

DON'T BLOW IT

TWO PHILLY CHEFS REVEAL THE SECRETS BEHIND FRANCE'S MOST DIFFICULT ROMANTIC DISH.

BY SARAH THOMPSON

We forget that chefs have lives too. While diners celebrate on Valentine's Day, those in the kitchen sacrifice their romantic aspirations for what is one of the most anticipated holidays of the year in the restaurant industry.

To develop a better sense of the effort involved in perfecting that big night, we asked two of Philadelphia's best and most entertaining pastry chefs, Fred Ortega and Matt Maslowski at Lacroix at the Rittenhouse (210 W. Rittenhouse Sq.), to prepare their most romantic dessert in their pastry kitchen.

Knowing their patrons' expectations, Ortega, executive pastry chef, and Maslowski, restaurant pastry chef, propose chocolate in one of its most refined presentations as the ideal finish to a Valentine's Day celebration—the soufflé.

The soufflé is a classic French dish whose light, airy texture comes from combining a thick egg yolk base with stiffly beaten egg whites. Soufflés may be savory or sweet, hot or cold. Certain soufflés are made on the spot with fruits and liquors, while other bases can be made in advance.

To prepare his chocolate soufflé, Maslowski begins by separating egg whites from egg yolks. He boils a half-quart of whole milk and adds this to a mixture of egg yolks, flour and sugar to create the soufflé base.

After melting the chocolate in a double boiler, he adds in the soufflé base. Now Maslowski is ready for the egg whites. He whips them in a standing mixer until they are shiny and form stiff peaks. Adding a third of the egg whites at a time, he skillfully folds them into the chocolate.

In less than a minute the chef has combined the ingredients, fished the batter into a pastry bag and is piping them into buttered and sugared ramekins.

When his soufflé has baked for 10 minutes, it emerges from the oven as a cylindrical chocolate tower, rising out of the ramekin with a distinguished air, and on top Maslowski places a thin chocolate disc decorated with gold moons and stars. In a matter of seconds, this chef's true genius for mingling taste, texture and presentation becomes abundantly and enticingly clear—the disc melts, forming a shiny veneer capping off the soufflé. He presents the dessert with a large porcelain spoon cradling a quenelle of Spanish almond ice cream.

Come mealtime at Lacroix, Maslowski

is the liaison between the kitchen and the dining room, having worked in the kitchen at both Novelty and Fountain. What stands out about this chef is his confident and playful disposition.

Maslowski jokes as he works. He believes in tasting everything he makes. He

emphasize that the ramekins must be buttered and sugared to create a pseudo-crust that enables the soufflé to rise appropriately.

When asked what causes soufflés to collapse, each provides a laundry list of reasons: temperature and pressure changes, overbeating, an improper ratio of egg yolk base to egg whites, even agitation while the soufflé is being served. The soufflé is an exercise in perfection, precision and patience. Ortega is pleased to tell us that the restaurant will go through at least 55 soufflés on a busy night.

Before tasting Maslowski's version, we had two distinct convictions about chocolate soufflés: They are subtly flavored and they have to be eaten in a hurry for fear of deflation. I have never been so pleased to be wrong.

This soufflé has a density and richness that seems to defy the laws of physics. The texture is fudgy, if not actually gooey. The contrast of the subtly salty, cold ice cream and sweet, warm soufflé teases the palate. This is the kind of thing one could eat every single day and never complain about. Maslowski shyly smiles at words of appreciation for what will likely be a showstopper for many patrons on Valentine's Day.

For those who don't find chocolate soufflé appealing (there must be, what, four or five of you?), Ortega will offer other specialties, like chocolate pate, apple napoleon, champagne sorbet and poached pears for Valentine's Day guests who secured reservations as early as October.

Ortega is determined to make diners' Lacroix experience memorable. He even handcrafted a chocolate box for every couple, filled with artisanal chocolates

made in the in-house chocolate laboratory.

So after all their work is done, how will the chefs themselves celebrate Valentine's Day? Ortega plans on a low-key dinner out with his wife—days after Valentine's Day.

Maslowski, well, he's single (see "Hot Stuff Coming Through," p. 26). But if he keeps up with his soufflés and ice creams, he's likely to become one of the most eligible bachelors in Philadelphia. ●



Cosmic cats: Pastry chefs Fred Ortega (left) and Matt Maslowski demonstrate the proper—and most fun—way to make a starchy soufflé (right).



produces heaping spoonfuls of his ice cream for colleagues to sample, and waits excitedly for nods, if not noises, of approval.

As Maslowski works, Ortega is content simply to observe. The duo teamed up in December after Ortega left his post as executive pastry chef at Le Bec-Fin. They play off each other naturally as they compare experiences and techniques for making soufflés.

Both agree that it's best to use two types of chocolate in this soufflé—a semisweet and a dark—in order to strike a balance between bitter and fruity flavors. They

MATT MASLOWSKI'S CHOCOLATE SOUFFLE RECIPE

SOUFFLE BASE

1/2 quart milk
2 ounces sugar
3 ounces all-purpose flour
6 egg yolks

Place the milk in a saucepot and let it come to a boil.

While the milk is boiling, whisk together the sugar, flour and egg yolks in a bowl. Use a mixer if necessary.

When the milk comes to a boil, slowly add half to the egg yolk mixture. This will temper the mixture so it doesn't scramble.

Pour the resulting mixture back into the pot with the rest of the milk and cook it until it becomes thick.

Take it off the heat and let it cool in a container until you're ready to use it.

It will keep in the refrigerator for a week.

CHOCOLATE SOUFFLE

15 ounces chocolate (usually a semisweet or 60-percent chocolate, best if a mixture of the two)

4 ounces soufflé base
8 egg whites (use the ones remaining from the base)

Melt the chocolate in pieces over a double boiler.

Butter and sugar the soufflé ramekins. Using soft butter and a pastry brush, coat the inside of the ramekins, making sure all areas are covered, especially the rim. Then roll the sugar around the inside to get a light coating, which helps the soufflé rise and puts a thin crust on its edges.

When the chocolate is melted, whip the egg whites into stiff peaks using a standing mixer. While whipping the egg whites, add the soufflé base to the chocolate in the double boiler. Keep it very warm to prevent the chocolate from cooling down too quickly when folding in the egg whites.

When the egg whites are stiff, remove the chocolate from the double boiler and then add egg whites one-third at a time, each time gently folding them into the base. Don't mix too much, or the egg whites will lose volume and air.

Once the egg whites are folded in, fill the ramekins using a spoon or a pastry bag.

Fill the ramekins to the top. If the pouring becomes messy, use your finger and wipe around the edge of the ramekin to clean it. This helps the soufflé rise straight.

Soufflé mixture can be prepared up to two hours before use if kept at room temperature.

Bake at 400 degrees for 9 to 10 minutes, depending on the preferred texture.

Serve with anything your heart desires. ●