



REPORTER

A Slice of Christmas

Tradition and innovation converge in France's festive *bûche de Noël*

BY GABRIELLA GERSHENSON

PARIS AT CHRISTMASTIME is heaven for a cake lover like me. True, a pâtisserie on virtually every street corner is seductive at any time of year, but there's something magical about windows packed with elaborately decorated *bûches de Noël*. Few French people celebrate Christmas without one of these cakes, a sponge roulade filled and iced with buttercream in flavors such as coffee, praline, chocolate, and chestnut. Modeled after the Yule log, the *bûche* is typically decorated with such embellishments as meringue mushrooms, marzipan holly, stumps whorled in a wood grain pattern, and frosting that's scored to resemble bark.

I adore these traditional gâteaux. Yet over the last decade, I've noted a mounting trend: New interpretations of the *bûche de Noël* are proliferating; shapes and decorations have departed from the classic log; textures and flavors have grown markedly lighter, fruitier, and more adventurous. Strolling past the Montmartre pastry shop of Arnaud Delmontel some Christmases ago, I noticed a selection of *bûches* in a range of Technicolor hues: a glossy sea foam-green roulade of pistachio sponge and mousse, with a sour cherry core; another in school bus yellow that was flavored with *yuzu*, the Asian citrus that seems as common as chocolate in

Parisian pastry these days. They were devoid of stumps and meringue mushrooms, yet they were still, clearly, *bûches de Noël*. These whimsical departures made me wonder about the evolution of this iconic cake. Spurred by my curiosity, last winter I contacted Delmontel, who offered to show me how he prepares a *bûche de Noël à la crème au beurre café*, the version he believes is at the root of the tradition.

Christmas is an exceptionally busy time for Delmontel, who owns three pastry shops in Paris. He starts planning his seasonal offer-

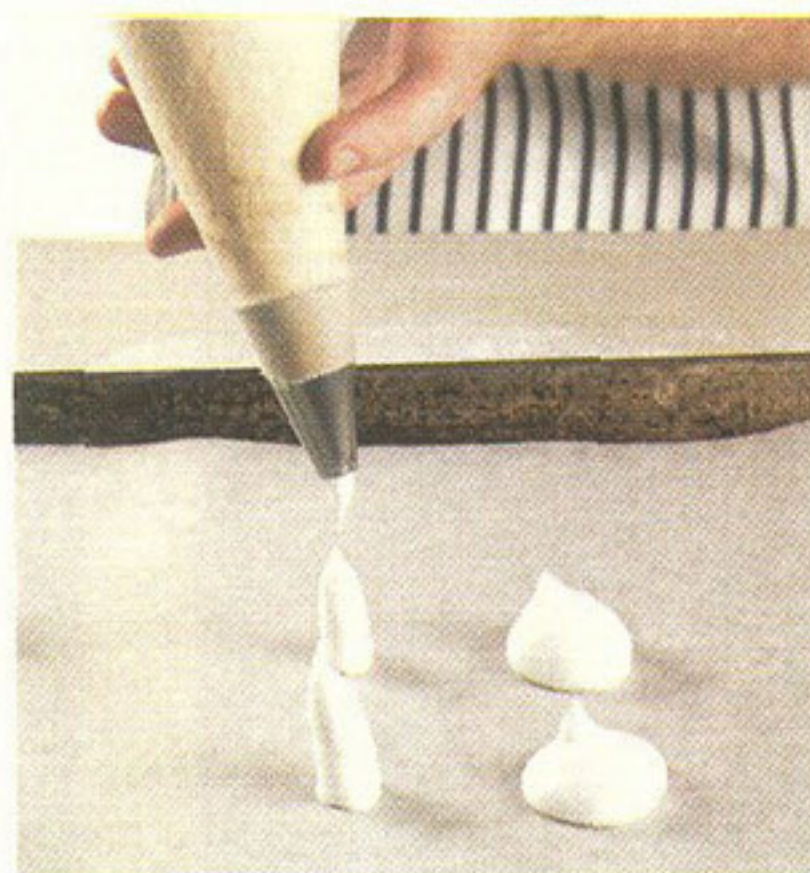
A traditional *bûche de Noël* (see page 38 for recipe).

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How to Roll and Decorate a Bûche de Noël For the complete recipe, see page 38



1 Put green meringue in a piping bag fitted with a $\frac{3}{8}$ " star tip. Start with a $1\frac{1}{2}$ "-wide star, then pipe two more stars on top of the first, each $\frac{1}{2}$ " smaller than the last, to form a three-tiered Christmas tree. Repeat steps to make additional trees.



2 Put plain meringue in a piping bag fitted with a $\frac{3}{8}$ " round tip. Pipe several $1\frac{1}{2}$ "-wide mounds and $\frac{1}{2}$ " x $1\frac{1}{2}$ " sticks to form mushroom caps and stems. Once the meringue pieces have baked and cooled, fit stems into bottoms of caps.



3 Place hot cake on a large kitchen towel dusted with confectioners' sugar; dust cake with more sugar. Starting with one narrow end, roll cake and towel together into a tight cylinder; let cool completely. Gently unroll cake.



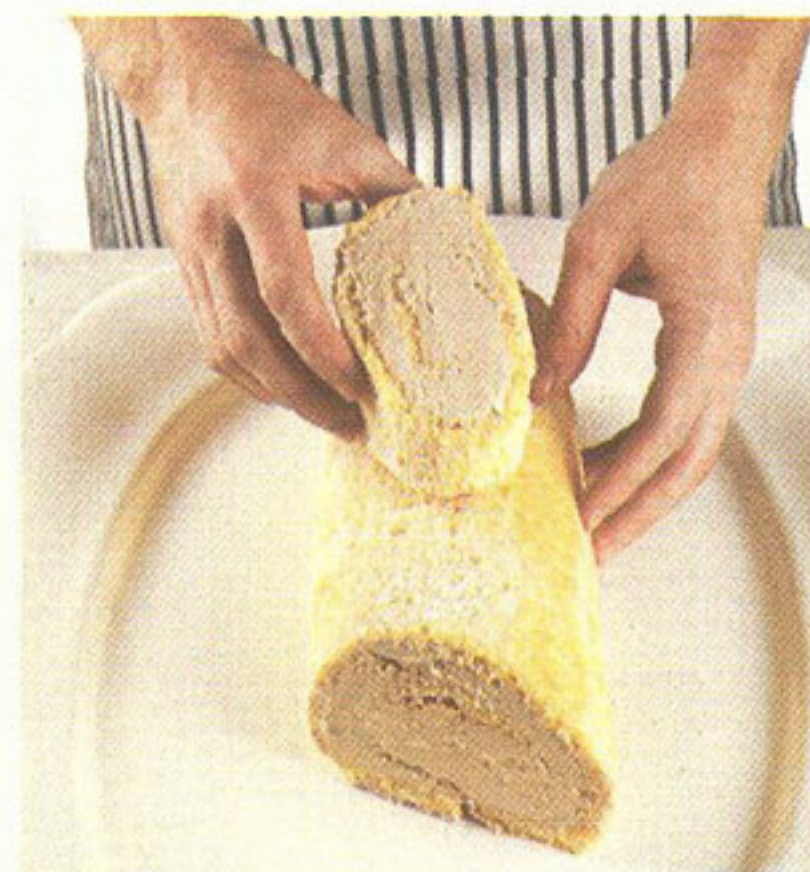
4 Brush rum syrup evenly over the cake with a pastry brush. Using an offset spatula, spread buttercream evenly over the cake, leaving a 1" border along the top edge so that the roll will close neatly and the buttercream will remain inside.



5 Starting with the edge nearest you, roll the cake, taking care not to apply too much pressure, so the buttercream stays inside the roll. Transfer the cake roll to a serving platter, seam side down, and chill to set.



6 Using a serrated knife, cut 3" off one end of cake at a 30° angle. Trim other end of cake to make it flat. Remove angled end and spread its flat side with buttercream—this will help it stick to the top of the cake.



7 Position the angled "stump" half-way between the center of the cake and the trimmed end so that it sits securely—frosted, flat side down—on top, to suggest the cut branch of a log.



8 Spread ganache over the surface of the cake and the stump; leave the ends of cake and the top of the stump exposed. Run the tines of a fork along the ganache parallel to the length of cake.

ings in June, developing recipes and creating brochures to showcase his collection. In early December, he displays the cakes in his shops' windows. Closer to the holiday, he sets up a tent outside for those who have preordered. In the two weeks before Christmas, the chef and his team produce close to 2,500 *bûches de Noël*.

The key to making a great *bûche de Noël*, according to Delmontel, a stocky man with a silver ponytail, is mastering the sponge cake, or as it's called in French, *biscuit*: "If it's cooked correctly, the cake is already done." He began by making a meringue, beating it until it was glossy and stiff enough to form a *bec d'oiseau*, or bird's beak, when the whisk was pulled from the bowl. Mixed into the *biscuit* batter, the meringue helped produce a cake that was springy to the touch and flexible enough to roll. For the coffee buttercream, Delmontel mixed more fluffy meringue, coffee extract, and soft

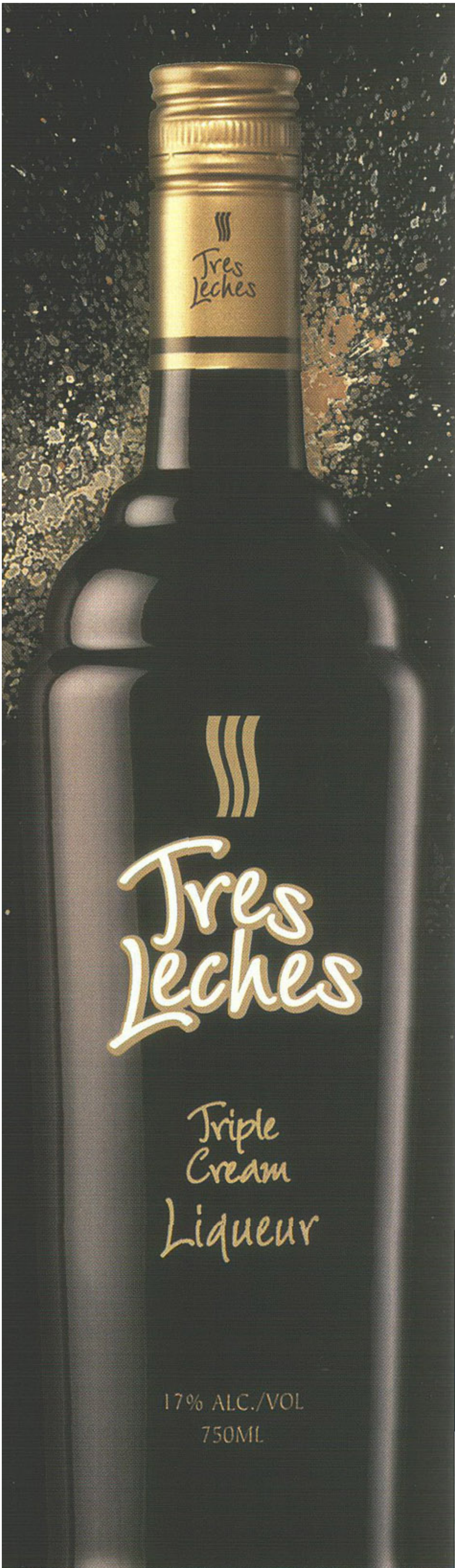
butter until the cream took on a satiny sheen.

Once the cake had baked and cooled, Delmontel brushed on a coffee-flavored syrup, waited a few minutes for it to absorb, and then spread buttercream over the cake from edge to edge. To form the log shape, he rolled the cake and sliced off the ends on the bias, arranging the "stumps" on top of the log. Using a pastry bag, he piped on more buttercream, covering the exterior of the cake. Finally, he warmed a fork in hot water and slashed bark-like markings through the frosting. He cut me a slice, and I took a bite. My mouth filled with bittersweet coffee essence and silky buttercream; the sponge was delicate, yet kept the whole thing grounded. It was simply one of the most delicious cakes I could hope to eat.

THE BÛCHE DE NOËL HAS its roots in Yule, a monthlong celebration of the win-

ter solstice observed by Northern Europe's Germanic tribes. The holiday peaked with the burning of an enormous log whose purpose was to ward off the darkness, both literal and figurative, associated with winter. The burning of the Yule log is one of many pre-Christian rituals incorporated into Christmas celebrations across Europe. But by the late 19th century in France, as smaller stoves replaced large hearths, the tradition had all but faded. Soon enough, the confectionery version of the Yule log emerged to fill the void.

The first recorded mention of the *bûche de Noël* appeared in 1898, in *Le Mémorial Historique et Géographique de la Pâtisserie*, a cookbook by the Parisian pastry chef Pierre Lacam. The recipe's primary elements are identical to those of Delmontel's *bûche de Noël*: *biscuit* rolled with either chocolate or



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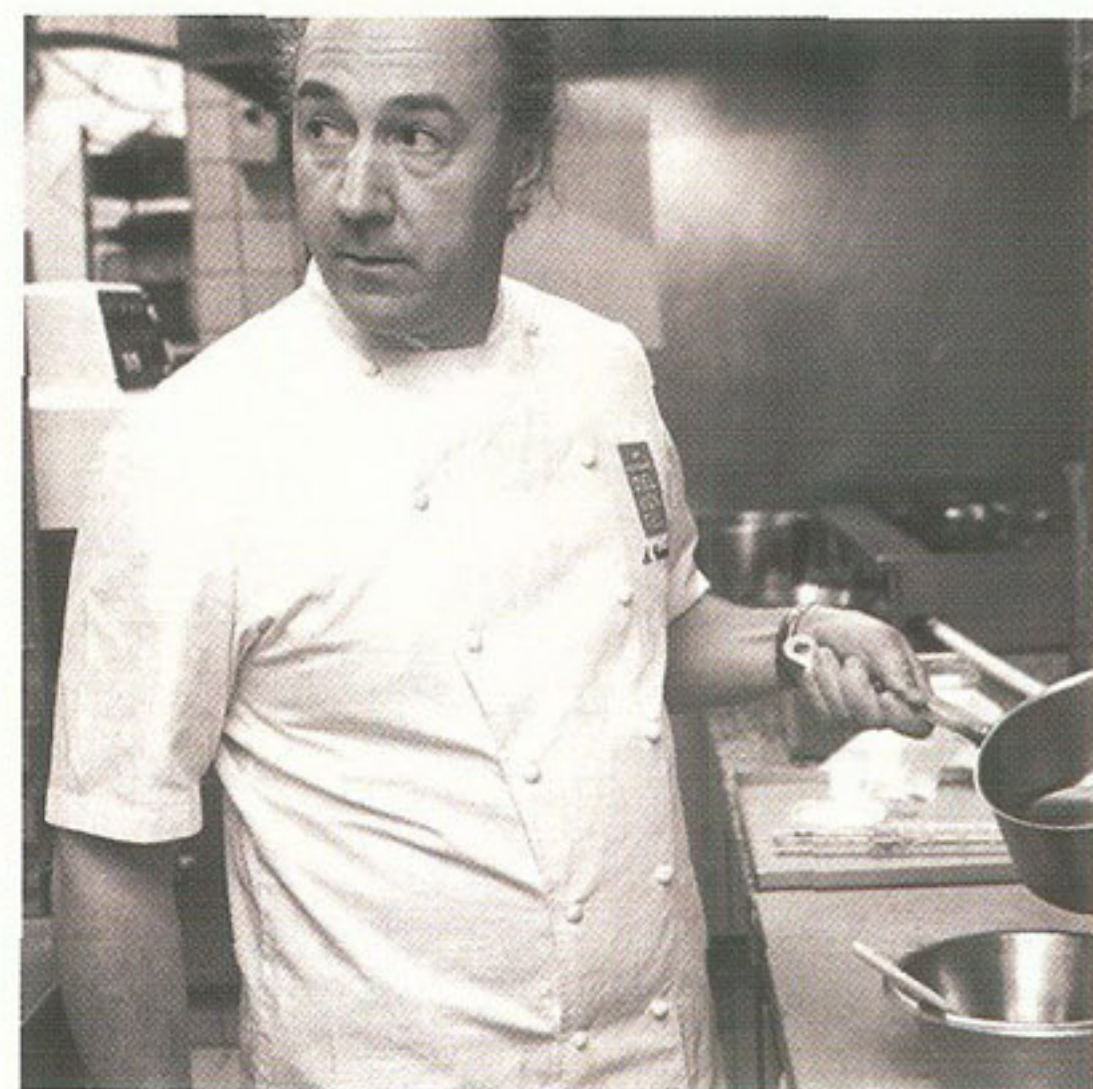
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coffee buttercream. According to Michael Krondl, author of *Sweet Invention, A History of Dessert* (Chicago Review Press, 2011), the *bûche de Noël* is an emblem of the era that produced it. With the advent of the railroad and tourism in the 19th century, the Parisian middle class was having a love affair with the countryside. Krondl believes this cake is an urban pastry chef's interpretation of a provincial Yuletide tradition.

Totemic as the Yule log shape may be, in the last decade, on the quest for novelty, many Parisian pâtissiers have abandoned it altogether. Recent examples include the *bûche* created by the celebrated pastry chef Christophe Michalak of the Hotel Plaza Athénée, modeled after the hotel's cascading staircase. At the tea room Angelina, chef Sebastian Bauer created a *bûche* that paid tribute to another iconic sweet, the macaron, by casting a chocolate mold in the shape of three of the cookies lined up in a row. And at the restaurant 114 Faubourg, pastry chef Laurent Jeannin dreamed up a version in the form of a white-chocolate mountain peak.

Innovation among Parisian pastry chefs is nothing new, of course. Back in 1873, Jules Gouffé wrote in *Le Livre de Pâtisserie*: "In order to succeed in the art of pastry, a youth...must have a lively and inventive fancy, one able to originate ideas." When I was in Paris last winter, several pâtissiers I spoke to cited the game-changing influence of the visionary pastry chef Pierre Hermé on the new exhibitionism in the *bûches de Noël*. By creating new fall, winter, spring, and summer lines of pastry each year, much like Paris's couturiers, Hermé solidified the notion of pastry art as fashion, and his peers followed suit. Now, the annual unveiling of *bûches de Noël* by the city's pastry chefs is attended by feverish media buzz. "Every year," said Jeannin, "there's more and more pressure to create for Christmas."

At the same time, even as pastry chefs have pulled out all the stops devising ever more radical renditions of the *bûche de Noël*, it seems there's been a parallel trend, equally radical in its way, among home cooks. Parisians have, historically, left pastry to the pâtissiers, making simple cakes at home but purchasing more elaborate desserts from the



From top: Pastry chef Arnaud Delmontel at his shop in Montmartre, Paris; blogger Pascale Weeks frosts a *bûche de Noël* in her kitchen.

cake shop. In the case of *bûches de Noël*, it's possible to find versions at every price point; even supermarkets sell them, both frozen and fresh, made from cake, ice cream, and sorbet. But there's a new movement toward professional-style baking at home, spurred in part by the recent abundance of books geared toward home cooks by masters such as Hermé and Michalak.

Pascale Weeks, a French food blogger, makes *bûche de Noël* for her family. "Ten years ago it was unusual to make your own," Weeks told me when at her house in Nogent Sur Marne, a suburb of Paris. "Now more people do; it's easy to buy all the utensils to make them at home." The day I visited, she had made a chestnut *bûche de Noël*. Her *biscuit* was pliant, without a single crack, and she had set a couple of slices at an angle to form the customary stumps. On top of the log swathed in chestnut buttercream, she lined up three *marrons glacés* (candied chestnuts) and then sprinkled on balls of edible silver "frost." It was as enchanting—and delicious—as any *bûche de Noël* I ate that winter. 🦋