



Using meringue as a medium, native Parisian Claire Becker creates flaky, smooth-topped works of art in her Oxnard bakery.

TASTEFUL COMPOSITION

The sweet story of Les Macarons Duverger

BY MARK STORER | PHOTOS BY KAREN PARKHOUSE

IT WASN'T ENOUGH FOR BERNARD AND Claire Becker to uproot from Paris and move to California. The story of their emigration is nearly a fairytale, and without really planning it, they are living an American dream. Bernard was a music composer working on films, and Claire was an art restorer working itinerantly around French museums, including, at one point, the Louvre. Suddenly, they're living in Ojai with their four children and baking cookies for a living. But it wasn't all that simple... or, maybe it was.

"We wanted to leave Paris. We knew it too well," said Claire, a native Parisian. "We had two kids at the time and we didn't just want to stay there for our whole lives. We wanted to go and try something new."

They landed in Echo Park, Los Angeles. There was a bilingual school in Los Feliz called Lycee International where their children could learn English and French, and Bernard was working on films between Los Angeles and Paris. But Claire was ready to try something else entirely. "I was a painting conservationist and wasn't happy doing it anymore," she explained. "I worked in private collections



ABOVE: French-born Bernard and Claire Becker uprooted their family from Paris to settle in Ojai and bake authentic melt-in-your-mouth macarons in Oxnard.

RIGHT: Duverger's chocolate macarons are made with organic African cocoa beans. A former painting conservationist, Claire created the cookies' color palette (think sweet orange blossom, lavender-blueberry) from all-natural fruit and vegetable extracts.





as well as museums and churches. I just wasn't happy."

Bernard felt the same way. "I didn't see myself doing what I was doing anymore," he said. "It wasn't about the music, per se, but the industry. I wanted to try something new. And so here we were making this great change in our lives, and it became more natural for us to keep changing."

But all that time, there were macarons—quintessentially French macarons, delicate little puffs, not chewy macaroons. If you recognize the name, then perhaps you've seen them. They are made with egg whites and almond flour for the most part, and then, of course, various fillings. Unlike the ubiquitous macaroon, two cookies are made and sandwiched together over a filling. Claire had been making them for many years. "Usually all for me," Bernard said. "She had a gift for it."

While they were still in Paris, the Beckers began making macarons for their friends and trying different kinds with different fillings. They used all-natural ingredients and tried new recipes. "In France, it was easy to find those things," said Claire. "I wanted to find all-natural ingredients in good quantities, but that was harder to do once we came to the U.S."

They did their own version of market research, taking the cookies to parties and giving them to friends to see if they liked them. "It was this kind of new cupcake craze and we wanted to see if they would be culturally accepted," said Bernard.

The cookies are naturally gluten-free and come in many colors, all of them natural. There are no additives or processed sugars. Flavors include orange blossom, coffee, lavender-blueberry, and chocolate, and the natural ingredients, Claire said, are the key to their delicate flavors.

"We tried them out at farmers' markets in Los Angeles and they became very popular," Claire said. So they began bak-

ing as a business, calling their product Duverger, Claire's maiden name.

They rented space at a bakery in Echo Park, selling to that bakery and other clients. Virtually overnight, the cookies took off. At one point, they sold 3,000 in four days. "It was very encouraging," Bernard



said in his typical understated fashion. "There was some potential."

They moved into a different bakery, this one in Culver City, and worked Southland farmers' markets. Then, they got a call from Whole Foods. "That request changed a lot of things for us. We'd reached the next professional level and it meant a lot more demands in terms of food safety and such," Bernard said. "Concurrently, we met with Raymond Lovjois, an old baker at the Paris Bakery in Oxnard, which was a commercial bakery. It was perfect for us."

Lovjois befriended the Beckers and the relationship bloomed over a six-month period while they ramped up production for Whole Foods markets. "In January of 2012, we moved into the bakery in Oxnard and moved our family to Ojai," said Claire. "We wanted to live in a place where it was small, quiet, and safe—where the kids could be kids. And we didn't want to live in the bakery."

Whole Foods represents about 20 percent of their business, although you won't find Duverger macarons at the

Ventura County locations, only Los Angeles. They also distribute the cookies (and a few other products, like an all-natural almond cake and Florentine cookies) to 15 states outside of California.

"A [North Carolina-based] chain called Earth Fare found us online," recalled Bernard. "I remember the first purchase order we received from them. We were very small and they wanted seven palettes—which is 80,000 macarons. We were used to doing boxes of 12 or 24."

Duverger now has a dozen employees, and the Beckers treat them like family. On a recent day at the bakery, the couple provided a break to celebrate their kitchen manager's birthday with a Napoleon cake, candles, and singing.

"We source mostly local ingredients," said Claire. "Sometimes it's harder, and we do what we have to, but we stay local when we can." The ingredients remain all-natural, of course.

Duverger keeps growing, and the couple is open to expansion. "We have a lot of room to grow in the bakery; we have 15,000 square feet and use just a portion of it," Bernard said. Claire wants to make other products, and the couple has even talked about creating a Duverger store.

Meanwhile, Bernard feels another change coming on. He's working on a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. With four children, a thriving business, and an active home life, one might wonder how it all fits together. "It's actually kind of a natural extension from being a musician," he said. "It's all about composing, about composition and putting pieces together to make something wonderful." ■

Retail locations, online orders, and more info at DUVERGERMACARONS.COM