

Lovely Log



In France and other French-speaking countries, Christmas dinner wouldn't be complete without a traditional *bûche de Noël*, also known as a Yule log, for dessert *by Philippe Dova / Photo: Roy Liu*



It may seem like a rather odd name for a cake – the “logs” on which the French feast at Christmas are not produced by lumberjacks, but there is a connection. Starting in the Middle Ages and continuing down the centuries, it was customary to light a big fruitwood log in the family fireplace on Christmas Eve and let it burn very slowly until New Year's Day, in the belief that this would guarantee good harvests in the year ahead. Traditional fireplaces were gradually replaced by cast-iron stoves in the 19th century and then by central heating in the 20th century, so the custom died out.

The first edible incarnation of the *bûche de Noël* was created in 1879 by pastry chef Antoine Charabot, but the *bûche* we know today – a rolled sponge cake filled with chocolate, coffee, vanilla or Grand Marnier-flavoured buttercream, covered with more buttercream, and embellished with sweets and decorative objects – did not make its appearance in pastry shop windows until 1945. Today this iconic pastry has evolved to include ice cream and fruit mousse variations, and has become popular around the world.

“I remember when I was a child, there were *bûches de Noël* in all of the Hong Kong pastry shops,” recalls Tracy Chow.

The owner of Pomme in Wan Chai, she holds a diploma from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. This year, Tracy has created two traditional *bûches* and an unusually flavoured Christmas cake. “Because chocolate is always popular, I wanted to make one [pictured above]. I'm using Valrhona dark chocolate – for me it's the best for baking. As for chestnut, you don't see many logs made from that and winter is certainly the season for it. Besides the logs, I also wanted to have a festive cake, so I made a green-tea Christmas tree cake.”

Alexandre Brusquet, head pastry chef at Pierre in Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental, set himself the challenge of creating a *bûche* that was light and not overly sweet – although it wasn't on the Christmas menu at home when he was growing up. “I spent Christmases at my grandparents' in Nîmes, and in the south of France the tradition on December 24 was a taste of 13 different desserts. There were mandarins, oranges, candied fruits, dates and chocolate truffles, and we would eat a bit of each, which was thought to bring good luck,” he reminisces.

Brusquet's “Grand Dessert” for Pierre consists of six items – until December 26, it will also include an intricate *bûche de Noël* created by the chef. “I'm not a big fan of the traditional buttercream *bûche*, which I feel is much too heavy after a Christmas dinner,” he explains. “Every year, I try to make something that adds a fresh note. Last year it was an orange mousse *bûche*, but this year I wanted to do something exotic.”

Brusquet's unique take on the *bûche de Noël* is a sponge filled with coconut mousse blended with white chocolate and Malibu liqueur, a passion-fruit meringue dacquoise, a Joconde almond biscuit, lemon marmalade and a centre of caramelised pear. The icing is made with passion fruit and the *bûche* is covered in dark chocolate “bark”, which is made by pouring 72% cocoa chocolate onto a cylinder to give it its shape.

Once the chocolate has hardened, Brusquet uses a metal brush to give it the appearance of a real tree trunk. Finally, for the chocolate mushrooms on the bark, he has used real mushrooms for the moulds. It's supremely artistic, sophisticated and a delicious way to celebrate Christmas. **L**

