-week notice in. I had zero wholesale accounts.”

Two days later, McIninch had his first placement in Oakville Grocery and within a month, six more locations. As of the publication of this story, one can find Madeleine’s Macarons at Oakville Grocery in Oakville and Healdsburg and the Napa Farmers Market. In addition, Gary’s Wine and Marketplace and Ranch Markets in Napa and Yountville will also have McIninch’s special Valentine’s Day “Box of Chocolates” beginning Feb. 11.

Madeleine’s Macarons also ships in the continental U.S., priority two-day. McIninch (often with Maddie) delivers orders in Napa, Sonoma and Solano counties. “We hate the shipping costs and currently, the unpredictability. We don’t want the exorbitant price of shipping to deter locals from ordering.” The Valentine’s Day boxes will be delivered on Feb. 11.

In making his macarons, McIninch uses organic almond flour and pasture-raised eggs from Napa’s The Hen Pen Farms. Because macarons are made with almond flour, they are naturally gluten-free.

One recipe difference that sets his macarons apart is that his buttercream filling has 20% less sugar, so they are not cloyingly sweet. In addition to classic flavors such as pistachio and vanilla, McIninch combines complementary ones, such as blueberry cheesecake and chocolate hazelnut.

“If the flavors aren’t muddled. It’s a fine line. I think our chocolate hazelnut is a perfect example of pairing flavors. It’s not unique, but it’s a classic for a reason. It eats like a fine wine drinks. You get chocolate and then, oh yeah, hazelnut. The last time I drank a ’93 Beringer Private Reserve Napa Valley Cab, I got chocolate-covered cherries, then black cher-

ries.”

One of his most fascinating flavors is his London Fog. “The shell is a swirling nebula of grey and purple, and the buttercream filling is a combination of vanilla and Earl Grey tea. For this filling, I grind the dried pod of a vanilla bean with the Earl Grey tea. I incorporate with a two to one ratio of tea to vanilla.” He recommends pairing it with Oakville Grocery’s London Fog Latte.

McIninch also asks his customers to vote for flavors. “We just asked for advice in choosing our sixth and final flavor for our upcoming Valentine’s ‘Box of Chocolates.’ It’s looking like white chocolate raspberry is running away with it.”

“We also must think about the colors of the shells,” he added. “Great macarons must look beautiful as well as taste great.”

Aubrey McIninch manages the business side of Madeleine’s Macarons, making it a true family endeavor. “The logistical dilemma, legal hurdles, labeling requirements, and the boring minutia of starting a macaron business during a pandemic were unprecedented,” McIninch said. “Aubrey tackled all the clerical, legal and social media needs and continues to contribute immensely to product and company development.”

Aubrey is already designing a Mother’s Day “Bouquet of Flowers” box with flavors such as rose, lavender and violet.

“When the shelter-in-place is lifted and tourists come back, and they will in droves, we will seek placements in Napa Valley hotels and bed and breakfasts for the all-too-often overlooked turndown service, and also in wineries where a token of appreciation in the form of a couple of macarons might be just the unexpected gift that the faithful tourists didn’t know they were missing,” McIninch said.

McIninch is quick to credit the community, friends, and his peers in the food and hospitality industry for the success of Madeleine’s

Macarons, especially his industry mentor, Chris Kollar of Kollar Chocolates, whom he describes as “the gold standard,” as well as Don Rickard of Platypus Tours, whose kitchen he uses to make his macarons.

“None of this would be possible without the tremendous support we’ve received from the community,” McIninch said. “We are forever indebted to these selfless individuals, whose influence, mentorship, support and unwavering encouragement, propelled us to endeavor to forge a more fulfilling career, while cherishing more family time and unearthing a more purposeful place in our community, in these most trying and uncertain of times.”

In reflecting on the past year since he made those fateful Valentine’s Day macarons for Aubrey, he still shakes his head. “In the middle of the most life-altering, worldwide cataclysmic event in generations, here was a Jersey kid, frantically degreasing Kitchen Aid mixing bowls with vinegar, in preparation of baking the most finicky French cookie, while listening to Edith Piaf,” he said. “Take a simple romantic gesture, unbridled enthusiasm and determination in perfecting the impossibly temperamental cookie, heaped with months of sheltering in place and sprinkled with a dash of OCD, and voilà, a new career!”

For more information about Madeleine’s Macarons, email [info@madeleinesmacarons.com](mailto:info@madeleinesmacarons.com), call 707-289-7499 or visit [madeleinesmacarons.com](http://madeleinesmacarons.com), Facebook @maddiesmacs or Instagram @madeleinesmacarons.

Elizabeth Smith is a freelance contributing writer for the Napa Valley Register and Napa Valley Life Magazine as well as a communications and social media specialist. Reach her at [elizabeth@elizabethsmithconsulting.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethsmithconsulting.com) or visit her website at [elizabethsmithconsulting.com](http://elizabethsmithconsulting.com).

## Morris

From C1

### Rack of Lamb with Mustard Crust

Serves 2 but it’s easy to scale up for more.

When you calculate the wonderful appearance and taste of a good rack of lamb versus the little work you actually have to perform, this is great main course for Valentine’s Day. Roasting a rack of lamb keeps the meat from easily being over cooked. Plus, a single rack will feed two people nicely and maybe even have a leftover chop or two for lunch the next day.

A rack is the half section of meat that runs from the shoulder to the loin of a lamb. Nowadays, lambs come to market between four to nine months old. Anything older is called ‘mutton’ and usually reserved for long-cooked dishes, with a more distinct lamb taste.

When you purchase a rack of lamb, even one that says, “ready to cook,” you will most likely still need to do some trimming to make it look Valentine’s Day worthy. First, make sure the rack has the chine bones (the backbone) removed. If it’s not, you won’t be able to easily carve the rack into individual chops.

Next, you get to “French the bone”, which sounds like something you should hide from the kids but all you’re doing is removing the meat, fat and sinew around each rib bone, so it looks tidy and little bits don’t burn during cooking. Use your boning knife to cut out any fat and meat left between the bones down to



DREAMSTIME

When you calculate the wonderful appearance and taste of a good rack of lamb versus the little work you actually have to perform, this is great main course for Valentine’s Day.

the eye of the lamb, then scape against the bone. Wrap a paper towel around each bone to help you get a good grip on the remaining sinew and pull them off.

If you’re feeling unsure of how to proceed, there are plenty of chefs on YouTube who demonstrate how it’s done. This is strictly for appearance’s sake, so skip the frenching if you don’t want to tackle it right now.

- 1 rack of lamb, cleaned (see note above)
- Aluminum foil
- 2 Tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary
- 2 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Half of fresh-cut lemon, juiced
- Kosher salt

Heat oven to 475°F while you heat a cast-iron skillet or a heavy skillet over medium-high heat and pat dry the rack of lamb. Do not add oil to the pan. When the skillet is hot, use tongs to add the rack meat side down and let brown for two minutes, then flip the rack over and brown for another two minutes.

Stir together the ingredients then brush the coating on the meat. Wrap a piece of aluminum foil around the

exposed rib bones so they won’t burn. Place the rack, meat side up, on an overproof pan in the center of the oven. Roast for about 20 minutes to reach medium, 140°F. Use an instant-read thermometer to check the temperature.

When done, remove the rack to your cutting board and use your chef’s knife to slice between each chop, cutting smoothly down the bone. I normally don’t do much food presentation, but I do like to fan three chops on the bottom of the plate, with the bones resting on each other in the center of the plate. These will cool quickly so serve right away. I like to serve them with mashed potatoes but my wife favors sweet potatoes, so, yes, we’re having roasted sweet potatoes and roasted Brussels sprouts on the side.

### Valencian Orange Tart

Adapted from “The New Spanish Table” by Anya von Bremzen

I know, I know, the average person wants chocolate for Valentine’s Day, right? But, your loved one is above average and deserves something unique. The appearance is something they haven’t seen before and it’s a healthy fruit taste, not chocolate wrapped in sugar. Yes, it does take a little work, so I always make the pastry a day or two ahead and leave wrapped in plastic in the refrigerator.

**For the pastry (or use your favorite pastry dough)**

- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2/3 cup confectioners’ sugar
- 1 medium-size pinch of salt
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, chilled and cut into small pieces
- 1 large egg yolk, beaten with 2 tablespoons chilled heavy cream

- 1 tablespoon ice water, if needed

**For the filling:**

- 5 medium-size thin-skinned California oranges, scrubbed well
- 2 1/2 cups fresh orange juice
- 1 cup sugar, plus more for caramelizing the tart
- 1 tablespoon grated orange zest
- 2 teaspoons orange flower water (optional but really amps up the flavor)
- About 1 cup orange marmalade

First, make the pastry. Place the flour, confectioners’ sugar, and salt in a food processor and pulse 5 or 6 times, just to combine. Add the butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal.

Transfer the flour mixture to a bowl and, using two forks, stir in the egg yolk mixture until it is evenly distributed. Pinch a piece of dough between your fingers. If it doesn’t hold together, stir in the ice water. Gather the dough into a ball. Lightly flour a work surface, then flatten the ball into a disk, wrap it in plastic, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. (The pastry can be prepared up to 2 days ahead.)

Place the disk of dough between two pieces of lightly floured parchment paper and roll it out to an 11-inch circle. Transfer the dough to a 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom, press it into the side of the pan, and trim the overhang. Freeze, covered with aluminum foil, for 20 minutes.

While the pastry is chilling, position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 400°F.

If you have made your own version of the dough, you can start from here. On the dough-lined aluminum foil, fill the tart pan with pie weights or dried beans, then bake it for 25 minutes. Remove the pie weights and the foil

and continue baking until the pastry is lightly golden and baked through, 8 to 10 minutes longer. Let cool completely in the pan on a rack before filling.

Prepare the tart: Cut off and discard a thick slice from each end of the oranges. Using a sharp knife, cut the oranges into 1/2-inch-thick slices (if the oranges are firm, you can use a mandolin). Place the orange juice, sugar, grated orange zest, and orange flower water, if using, in a wide pot and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Add the orange slices; if they are not submerged in liquid, add a little water. Reduce the heat to low and let the oranges simmer, partially covered, for 15 minutes. Let the orange slices cool in the cooking liquid, then drain them and gently pat them dry with paper towels. Cut the orange slices in half and remove all seeds.

Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 375°F. To assemble the tart, spread the marmalade evenly in the bottom of the tart shell and arrange the halved orange slices on top in concentric circles, overlapping slightly. Bake it on the center rack until the oranges are very soft and lightly browned, 30 minutes. Preheat the broiler.

When the tart is just cool enough to handle, wrap aluminum foil around the edge of the crust so that it doesn’t burn when the tart is caramelized. Sprinkle sugar in a thin, even layer over the tart and broil until the sugar is caramelized, 4 to 7 minutes, depending on the heat of the broiler, being very careful not to let the tart burn (if you are unfamiliar with a kitchenware blowtorch, you can use that to caramelize the tart).

Let the tart cool to room temperature before serving. A scoop of real vanilla ice cream served next to a slice would really shower your loved one with affection.