



Chef Hélène Cazemajou

On Passion, Precision and Paneterie French Bakery

By Maritza Cosano
Photo: Addiel Perera, WPB Magazine

The Pastry Chef behind Paneterie’s French delectable desserts, Hélène Cazemajou, makes the perfect *pâte à choux*, or what we call cream-puff dough. Arriving in France with Catherine de Medici’s pastry chef, Popelini, the dough has been around for almost 500 years. Hélène’s recipe is the same she learned as an apprentice chef of the late Jean-Marie Hiblot, a revered Parisian pastry chef.

The recipe relies on only four ingredients—water, butter, flour, and eggs. If you’re a fan of this pastry or any other French dessert, chances are you’ve tasted one of Chef Hélène’s creations at Paneterie French Bakery on Clematis Street. And if we were to put a video camera in her kitchen, you could catch a behind-the-scenes look at her cult-favorite cream puffs, baked with a craftsman’s passion and a mathematician’s accuracy.

It’s the kind of care and precision that draws you to her kitchen wanting to bake something magnifique too.

“Pastry is an art of parts,” Chef Hélène explains with her breathy French accent. Dough, she observes, is what builds a pastry, sets its character, determines its structure and shape, and contributes to its texture and taste. Having worked with some of the most well-known chefs of France like Christophe Michalak, Alain Ducasse, Alain Passart, and Jean-Marie Hiblot, Chef Hélène knows this to be true and finds satisfaction in spreading her passion for pastry in our town, filling it with sweet offerings.

In 2018, the timing was perfect for Chef Hélène, who had parted ways with her previous employer in Paris to travel to America and set up shop on Clematis Street. Since then, Paneterie French



Paneterie is a quaint family-owned and operated bistro-style bakery serving traditional artisan-crafted French bake goods, sandwiches, salads, and delicious coffees and drinks.

Bakery is where she has been creating her intricately constructed desserts, and because of her culinary skills, performance, and creativity, the shop has never been hotter.

Born in Bordeaux, in the southwest of France, which is the heart of France's greatest region for food and wine, Hélène reinvented herself when she took on the title of Director and Executive Pastry Chef of Paneterie, drawing much of her energy from her hometown's vibrant artistic and culinary life.

"Bordeaux is wonderful," she says. "The very essence of elegance."

It's where she earned her titles of waitress and pastry chef, while making all kinds of baked goods in her farm, where she grew up and worked hard to maintain it with her parents and four brothers.

According to her, people in Bordeaux love cooking. Why not? The city has world-famous produce, oysters from the Bay of Arcachon, and farm animals that graze on the Médoc marshes. And, like in Bordeaux, Hélène has found in West Palm Beach a new place she can call home. For her, the city is a hot spot to go on the weekend, where farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables and, depending on where you are, you can grab a nice glass of white wine and pair it with some hot bread and cold meats, cheeses, or seafood. Franchement, j'adore!

I came across this funny and spirited French woman at the front steps of Paneterie French Bakery, dusting a table and making room for her next guest: me. There we spent an afternoon talking about pastries and dismantling that je ne sais quoi about French women by debunking certain myths like "all French women know how to cook" or "French women eat but don't get fat." No, is the answer to both. But, despite her hair up in a messy bun, I affirm that "French women have a genetic gift" [another myth], as Heléné clearly builds the image French women convey throughout the world: Natural beauty.

Who or what inspired your passion for cooking?



I grew up on a farm in Bordeaux, France, where we had cows and chickens . . . and my dad used to cook a lot. In the morning, I would get up and give him a glass to fill up with milk, straight from the cow. My mom also cooked a lot, making everything homemade. My grandparents, too. My four brothers and I would spend a lot of time with them in the kitchen.

I have always been passionate about food, but I didn't necessarily want to work in a kitchen. I'm a people person so I was worried that I would be in a rat lab hidden behind closed doors. So, that's when I decided to go to school for two years to be a professional waitress. In France, you are trained in hospitality or culinary school for two years before you can show up to take an order. The job is seen as a profession, not a way station to

a "real job." Depending on your knowledge and training, you can be highly paid as a waitress in France.

For an aspiring culinary, baking, and restaurant management student like yourself, how was your training?

Well, in the first year, you're doing both: kitchen and waitressing, which allows everybody to understand the two parts and work well together: the chef who prepares the food and the waiter who serves it to the customers.

Did you gravitate to one more than the other?

I was the best in my class, and my teachers always wanted me to focus on the kitchen. But I always wanted to travel, so I thought of a job that I could do so I could travel. The first summer after I got

my first diploma, I traveled to England where I learned English while waitressing. At first, it was a catastrophe. All I knew to say was “Hello, how are you?” But the best way to learn that language is by going to that country. I went back home for a while to finish my second diploma in pastry. Then, I returned to England and took a position in pastry in a small French restaurant.

As a pastry chef?

You know, that’s a loose interpretation of the term. When I first came to America, people would say, “Oh, you’re a pastry chef.” And I’d replied, “No, I’m a baby in pastry!” It’s not because you make pastries that you become a chef. Being a chef means that you know how to run a kitchen with a team of cooks, you know how to place an order of goods, and to some extent, you know how to run a restaurant. Being a chef includes a lot. It’s not because you went to a culinary school, or work in a pastry shop right after school that makes you a pastry chef. It takes years!

Do you consider yourself a pastry chef now?

Yes, I do. It’s taken me years of working with some of the best. After I got my second diploma, I got a job at L’Arpège Restaurant, a Michelin 3-star restaurant on the southeast side of Paris with Chef Alain Passard. He’s a gem and considered to be one of the best chefs in the world. When I finished all my classes, I got offered to stay, but I really wanted to travel. I got a position as a sous chef at the Ritz Carlton in Orlando, Florida. I was supposed to have stayed for a year, but because of a family matter, I returned to France. But while I was at the Ritz Carlton, every month I sent my resume to Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Montaigne, Paris, to ensure it would stay on top of the pile.

I guess it’s safe to say that you really wanted to work there. I mean, this is no ordinary hotel. It is the very best in Paris. You guessed it right! One day, my friend and I were in a car on our way to a farmers market on the south side of Paris, in the middle of nowhere, when I got this call. It was from Hotel Plaza Athénée. “Bonjour, this is Geneveve . . . I have your resume in my hand. Are you still looking for a job?” At that point, I grabbed my friend and gestured madly for her to

stop the car. I didn’t know if I was going to have phone service past that point! [laughing] The job was a train ride from Bordeaux to Paris and I was there the next Tuesday as scheduled. I arrived 45 minutes early and drank like ten espressos before we met. After the interview, she asked me if I had any questions and, with tears in my eyes I said, “Oui! Quand puis-je commencer?” [When can I start?] She liked that answer and took me to “make some pastries.” And that’s how I started.

Ultimately, I moved in with my older brother who lived in Paris in a really tiny apartment. My mentor, Executive Pasty Chef Jean-Marie Hiblot taught me everything I know. He was fantastic, but most of all, he was my friend. He died early this year at only 42 years old from an unexpected illness. He was an active and beloved figure among his colleagues in the industry.

How did the experience of working with a legend who had built a prestigious career alongside French chef masters like Christophe Michalak (Plaza Athenee), Gilles Marchal (Le





Bristol), and Alain Ducasse influence you?

Well, to start with, I knew I wasn't the best in my team. The knowledge these guys had was amazing. They grew up in pastry and they had a diploma that I didn't have. I had my experience, my passion, my motivation . . . and I also had tremendous eagerness to learn! It took a little bit to make a place for myself. I was also the only woman on my team. H el ene and the boys. Twenty men, only one woman in the kitchen. So, it was tough.

Reportedly, restaurant kitchens around the world are male-dominated. It's a business no different, I would imagine, to other industries where women are challenged to quit if they can't stand the heat.

Nicely put. The thing is, it's a really hard job. It's a lot of hours. It's very physical—what you have to carry, what you have to do. . . and when you make a huge batch of cake, you then have like 60 pounds of cake to carry! So, to make it

H el ene's cream puffs are delicious and a top seller at Pan terie.





The leading lady of Panetière French Bakery enjoys the synergy of Clematis Street, which has that old European vibe.

there, anything the guys carried, I carried. If there was an item that needed to be carried by two people, I'd carry it with two people. I was always there early and left late. See my cooking scars, I earned my stripes. The job expects a lot.

Men and women are not designed the same. We need to be equally respected, but we are not equally built. Men are typically stronger than women. [smiling] But, we are equally smart. And that's fine by me! Hey! I have four brothers. So, I'm used to working hard in the company of males. And in the kitchen, I wasn't worried about anything, and it was the best experience of my life. It was tough at first because they did not go easy on me, that's for sure. They'd say, [knocking on the table hard] "You have to earn it, baby!" And that's normal.

How long were you there?

For about a year and a half. My back started hurting really bad and it became such a nightmare that I had to leave. The restaurant went through a renovation and when it re-opened, my old boss called me. "Everything is going to be stressful, I need you to be here," he said. I told him, "I'll be there for you, no problem."

In a kitchen, it's all about teamwork. I knew it was going to be terrible for my back. To open a hotel like that is no easy feat. You do 18-hour days, easily. It got to the point where I had to take painkillers for my back or I would not be able to work. Ultimately, I gave my two-week notice and stayed until my replacement came in.

How did that make you feel?

Stopping pastry was hard on me. I had worked so hard to build my resume and reputation, and to acquire all the knowledge I'd gained from all of those experiences. It was tough but I didn't know how not to work. So, I started doing other things while fixing my back. When I felt ready, I took a job at a small pastry shop. After a short time, I increased the sales by 80 percent of all their pastries. I realized I could hold the hours and physicality of the job. But, I wasn't there long, though. The owner was an ass. I was nice enough to give him a two-week notice, and I told him so.

Where did you go from there?

I got a job at the Champeaux Paris Restaurant, a contemporary brasserie that opened by Alain Ducasse's, at la Canopée Forum des Halles. It was tough, a lot of hours, but while there, I kept receiving offers in my email from different places around the world. Some had really nice locations and with a really nice pay, free accommodations, everything . . .

Meanwhile, I met my future husband. I was torn between staying in France or following the money. Money is not everything to me, I assure you. But when you work so many hours and you don't get rewarded well, that's not good. That's a problem in France. We have some of the world's best chefs and manual workers but they don't get paid properly. There are so many taxes and so at the end of the day, all those people with gold in their hands end up leaving, like I did.

How did you end up at Paneterie?

My stepdad is friends with Thierry Beaud, owner of Pistache French Bistro. They were having a chat right out here one day when Thierry told my stepdad that he was planning to close the bakery. He just didn't have much time for it, he said. My stepdad quickly called me and asked if I wanted to go back to work. He would have never invested in a pastry shop if I wasn't involved. You need a chef who's good and reliable. I arrived in the U.S. on February 10, 2018. And on the 15th, we signed all the papers and finalized everything.

And the rest is history . . .

Well, the story doesn't quite end there. Two weeks later after I arrived, I found out I was pregnant. And trust me, you don't start up a new business by yourself in another country . . . and pregnant! You just don't do that to yourself. But it happened! I worked 16 hours a day on my feet until the day that my daughter was born.

And your husband...

That's a story for another day. Let's just say it didn't work out. Being honest was always my mantra so I don't understand someone who cheats. I make mistakes but I don't think I'm purposely mean or unfair to anyone. Life is too short and you don't know when it's going to end.

Jean-Marie was one of the best men I've ever met. He was dedicated, invested . . . fantastic. And he is gone.

But he left you a gift—the knowledge and skills he instilled in you. How do you take all of that and make it as this woman powerhouse that takes care of her Paneterie family business? Well, as you said, this is a family business. My stepdad is the CEO of the company, my mom is the treasurer and I'm the director, so together we take care of our two locations: Clematis Street and Delray Beach.

Is a franchise the next step for Paneterie?

No, because then my family and I wouldn't be able to control our high-quality products and services. We could distribute the pastries, but how do we know that stores won't serve old pastries?

What does Paneterie mean?

Bread box. Or, something that contains bake goods.

As I watch you greet your guests, whether they call or come into the shop, it seems that everything that you've been trained for has prepared you for this bread box.

[smiling] That's why no one can tell me that running my own shop is not possible. I know how to do everything in here. There are some things that I'm not good at, like paperwork. I hate it so much! But, if I had to do it, I'd do it properly because that's how I was raised.

What's your favorite pastry to bake?

I love to do everything. But, I actually love to make ice cream. One day, I hope to add that to my menu.

Final word.

If you want to take the time to eat a good pastry with a good cup of coffee, come to Paneterie. But, if it's really, really busy and you try to rush me, I'd say, brace yourself.

Why? Something French might just come out?

[laughing hard] Oui!