

Smart cookies

Nadine Ingram has elevated the humble biscuit into a crunchy artform.

By Vince Hoolihan

Restaurant critic Terry Durack isn't renowned for pulling his punches. In one review he famously likened an overcooked pork cutlet to "chewing a trampoline", while an unfortunate vegetable dish was compared to "a cross between a dog's breakfast and baby sick". When Durack visited Iguacu, an ill-fated restaurant in Mosman, his review was so scathing that the restaurant promptly folded. But within this avalanche of criticism, Durack did find something at the restaurant that met his formidably high standards.

Writing in his *Sydney Morning Herald* review, Durack was gobsmacked by the biscuit sticking out of his *crème brûlée*. "The accompanying light-as-air macaroon baton filled with liquorice paste is an absolute killer of technique and finesse, straight off the friandise trays of a French three-star restaurant if not finer," Durack wrote. "Pastry chef Nadine Ingram who has cooked at London's Le Gavroche, as well as *bel mondo*, should be locked in the pastry kitchen with heavy manacles and no possible way of escape. She's good."

The welcome news for Durack and biscuit lovers everywhere is that not only is Nadine

still in the game but she's set up her own business. Cookie Couture is all about delivering handmade biscuits in which taste and texture reign supreme. Delicately spiced gingerbread is lifted with the subtle crunch of icing, rich chocolate brownies are spiked with drunken prunes, macarons are sexed up with pistachio and white chocolate, while buttery shortbread is studded with generous slivers of hazelnut. It's really no surprise that even a cantankerous critic like Durack was swiftly won over. Cookie Couture is to the biscuit what Rolls Royce is to cars.

Part of the cookies' appeal lies in their aesthetic charms. Biscuits come layered in multi-coloured icing in the shape of spotted pigs and sailing boats, clowns, violins and camels. Nadine admits that her two young daughters, Ruby and Poppy, play a vital role in dreaming up new designs.

"Poppy came into the kitchen the other day when I was making some elephant biscuits," Nadine recalls. "She said, 'You know Mum, you really should put boots on that elephant.' I'm working on that concept now but it's tricky because the elephant's only got short, squatty legs..."



You can rest assured, however, that despite these teething problems in the elephant footwear department, the problem will soon be conquered. Having worked as a pastry chef at Le Gavroche, a pinnacle of fine-dining under chef Michel Roux, Nadine brings an exacting professionalism to her craft. “I learnt so many things there,” she says of her time at Le Gavroche. “Technique more than anything else - working in the petit-four section I learnt how to make macaroons really properly. But I also learned pride in the way you present things. Everyone in the kitchen is so focused on delivering perfect food that it becomes really contagious.”

Nadine grew up in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales – a world away from the fine-dining culture that she would come to work in. But even as a girl she had already developed an appreciation for biscuits. “We used to go to my Uncle Sam’s milk shed and have Delta Cream biscuits and a chocolate milkshake,” she remembers. “Delta Creams are made of chocolate shortbread with the white icing in the middle. I actually really want to do my own

version of a Delta Cream biscuit now on a higher level and just take it up a notch. I’ll call them Sam’s Milk Shed Cookies.”

On our visit Nadine was perfecting a new line of miniature purple ponies. But when she’s not dreaming up new designs, Nadine works furiously to keep up with demand at her growing business. Customers are always ordering specially customised shapes and designs to celebrate birthdays, weddings, anniversaries and other special occasions. “Pigs and hearts are the most popular,” she admits.

But where does Nadine stand on the highly controversial issue of whether or not to dunk your biscuit?

“I’m all for it,” she says cheerfully. “I’ve never actually seen anyone dunk one of my biscuits - I’m not sure it would be a good experience as the icing would melt into your tea. But I’m not opposed to it, people should enjoy the biscuits however they like.”

www.cookiecouture.com.au

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