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Matter: The Sugar Land Express

By Maura Egan
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Will Cotton is inspecting a frilly white bra in the window of a lingerie shop on the Rue St. Honoré in Paris. The 40-year-old artist, known for his sticky, sugary landscape paintings of gingerbread houses, chocolate forests and ice-cream caverns, is doing research. Lately, Cotton has peopled his Candy Land scenes with girls clad in panties, various underpinnings and hats made from fondant icing. They sit perched odalisque-style, naturally, on cotton-candy clouds. The boutique's lacy display reminds him of some of his own confections. Cotton deals with temptation and excess, but he is not one to comment on overconsumption or the dangers of trans fats. "I'm interested in depicting an imagined utopia, a place that's only about pleasure," he says.



Garden of earthly delights: Will Cotton's manicured macaroon garden surrounds a "floating island." Marcus Gaab for The New York Times.

Cotton will be visiting one such place in Paris today, the Ladurée tea salon on the Champs Élysées. He is trying to tweak the recipe for his next art piece - a forest of macaroon trees. The idea is first to build a maquette in his studio and then paint from it.



Phillippe Andrieu, the pastry chef at Ladurée, shows Will Cotton how to construct the Paris bakery's signature macaroon pyramid. Marcus Gaab.



Andrieu's secret is to heat the sugar before folding it into the egg whites. Ladurée churns out more than 12,000 macarons a day. Marcus Gaab.

Ladurée is world famous for its macarons and sells more than 12,000 of them daily out of four shops scattered across Paris. (Last month, it opened a satellite at Harrods in London.) As with Proust and his madeleines, tourists and natives alike swoon over the mere mention of these perfect almond treats. Everyone has a favorite flavor: pistachio, salted-butter caramel or orange blossom, or more gourmet versions like lime basil (available in summer), chestnut (special for autumn), even java pepper (which comes in a very mod-looking shade of pewter). Cotton traces his own macaroon obsessions to the window of a little jewel-box shop on the Rue Bonaparte, where he first eyed Ladurée's signature pyramid. That led to a baking course at the Institution of Culinary Education in New York. But Cotton's cookies were just sweet nothings; they didn't rise, and the tops cracked and browned. So he turned to the master.

Philippe Andrieu has been the pastry chef at Ladurée for the last seven years, overseeing 85 bakers who churn out everything from macarons to mille-feuilles. Before heading to the Champs Élysées shop for his cookie tutorial, Cotton stops to sample various gâteaux at a tiny pastry shop in the Bastille, checks out the competition at Fauchon near the Opéra and makes quick watercolors of the sweets he has polished off along the way, including several pains au chocolat and crèmes brûlées. When he finally steps into the enormous and immaculate Ladurée kitchen, Cotton is the proverbial kid in the candy store. In pitch-perfect French, he gets down to macarons 101. Andrieu, it turns out, bakes his longer and at a lower temperature. He also heats his sugar before folding it into the egg whites - a revelation for Cotton. The two bond over the fact that neither professional nor amateur has figured out how to get their ginger macarons to taste like real ginger. Andrieu then deconstructs a macaroon pyramid, revealing that he uses toothpicks to attach the cookies to the triangular base so that the shells don't crack when you take them off afterward.

Armed with his notes and several pastel pastry boxes, Cotton returns to New York and his Lower East Side studio to build his forest. "It's going to be more

manicured, like a royal garden," says the artist, whose chocolate and lollipop landscapes are typically more homespun. Over the next few weeks, he will prepare a show for the Michael Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles (through Dec. 21), finish a commission for Tom Ford . . . and construct his French fantasy.

Six hundred macaroons later, not to mention a stressful battle with torrential rain and the accompanying humidity that foiled his egg whites, Cotton has created a stately-looking garden. The creamy colored macaroon trees are potted in ladyfinger planters. There are mounds of meringue and retaining walls made from vanilla wafers. The centerpiece is a lake complete with a "floating island," a traditional french pastry made of dollops of meringue floating in a bath of crème anglais (a homage to the one Cotton enjoyed at Le Duc in Paris).

"I think my macaroons might be even better than Ladurée's," Cotton says, only half joking. The smell in his studio is certainly intoxicating. Will he hold on to this model masterpiece as a keepsake? No, there is a fly issue to deal with. And, he says with a sigh, "My cats have developed a sweet tooth."

Parisian-Style Lemon Macaroons

For the lemon-curd filling:

4 ounces (1 stick) unsalted butter
1 cup superfine sugar
3 large eggs, beaten Zest of 2 lemons
Juice of 2 lemons

For the macaroons:

1 cup almond flour
1 1/4 cups confectioners' sugar
3 large egg whites, at room temperature
Pinch of salt
3/4 cup superfine sugar
10 drops yellow food coloring.

1. Prepare the lemon curd: Melt the butter in a double boiler over low heat. Gradually whisk in the remaining ingredients. Continue to whisk until curd is thick enough to hold the whisk's marks, 6 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, cover the surface with plastic wrap and cool in the refrigerator for about 1 hour.

2. Preheat the oven to 320 degrees. Place one cookie sheet on top of another and line the top sheet with parchment paper or Silpat. Sift together the almond flour and confectioners' sugar into a large bowl. In a mixing bowl fitted with a whisk, whip 2 of the egg whites and salt to stiff peaks.

3. Combine the superfine sugar and 1/4 cup water in a small heavy-bottomed saucepan. Stir over medium heat and from time to time brush the edges with hot water using a pastry brush. When the syrup reaches 241 degrees or the "soft ball" stage on a candy thermometer, whisk the syrup into the stiff egg whites in a thin steady stream. Continue whisking until the meringue forms soft peaks.

4. Using a fork, work the remaining egg white into the almond flour-sugar mixture to make a smooth wet paste. Stir a quarter of the meringue into the almond paste to moisten, then gently fold in the remaining meringue and the food coloring. Using a pastry bag fitted with a 1/2-inch round tip, pipe 1 1/4-inch rounds on the cookie sheet. Gently tap the pan on the work surface to settle the meringue peaks. Let stand until a skin forms, about 20 to 30 minutes.

5. Bake with the door slightly ajar for 12 minutes; rotate the pan then bake for another 12 minutes. When cool, sandwich two macaroons together with a dollop of lemon curd. Let stand in the refrigerator for 12 to 24 hours. Makes 35 to 40 macaroons. Adapted from Will Cotton.