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A Frenchman in Moscow Tastes the Perfect Croissant

By Lena Smirnova

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When French confectioner Laurent Bourcier first came to a Russian marketplace several years ago, he was shocked by what he saw there. Eclairs. Lots of them.

The sight would have been quite common to passers-by, but to the former personal confectioner of the Japanese emperor, who is now the quality director at the Wolkonsky bakery chain, this amounted to an insult against one of the key French cuisine mascots.

The eclairs were not kept at the required temperature of no more than 5 degrees Celsius, and they were dusted with powder or cocoa instead of with glaze — "a la russe," as Bourcier described them.

After braving a taste, Bourcier quickly determined that the cream in the eclairs was made of a mixture of powder and water. This was not a difficult diagnosis since he had sampled similar concoctions when he was serving in the army. This cream was then fondly called David

Copperfield, he remembered.

However, nostalgia is not keeping Bourcier from sweeping David Copperfield out of Russia. His mission at Wolkonsky is to deliver the perfect eclairs and croissants to Russians.

The perfect eclair has soft dough, is filled with cream made of egg yolks and is covered with a shiny glaze to live up to its name, which translates as "lighting rod," Bourcier said. In the case of the perfect croissant, it must be just right in terms of sweetness and lightness of layers, and it must not fall apart in a sea of crumbs.

Seems simple, but the preparation of a croissant actually takes eight hours and requires an extensive amount of craftsmanship.

For those brave enough to attempt making croissants at home, Bourcier sent the cautionary note not to bother. Without going into details, it is enough to say that the formula for the perfect croissant appears more difficult than something you could be awarded a chemistry prize for.

"It takes a lot of courage," Bourcier said. "You probably have better things to do than bake croissants."

Even French bakeries may take the simple route, with as many as 70 percent serving previously frozen croissants. Ordinarily, fresh croissants should not be kept for more than 12 hours.

Meanwhile, Russian confectioners are slowly improving the quality of their products, Bourcier said, adding that he has seen many positive changes over the past eight years. The number of good bakeries is still low, though, partially due to the difficulty of getting quality ingredients in Moscow.

Wolkonsky ships flour and butter from France, a luxury many bakeries can't afford.

"It is often not the chef who chooses the ingredients that he needs for his products," Bourcier said. "This is linked to cost-efficiency. There are enterprises that want to get a lot of money right away. There are a lot of these enterprises in Moscow, but fortunately they don't last long."

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