

# [ ] spaesprît

**Title:** Good Moon Rising

**Summary** Be moonstruck by the most heavenly pastry of them all. We ask the experts what makes croissants so special -and so tricky to master.

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feature

BY CHRISTOPHER TAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALVIN TAN (MAIN PHOTO)  
AND CHRISTOPHER TAN





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# Good Moon Rising

BE MOONSTRUCK BY THE MOST  
HEAVENLY PASTRY OF THEM ALL. WE ASK THE  
EXPERTS WHAT MAKES CROISSANTS SO SPECIAL  
— AND SO TRICKY TO MASTER.

*On a scale of one to 10 – one being, say, a sablé, and 10 a croquembouche – a perfect croissant would rank somewhere around a nine.*

*Why so high? The method sounds straightforward enough: make a lightly sweetened, milk-enriched dough. Wrap into it a thin layer of pliable butter, then roll out this package and fold it over on itself repeatedly to obtain between 20 and 40 internal layers of dough, separated by butter layers. (This exponential origami is called lamination, the same process used to generate the layers in puff pastry and Danish pastry doughs.) But as with so many deceptively simple recipes, the devil – and also the potential divinity – is in the details.*

*Reading pastry chef manuals, one gets left with the stressful impression that croissant nirvana is bounded by a narrow space between opposing errors. The dough must not be too stiff, nor too stretchy; the butter must not be too squishy, but not too hard; the laminated bundle cannot be too cool or too warm; the rolling motions must be incisive but not overly aggressive; and so on and so forth. But then who ever said perfection was easy? We consulted some of Singapore's best independent bakers on the matter.*



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## Twist and chaud

"How many layers? Aha – surprise!" grins the affable, tousle-haired Gontran Cherrier, taking a moment from rushing around the kitchen at Tiong Bahru Bakery, his joint venture with Spa Esprit on Eng Hoon Street, to talk about croissants. "I fold two times," he says, a restraint that generates fewer layers than most classical recipes, but layers that are crisply defined, and as easily pulled apart as a rainbow kueh lapis. "I use Type 45 flour and I don't add too much liquid, to obtain a strong dough. It's important to take my time to make the folds to create distinct layers. That is my signature. I try to do a little bit different from tradition... a recipe is your personality, I try to have my personal touch in each product." For him, croissant perfection is reached when "I hear it – it's crispy. In your mouth, it's crunchy, but the inside is moist. This contrast is very very important."

A third generation baker and pastry chef, cookbook author and TV presenter, Cherrier has been the toast of Paris for several years. His viennoiseries are responsible for at least some of that – his Paris bakeries sell some 4,500 croissants and pains au chocolate a day – but more crucially, his respect for artisan methods balanced with his forward-thinking and canny adoption of multicultural ingredients and influences has struck a chord with French foodies fleeing from the horror of pain industriel.

Taking bread seriously, his French customers make sure to match their loaves with the rest of their meal. "When they tell me, 'I am having a dinner, we will eat some foie gras, some oysters, this kind of cheese', I try to give them advice to help them choose the bread." His creations surprise his parents, he thinks, "because it's very different from my grandfather's style of bakery... but they are very happy for me... they want to visit Singapore."

Many of Cherrier's speciality breads feature decidedly untraditional ingredients, such as the pandan flan he's invented for Singaporean customers, the popular red miso and rye boule, or a mixed-grain baguette radiating unexpected warmth from curry spices (his father's favourite, he says). Has he not similarly experimented with croissants? "Not yet!" he grins, before assuming a pensive, intense expression. "I've tried adding matcha and white miso to brioche... for croissant, why not? I must think... maybe I'd just change part of the water, or spread something on the dough..."

But, s'il vous plait, not simply innovation for its own sake. "You must be serious when you prepare your croissants," Cherrier says. "You must be careful to control everything, there are a lot of critical points. The room cannot be too warm, the butter cannot be too firm or too soft. The croissants must not be over-proofed, or else the layers don't show properly, and there is too much yeasty flavour."

In the unlikely event that anyone ever has a leftover Cherrier croissant, what could they do with it? "Croissant au jambon!" says the chef. Stuff it with "cheese, ham, bechamel sauce seasoned with nutmeg, some cheese on top, bake it again... it's really good."





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## World wide web



Another baker known to his fans and readers for his eclectic, globe-trotting savoir faire, vividly espoused in his bakeries and books, Chef Dean Brettschneider takes pride in the fact that “my style is ‘New World Baking’, which means I don’t have any historic baking cultural boundaries... so I can bake what the people want, not what I am only classically trained to do. I am known for great breads, cakes and pastries, not just one area of baking!”

Agreeably enough – given the varied (and probably apocryphal) legends of their being created in the 1600s in the shape of the Turkish flag’s crescent moon, to commemorate Viennese victories over Turkish besiegers – croissants share the display quite happily with Turkish pide and other international delights at the New Zealander’s Hillcrest Road outlet, Baker & Cook. As you might expect, his recipe veers a little from the classical. “We have added a little sugar to our dough, plus a small amount of sourdough for a full fermented flavour. This is not typically French, but it goes down a treat with locals and also expats. A happy balance,” Brettschneider explains.

An even gilding and a “feather light” heft in the hand distinguish his croissant, whose porous interior one can easily picture as the perfect sponge for almond cream or the custard matrix of a bread and butter pudding – Brettschneider’s two recommendations for elevating leftover croissants.

There are no top-secret techniques to producing a sterling croissant, he avers: “Nothing is secret, just passion, knowledge, good ingredients and thinking... plus we also use New Zealand butter!”



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## Manual transmission

"You have to treat the dough like a baby at every single step," says Nick Chua, bending low over his proofed croissants as he tenderly brushes them with egg wash. His baking partner, Jason Tan, explains that it takes three days to bring these kids to term; dough mixed on day one, laminated with butter on day two, shaped on day three, and subsequently baked, with long rests and chilling periods between each phase to develop flavour and texture.

The two Le Cordon Bleu alumni run a tight ship at Nick Vina bakery at Icon Village in Tanjong Pagar, where, like an ark for artisan breads, an enormous proofing cabinet and work table form the heart of the room. This is where dough is slapped, rolled and coaxed into shape. "Our style is very traditional, with very little aid from modern day machinery and modern ingredients such as bread improvers, that speed up the baking process," says Tan.

Hence, pretty much unique among local bakeries, Nick Vina's croissants are entirely hand-formed. Built from French Type 55 flour, fresh yeast, milk, a little butter and a touch of honey, the dough comes together in barely a couple of minutes in an electric mixer. After that, it only ever encounters hands, a rolling pin, a ruler and a knife – no sheeter machines, not even a rolling croissant cutter. "Skills like temperature control, rolling and layering take a while to learn and master...it took me about a year to perfect the technique," says Tan.

What was their taste goal when designing their croissant recipe? "Rich!" chorus Tan and Chua, grinning in unison. "The lamination butter percentage is at least 40 per cent. It's a very traditional French-style recipe that leans to the denser side," details Tan, explaining that its moist, butter-saturated texture pre-dates the lighter, fluffier consistency that Viennese techniques introduced and refined in France during the mid 1800s. Like almost all the bakers we spoke to, Tan and Chua favour unsalted French butter churned from cream lightly fermented with a lactic culture, containing more butterfat – around 84 per cent – and less water than supermarket butter. Adds Chua, "When we once tried to make our croissants slightly less buttery in response to local customers' comments, our French and European customers told us 'no, no, you cannot make it less rich!'. Happily, they haven't since.

"A perfect croissant should be a beautiful caramel-brown on the outside and creamy yellow-white on the inside."



NICK CHUA (LEFT) AND JASON TAN

**1 2 3 MAKING HAND-FORMED CROISSANTS |** **1** MUSHROOM-TEXTURED FRESH YEAST. **2** JUST MIXED DOUGH **3** THE RESTED, CHILLED DOUGH ROLLS OUT SMOOTHLY. **4** UNSALTED BUTTER IS WRAPPED IN THE DOUGH. **5** KEEPING CORNERS NEAT MAKES FOR AN EVEN RISE. **6** REPEATED ROLLING AND FOLDING CREATES THE LAYERS. **7** HAND-CUTTING PASTRY TRIANGLES. **8** ROLLING THE TRIANGLES INTO NEATLY TAPERED CROISSANTS. **9** TWO COATS OF EGG WASH YIELD A SHINY, BRONZED FINISH.



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## Wild at heart

As for open secrets, "More than anything, we have to mention that our breads are made by experienced artisan bakers," says Chef Shu Kimura of Maison Kayser's products. Kimura himself has bread in his bones; he belongs to the family who established Kimuraya in Tokyo's Ginza, one of Japan's oldest and most venerated bakeries. A law degree and the promise of a distinguished legal career could not keep him away from the oven, and after training and working in America for a few years, he had an epiphany at a Parisian bakery: "I was so moved by the baguette," he says, "It was so outstanding in its crispy touch and crust, the smoothness and perfume of wheat." The bakery belonged to renowned artisan baker Eric Kayser, who in 2001 joined forces with Kimura to open Maison Kayser in Tokyo. The Singapore branch followed a decade later.

The majority of bakeries around the world use fresh yeast for croissants, but at Kayser, a signature leaven is the key not just to croissants, but to all the bread formulas. A liquid mix of at least 3,000 wild yeast cultivars, stored and bred in an incubator custom-designed by Eric Kayser in collaboration with Electrolux, the leaven works slowly to produce subtle flavour nuances during prolonged low-temperature dough fermentation.

"We use AOC [Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée] fermented butter from Brittany," Kimura continues. Kneaded and formed into sheets in the bakery, the butter is kept chilled but never frozen, lest freezer burn compromise its texture and flavour. The other ingredients are similarly shepherded for delicate, uniform results; when the croissant is sliced across, the fractal honeycomb of internal air cells "looks like mesh nets, with uniform or similar size of spaces," he describes. "The crust is crispy and the crumb is soft. You can feel the elegant aroma of fermented butter with every bite."

"We don't see any difference in preferences for croissant between the French, Japanese and Singaporean customers. We believe our croissant is enjoyed by many people regardless of nationalities."





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## Taste Test

BY CHRISTOPHER TAN, JOSEPHINE SOH AND AMY VAN

### TIONG BAHRU BAKERY

- Very defined, beautiful layers – crisp outer layers contrast well with tender centre
- Colour not as even as the rest, but still appealing
- Balanced buttery taste, not too rich or cloying – you could eat a few of these in one sitting
- Dough has a pleasant touch of sweetness
- “Couture croissants”
- “I would eat this again and again and again and again and again and some more”



### NICK VINA

- Most hand-made appearance
- Darkest, glossiest finish of the lot
- Outer layers have perfect caramelised crunch and flavour
- Very rich, buttery, moist centres
- One is enough to fill you up
- Dough has floral aromas and delicate sour nuances from fermentation
- “What you’d expect of a good croissant in flavour, aroma and texture”
- “I feel happy eating this... with my morning café au lait”



### MAISON KAYSER

- Defined, distinct, flaky layers
- Golden, even colour
- Mild and pleasant butter flavour with a slightly sour end note
- Dry and fluffy texture — good for soaking up more butter and confitures



### BAKER & COOK

- Very evenly shaped, but least defined layers
- Internal texture is light, slightly bready, very consistent
- Mild flavour, aroma akin to crusty bread
- Would make a good base for sandwich fillings — cheese, ham — and hot preparations





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## a editor's note

### BEHIND THE SCENES



**TOP CHEFS SKETCHING THEIR INSPIRATIONS (FROM TOP) |**  
ERIC BOST | BRUNO MENARD |  
JASON ATHERTON

*The endless folds; the slabs of smooth butter; the patience and precision that come with handling the dough — rolling, laminating, cutting and forming it into crescent-shaped perfection.*

And finally when it's out of the oven — a crisp, multi-layered shell that shatters when bitten into, making way for pillow-soft buttery goodness. The art of baking these puffy golden beauties still amazes me. I know how tedious it is to master them even with the help of a dough-sheeter. But I believe that for this baked good to be perfect, like all other foods, it needs to be injected with a huge dash of soul and passion.

One of the best croissants I've ever had was in a small corner café in Avignon, Provence. It was summer and we were sitting outside sipping café au lait and tearing apart the flaky pastry and relishing its moist buttery interior. I didn't think we'd be able to get such superb croissants in Singapore after years of flat, greasy ones with an undesirable waxy aftertaste. Those mass-produced breads are thankfully a thing of the past.

The team recently did a taste test of a range of croissants and are happy to report that we now have amazingly scrumptious ones right here on our shores. We also find out what makes for a perfect croissant in our interview with several independent bakers — including famous French baker Gontran Cherrier who just launched Tiong Bahru Bakery, his wildly popular venture in Singapore.

What else has been happening on our tiny island's culinary scene? Plenty. Big names from overseas such as Bruno Menard and Jason Atherton have hopped on the bandwagon and set up shop here too. We met them along with other top chefs and got them to scribble their 'thought-processes' (i.e. inspirations) on paper. Flip through our pages and find out how these experts dream up their unique concepts and stellar menus just for your dining pleasure.

To start your read on a high note, we would like to congratulate the Singapore team for winning gold at Bocuse d'Or Asia, which we featured in last month's issue. Well done Singapore, and we're certain there's more to come!



### ON THE COVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALVIN TAN, FLAME PRODUCTIONS | CROISSANT COURTESY OF GONTRAN CHERRIER, TIONG BAHRU BAKERY

