

Tres Croissant

Samantha Lew

Writer's comment: I took Enl 104C (Journalism) at 3:00 in the afternoon, right when my post-lunchtime munchies were at their worst. By the end of the class, I was ready to sacrifice an entire roll of laundry quarters to the nearest vending machine. When Lecturer John Boe suggested food as a possible subject for a feature article, I pounced on the idea; why not make the most of what I was already thinking about? My personal goal for *Tres Croissant* was to write about a fairly complex subject in a friendly and accessible way. I also wanted to combine elements of pure information, interview, and personal experience in one article. I chose to write about croissant because of my past experience with pastry making and my recent study abroad in Europe, where my *tres/trois faux pas* unfolded. I owe so much to Albert Kutternig, owner of Konditorei, for his invaluable insight on the subtleties of pastry making. And of course, none of this could have come to pass without John Boe, whose humor and keen advice helped me refine my prose style and grasp the art of journalistic writing.

—*Samantha Lew*

Instructor's comment: Rereading Samantha Lew's charming feature article "Tres Croissant," I am struck by how her successful article resembles a fine meal. It has a great lead (the appetizer), telling us the story of the invention of the croissant, a great finish, telling us the story of a memorable croissant she ate in Paris, and lots of tasteful, fulfilling stuff in between. Samantha, I recall, came late to this topic, having spent a couple of weeks on another piece that turned out to be a dead end. Seeing another student's draft feature on dumplings helped inspire her to have the courage (and wisdom) to scrap two weeks of work. In reward she found a topic she could sink her teeth into, a topic that led to this tasty piece of writing. I apologize for the food puns in this intro, but having just reread "Tres Croissant," the pleasures of food represented in language have seduced me.

—*John Boe, English Department*

1 683. VIENNA. HARD TIMES. Turkey had again invaded Austria, and with a formidable enemy force bearing down on city gates, the end seemed near.

But Viennese luck turned the night Turkish forces began tunneling under city walls to the center of town. Austrian bakers, who spent much of their time working underground into the wee hours of the morning, heard the noise of the excavation. The streets of Vienna rang with their shouts as they sounded the alarm and woke the citizens. Their Paul Revere heroism allowed the Austrian army to put a swift end to the digging, leading to a sound Turkish defeat.

In an act of gratitude and celebration, the Austrian government honored bakers with the privilege of creating a commemorative pastry. The bakers chose a yeasty bread rolled into a crescent, or *croissant* (correctly pronounced “KWAH-sahn”). They chose the shape as a celebratory taunt, mimicking the emblem on the Turkish flag, the new moon. Nearly a century later, Austrian princess Marie Antoinette introduced the croissant to the French aristocracy. It was not until the 1920’s that dough was changed to the light, flaky puff pastry that we know today. Croissant, the pastry that has seduced the American palate for over half a century, was born.

Today we enjoy croissants with everything from jam and coffee to sandwich fixings and salad. Croissants can be savory (filled with ham, cheese, or spinach) or sweet (filled with cream cheese, chocolate, or marzipan). Other variations include the *croissant alsacien*, stuffed with dried fruit and brushed with egg white and sugar.

The Danish call their version *Wienerbrod*, meaning “Vienna bread” to honor the pastry’s city of birth. Though made with the same dough, wienerbrod is traditionally pumped with sweet filling and drizzled with icing. In France as well as the United States, anything called a croissant is made with fats or margarine. A *croissant au beurre* contains layers of pure butter. In all variations, the lush, multi-layered consistency of the pastry remains.

In fact, the layered structure of the croissant makes it so challenging to bake. To attain the fluffy, flaky consistency that bakers covet, the dough must be carefully rolled and folded to create thin, alternating layers of butter and dough. During proofing (allowing the dough to rise in a warm, moist environment) and baking, water evaporates from the butter, creating a steam that distends the pastry, suffusing it with air.

The croissant quadruples in size, containing hundreds of individual thin layers of dough. Writes Anne William in *La Varenne Pratique*, “Folded doughs are unsurpassed in their delicacy, lightness, and rich buttery flavor.”

When making croissant dough, each complete fold and roll is called a “turn,” and the entire folding process dubbed “turning.” The simplest croissant recipes call for a two-fold turn completed four times, while the most advanced recipes, sometimes based on a puff pastry model, call for twice the number of folds and turns. Unlike puff pastry, which relies purely on folds of butter and dough for loftiness, croissant dough has yeast added for height and flavor. Serious *patissieurs*—pastry chefs—have been known to be exacting about the dimensions of the dough, monitoring the number of turns to achieve the ideal texture.

During turning, temperature is crucial to the consistency of the croissant. Too warm and the fats soften and leak from the bread, leading to a flat and layerless pastry. To cool and the fats may tear through the dough, failing to spread evenly between the layers and create flakiness. Pasty chefs often work on pre-chilled marble to help control the temperature of the pastry.

Allowing the dough to rest between turns is also important to the texture of the croissant. A fifteen-minute resting period allows the fats to firm and the starches to settle for the next round of turning. Dough that is not allowed to rest long enough becomes delicate and easy to tear.

After folding, the dough is rested one last time in a proofing box. Warm steam rises from the bottom of the box to encourage yeast growth and to make sure that the dough doesn’t dry out. As pastry chef Albert Kutternig of Austrian pastisserie Konditorei notes, “If the dough dries out, the steam won’t be strong enough to push the layers out.” Kutternig also cautions against allowing the dough to rise too much. “If you get the full range of the yeast in the proof box, when you put the dough in the oven, the layers won’t rise and the dough will sink. The crust that comes from baking would form without anything to hold it up, make it stand.” Kutternig proofs his own croissants to 2/3 capacity and then allows them to rise the remaining 1/3 while baking in the oven. “You put it in the oven at two-thirds, and it rises the rest by itself. At the same time it reaches its limit, it has a crust to hold it up.”

Kutternig has a wealth of experience to support his method. Born in Klagenfurt, Austria, he was one in a family of many master bakers

and master pastry chefs. He began his training at the age of fourteen in the family bakery located in Krumpendorf, a nearby town. "My apprenticeship was five days of baking and one day of school. Apprenticeships last for three years."

Kutternig went on to train in croissant's city of origin, Vienna, where he gained his Master's degree in Sugar Baking in 1981. In his last five years of training, he worked at the Kur Café Oberlaa in Vienna under the mastership of Mr. Karl Schuhmacher. Kur Café's excellence is still known today in Austria as well as Southeast Asia.

"I learned everything," Kutternig remembers. "I wanted to go into everything."

His superior training speaks through the intensity in which he discusses pastry. "You could learn to make croissant in two weeks. I could take you back and show you. But to really train, you would begin with the dough. This is training in Europe. You have to know your ingredients. It's very important." Kutternig believes in the science of pastrymaking—knowing exactly how and why you received your outcome.

For these reasons, he fires answers to my barrage of croissant trouble-shooting questions without flinching. Too delicate? "Too early in the oven." Too flat? "Proofed too much." Chewy? "Not baked enough, or baked too hot, if it's the right color." Greasy? "Not baked through. A lot of moisture is still left in it."

If only I'd known these things when I began my own croissant crusade a few years ago. Inspired by a private pastrymaking class I had recently taken, I lugged home Rose Levy Berenbaum's enormous but essential *Pie and Pastry Bible* with the naive ambition of unlocking the secret of croissant. "If Safeway and Costco can pump out croissants by the dozen, why can't I manage at least one good one?" I told myself, proffering my trusty rolling pin.

Two hours later found me nowhere near my dream of a fluffy golden pastry. The croissants, despite all my enthusiasm, were a disaster! I managed to remember the number of turns I made, but when I had my back turned, my father took the dough out of the refrigerator to make room for a pot of soup. When butter started oozing out of the side during the last rolling, I had to stop and refrigerate the whole thing again. Forget resting the croissants, I told myself, leaving flour streaked across my face like warpaint. I was the one who needed a nap! The result the oven yielded fifteen minutes later was no help; had I made crois-

sants or pancakes? It was hard to tell. Clearly there was more to croissant than I had anticipated.

The perfect croissant is neither too soft (underbaked) nor crisp (overbaked). Its outer color should be golden brown and slightly shiny, but always pale yellow inside. "The outside should be crunchy," says Kutternig. The inside is, "very fluffy," and layers should be neither too spaced nor too close, but lofty and uniform. And despite the heart attack of butter holding it together, a croissant should always be light and lovely, to go with morning coffee and fruit. It should *never* seem heavy or limp, or leave a greasy aftertaste on the tongue. Kutternig finds that the best croissants are neither "too sweet nor too sour" but somewhere in between. In the *Bread Baker's Bible*, Jennie Shapter describes the perfect croissant as, "Golden layers of flaky pastry, puffy, light and flavoured with butter . . ."

Kutternig recommends enjoying the perfect croissant warmed in the oven instead of the microwave, to keep the crispness. He believes in adding a side of unsalted butter. For an accompanying drink he says he "prefer[s] hot chocolate, but I think it's an individual preference."

The *Pie and Pastry Bible's* author, Rose Levy Berenbaum, found her ideal croissant in Paris, in a small patisserie near the Eiffel Tower. Inspired by such culinary perfection, Berenbaum embarked on the grand quest for the perfect croissant recipe, and so conceived a chapter in her book. I couldn't help but remember the source of her experience when a friend and I visited the City of Lights a few years later. We could see the Eiffel Tower from our hotel, and along the street below my window, little old men in berets shuffled home with baguettes. The entire scene seemed too picturesque to disappoint. It was time to find that bakery—and the perfect croissant.

After passing innumerable displays of out-of-season tulips and more men carrying baguettes, we finally stumbled upon something like Berenbaum's mecca. No catchy French name or logo, merely, on a large yellow awning in round letters: *Patisserie*. Inside was like walking into the heart of a croissant—golden, warm, and swirling with the scent of yeast and baking. Behind the counter stood wooden shelves piled with breads of all shapes and sizes. Beneath the nearest glass glowed the telltale crescent shape of croissants.

The line to the register was considerable, so my friend went to stand outside while I waited my turn. By the time I reached the front my

mind was whirring with the fragrance of baking bread—and the discovery of a small army of gleaming chocolate éclairs, conveniently placed to the left of the croissants. Somehow my English, Spanish and French language skills merged, and I became flustered. “Er, I would like—*je voudrais*—” I gawked at the dozens of trays, “*tres croissant, s’il vous plait.*”

The lady stared at me. “*Croissant?*”

I stared back. “Er, *oui. Tres croissant?*”

She frowned at me as I repeated myself again. This was getting embarrassing.

Then a light in her eyes: “Ah. *Trois croissant, no tres.*” She held up three fingers. “*Trois, three. Oui?*”

“*Oui!*” I hastily agreed. What an idiot—I had been pronouncing the Spanish word for three with a French accent! No wonder she didn’t know what I was talking about. The customers behind me shifted, muttering, and I could feel a hot flush creeping up my neck. But I was determined not to leave without one more thing . . . “*Et madame? Trois éclairs aussi.*”

I told this story to my multi-lingual boyfriend a few days later, fully expecting him to laugh at the lengths I would go to get a good croissant. Instead, he couldn’t hide his mirth over my Spanish/French mistake.

“You idiot, you didn’t ask for three croissants,” he told me between snorts of laughter.

“Then what did I ask for?” I asked suspiciously.

“A *lot* of croissant,” he chortled. “You said you wanted ‘a lot of croissant.’”

No wonder the lady had looked at me like I’d suddenly sprouted another head. What kind of moron walks up to a bakery and expectantly demands “a lot of croissant,” as if I had wanted her to sweep her whole tray and back stock into a bag and let me wheel them out the door?

At least I could say that the pastry was worth every inch of the humiliation. Lush with fluffy layers and a baked deep golden brown, my croissant was still warm from the oven and needed no accompanying coffee and jam. My brain nearly shorted out coordinating smiling and chewing at the same time. Even now, my mouth waters at the memory. Maybe I had been on to something in my lingual faux pas. For this kind of perfection, nothing less than “a lot” of croissant will do.