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*February
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Fearlessly *French* Pastry

A BRUNSWICK BAKESHOP SHARES A RECIPE TO
CONQUER KITCHEN JITTERS

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Imperial canelés combine a deeply caramelized exterior with a custard-like filling, making them a distinctive (and delicious) treat.



Traditional copper molds create the heat needed to achieve a dark-mahogany shell.

If you're like me, the prospect of making traditional French pastries at home strikes fear in your heart: the scrupulous measuring. The folding and laminating of the dough. The resting and repeating. It can all just seem so daunting—and, frankly, a chore.

Once upon a time, April Robinson felt the same. A Texas native, she moved to New York City in 2000 with no plans to be a chef. After a couple of years in non-food-related jobs (and goaded by a boyfriend's complaints about her cooking), April landed her first jobs in a professional kitchen, working part time before earning a full-time position at Tabla, the fusion restaurant of legendary chef Floyd Cardoz. April says she was ecstatic about the opportunity—until she learned it was in the pastry department. Professional kitchens back then wanted to steer women into pastries, she says, and she didn't want to be pigeonholed because of her gender.

"I thought about declining the position, but he was amazing: hands down my favorite chef ever," says April of Cardoz, who died last year of Covid-19 at age 59. "And he promised I could hop over to another station as soon as space opened."

A few months later, it did. But April, who majored in chemistry at the University of Texas, found she wasn't ready to leave pastries. "I was really enjoying it. It appealed to my science sensibility. I felt like I just had so much more to discover there."

After eventually leaving Tabla, April opened multiple successful restaurants worldwide. Along the way, she came to love the art as well as the science of a good pastry. In time, she found herself managing the pastry kitchen in one of Hong Kong's most luxurious hotels. The work, she says, was exciting but also exhausting: Some weeks, she'd go days without even leaving the hotel.

It was time, she realized, to reevaluate. She and her husband wanted to be close to his family—and to start one of their own. So, they decided to return to his native Maine. But first they took three months to hike a portion of the 3,100-mile Continental Divide Trail in the western U.S.

"There was something so wonderful and meditative about waking up every morning and just putting one foot in front of the other," says April. That meditative aspect, she says, very much underlies her latest endeavor, Ritual Bakehouse & Patisserie, located in Brunswick.

The name of the new bakery, she says, pays homage to her personal ethos: that there is merit in slowness and repetition. "I love the whole process of French pastry making," says April. "It can't be hurried. It gives you time to slow down and think. There's a real mindfulness to it."

When designing the bakery's seating area, April sought to extend that mindfulness to her customers. She favors a subtle, warm palette and a space that invites people to be truly present with one another.

"I know it sounds romantic, but when I first envisioned Ritual, I saw it as a place for first



above Pastry chef April Robinson and her daughter, Emilia, prepare canelé batter in their home kitchen. *below, left* Beeswax adds a distinctive aroma and crunch to the canelés—while making your kitchen smell extraordinary. *below, right* Rotating the canelés regularly ensures a uniform caramelizing of their shells.

dates and community gatherings. I wanted to watch people fall in love here."

For her recipe contribution to this issue, April chose the imperial canelé, an almost mystical dessert featuring rum, vanilla bean, and pure beeswax (available at your farmers market or natural food store). What results is a pastry with a deeply caramelized exterior and a rich, custard-like center. Traditionally, canelés are made in small copper molds. They're expensive but well worth the investment, should the pastry become a

staple in your house. Until then, you'll do just fine with a carbon-steel nonstick canelé pan, readily available at Amazon or a kitchen specialty store.

Much to my surprise, and with April's very patient guidance, I spent a happy weekend making my own first batch. As they cooled, I texted her a photo and asked for a critique.

"Oh, grrrrrrrrrrl . . ." she replied. "♥♥♥♥" Indeed.





Imperial Canelés

1 cup plus 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
4 tablespoons butter
1 whole vanilla bean
1 egg
1 egg yolk
475 milliliters whole milk, warmed
40 milliliters rum or orange liqueur

Beeswax coating:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup organic beeswax
1 cup clarified butter or ghee

For the batter:

In a large bowl, sift the dry ingredients. In a saucepan, melt the butter. Scrape the insides from the vanilla bean and add them to the melted butter. Discard the bean pod. Keep the vanilla butter warm over low heat. Gently whisk together the whole egg, egg yolk, and milk in a medium-sized bowl. Add the warm vanilla butter and gently whisk until

mixed. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients. Whisk thoroughly. Pass the batter through a chinois or fine sieve to remove lumps. Refrigerate the batter for 48 hours (this allows the flour to fully hydrate).

To make the canelés:

Remove the batter from the refrigerator and allow it to come to room temperature (about 2 hours). Add rum or liqueur to the batter, stirring gently to minimize air bubbles.

Heat your oven to 500 degrees. (If using a convection oven, make sure the fan is off.)

In a small bowl, grate the beeswax. Combine it with clarified butter and heat in a saucepan until both are melted. Keep the mixture warm. If you're using copper molds, fill each mold to the top with the beeswax-and-butter mixture. Empty the

mixture back into the pot. Turn the molds upside down on a baking rack to let excess wax drip off (be sure to place waxed or parchment paper below the rack to catch drips). If you're using a nonstick pan, either double the beeswax-and-butter recipe to ensure you have enough to fill each cavity or brush each cavity with a pastry brush to ensure it is well-covered.

Fill the molds or pan cavities $\frac{2}{3}$ full with the batter. Place them on a foil-lined baking sheet. Bake for 10 minutes. Rotate the sheet pan 180 degrees and reduce oven temperature to 425 degrees. Bake for an additional 45 minutes, continuing to rotate the sheet every 10 minutes. (If the tops of the canelés become too dark, loosely cover them with aluminum foil.) Remove from the oven and invert them on a rack. Cool for 30 minutes. Serve the same day, or the canelés will begin to soften.