

# MACARON MAESTRO

For years, Pierre Hermé has been at the forefront of modernising classic French pastries, delighting people with his bold creations. His macarons, made with daring and unconventional flavour pairings, have become a culinary obsession throughout the world.

STORY APPLE MANDY

COURTESY PIERRE HERMÉ PARIS | PORTRAIT LUNA WONG

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Being a pastry chef is not easy; it requires a lot of skill, creativity and hard work to survive and thrive in a competitive industry. Some give up in the middle of their careers, while others continue and succeed. Pierre Hermé chose the second path and today he has earned a reputation for modernising French pastries, including creatively flavoured macarons.

Among Hermé's creations, the delicate meringue-based confections are what made him famous. They may look pretty and simple, but are in fact difficult to make. In Hermé's new book *Macarons*, he illustrates the 32 steps to creating a single macaron shell, seven for the ganache – a whipped filling of chocolate and cream, seven for buttercream. The assembly alone requires six steps. The process is very time-consuming but Hermé, now 55, has perfected them all to create a sugary treat that's crunchy on the outside and chewy on the inside.

Dubbed "The Picasso of Pastry" by French *Vogue*, Hermé creates a mélange of flavours from a combination of fruits, spices, nuts, teas, and other ingredients like liquorice, olive oil and cream cheese. Among the 14 signature and seasonal flavours, his crowd-pleasing creation Velouté Ispahan – made with brightly coloured shells and yoghurt, rose, lychee and raspberry flavoured filling – is the most loved. Other daring combinations include peach, apricot and saffron, as well as pistachio, Ceylon cinnamon and morello cherry. He's also introduced new flavours like Jardin des 8 Trésors, which has the same ingredients as the Chinese herbal tonic, Eight Treasures Tea.

The chef brainstorms every flavour combination before sketching out his ideas, with ingredients listed down to the last gram. "I've been doing this since 1983," says the soft-spoken Hermé, as he shows an example in his *Hermé* magazine. "These sketches allow my team of chefs in the test kitchen to understand the textures I am looking for."

He's juggling as many as 40 new recipe ideas at any given time, and some can take months or even years to perfect. These precise formulas are tested and refined at the Maison Pierre Hermé in Paris before being passed to a team of chefs in Alsace. There, the macarons are made and kept frozen there until they are ready to be shipped to stores worldwide.

"You don't usually eat a macaron immediately. The traditional way is to wait until the biscuit is a little soft," explains Hermé. "To achieve the desired texture, after filling the macarons, they are refrigerated or 'aged' for one to two days in order for the flavours to



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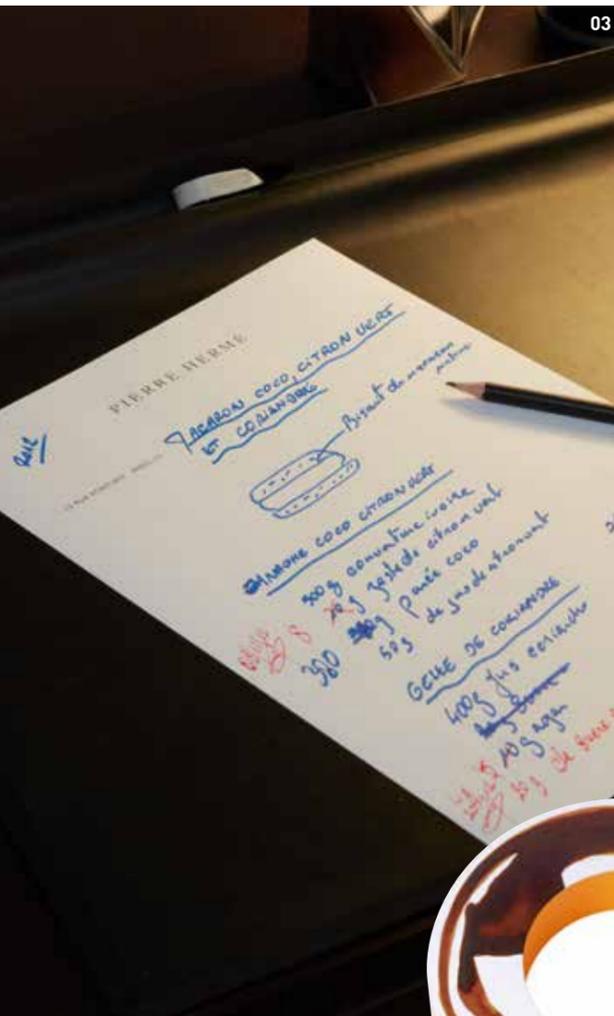
**"IF YOU MEET A PASTRY CHEF AND HE TELLS YOU THAT THEIR MACARONS ARE NOT FROZEN, YOU CAN TELL HIM HE IS A LIAR."**

develop and the filling and biscuit to homogenise. If you meet a pastry chef and he tells you that their macarons are not frozen, you can tell him he is a liar."

#### FINDING SUCCESS AS A MACARON MAKER

Heir to four generations of Alsatian bakery and pastry-making tradition, Hermé came to Paris when he was 14 to work as an apprentice with the acclaimed pâtissier Gaston Lenôtre. At 24, he landed

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a job at fine food merchant Fauchon as the head pastry chef looking after the pastry, chocolate and ice-cream departments.

Hermé describes his experience at Fauchon as “the best” for he was offered the opportunity and freedom to be creative. After working there for 11 years, he decided to open his own consulting company with Charles Znaty in 1997. His first client was Ladurée, an upscale Parisian bakery specialising in macarons. He helped them create and develop recipes, as well as expand their business to different cities.

Around the same time, Hermé also began developing his own brand. He wanted to open his first pâtisserie in Paris but was not able to, due to his involvement with Ladurée. Instead, he looked to Tokyo, where he set up the Pierre Hermé Paris brand’s first shop, selling pastries, macarons and chocolates.

“French pastries were introduced in Japan by the end of the 1950s and they became very popular in Tokyo,” says Hermé. “There were a lot of good Japanese chefs trained in France and they have the talent in making amazing pastries.”



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03 Hermé shares one of his recipe sketches, with ingredients listed down to the last gram



COURTESY PIERRE HERMÉ PARIS

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04 Hermé collaborates with designers, including the famous cartoonist Nicolas Vial, to create macaron gift boxes

05 Hermé has published over 30 cookbooks, including the latest *Pierre Hermé Macaron*

06 The popular Ispahan collection is made with base ingredients of rose, lychee and raspberry

Since opening the Pierre Hermé Paris pâtisserie in Tokyo, Hermé’s has gone on to open eight more shops in Japan and France. On a quest to expand his gourmet repertoire, he created another concept – Macarons & Chocolats Pierre Hermé Paris boutiques – that specialises in macarons and chocolates only. There are now 38 of them in 10 countries, including Qatar, Azerbaijan, Thailand and Macau.

Hermé’s empire, with a staff of 600, also collaborates with hotels, including the Raffles Hotels & Resorts and The Ritz-Carlton Hotels. He partners with artists to create packaging, candles and tableware, as well as perfumers to create new scents for brands like L’Occitane.

Building on his clout in the industry, Hermé established Jour du Macaron (Macaron Day), which

takes place on March 20 each year in Paris. Partnering with members of France’s elite pastry committee, Relais Desserts, the initiative promotes the classic French treat while supporting a charitable cause. In Hong Kong, Hermé’s boutiques donate a percentage of the daily sales to a charity organisation such as Make-A-Wish Hong Kong, which grants a special wish to children with a life-threatening disease. It’s a pretty sweet deal – with a donation of HK\$20, customers get to enjoy a macaron of their choice.

While there’s no doubting Hermé’s success, he’s rather coy about his achievements. “Life’s path is a maze and it is not a straight line. There will be challenges, but that’s what makes life exciting. Throughout my entire career, there was never a time I wanted to give up because I’m confident of my own abilities.”