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About a month ago, the New York Times declared the cupcake dead, gone and all but forgotten. Say it isn't so! How could America walk away from a sweet little dessert that is both delicious and adorable? And to top it off, imagine the potential for embarrassment! Just as the Big Apple was announcing the end of the birthday party as we know it, I was lining up red, white and blue cupcakes for a Fourth of July bash.

Living in New Hampshire rarely puts you close to the cutting edge of, well, more or less anything. Food trends, technology trends, fashion trends, it's been a while since northern New England led the

groundbreaking way. Of course, the alarm clock was invented in New Hampshire in 1787 and Maine gave us both Bean boots and lobster rolls.

Not that I'm complaining. Living off the edge gives you the sublime freedom to explore and be exactly who you are. However, devotees of the now passé cupcake deserve alternatives. So, all you fancy-pants New York writers ... what do you suggest? You can't shout nay and then walk away.

First on the next or now food fad list is probably kale. While delicious, these hardy greens are hardly birthday material. After working up an appetite with pin the tail on the donkey, most boys and girls are not begging for a tall, cool glass of kale juice.

Then comes quinoa. Nutty, chewy and loaded with protein, quinoa is both tasty and good for you. I even served it at a birthday dinner last spring. But not for dessert. Quinoa may start to pop up on menus from here to eternity but, no, it will not take over where the cupcake left off.

Cronuts? Whoopie pies? Macarons? They've all been heralded as the next worth-standing-in-line-for-two-hours treat. Let's take them one at a time.

With a registered trademark and warning to beware of imitations, the cronut is doing its best to remain a uniquely New York treat. By all accounts, it is worth the trip but it's been a while since I had cause to visit New York. I'm still not convinced that a donut-croissant hybrid is enough of a reason to jump on the train. Besides, when it comes to standing in line for an hour or more, well, better you than me.

Since they were invented in Maine, whoopie pies are easy to find (at least in New England). They are piled high in sweet pyramids in bakery windows, at farmers' markets and farm stands. Moreover, they're not particularly difficult to make and come in a variety of flavors. Unfortunately, in spite of their fun and funny name, they are nowhere near as pretty as a cupcake.

And finally, the macaron. Born in France and not to be confused with a macaroon, macarons are light and airy meringue cookies. (Macaroons are also tasty but moister, denser and made with coconut.) These French confections are tricky but nowhere near impossible to make and are definitely worth the effort. As long as you don't bake them on a damp, humid or rainy day, you shouldn't have any trouble. By themselves or with a luscious dab of mousse and a few berries, macaron are definitely birthday party worthy.



While I don't intend to give up cupcakes anytime soon, a batch of macaron sounds delightful right about now. Bon appétit!

Susan

Almond Macarons with Chocolate-Raspberry Ganache

These delicate cookies are crisp on the outside, slightly chewy inside. They are worthy of any celebration, be it a birthday dinner or end-of-summer afternoon tea with an old friend. Enjoy!

Makes about 16 cookies

3 ounces whole almonds or 3/4 cup almond flour
1 cup confectioners' sugar
2 large egg whites
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 cup granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Chocolate-Raspberry Ganache (recipe follows)

Put the oven racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven and preheat to 325 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with silicon baking mats or parchment paper.

Put the almonds and confectioners' sugar in a food processor and pulse until finely ground.

Put the egg whites and salt in a bowl and beat with an electric mixer at medium-high speed until soft peaks form. With the mixer on medium, gradually add the granulated sugar and vanilla. Increase the mixer speed to high and beat until stiff, glossy peaks form.

In 2 batches, gently fold the almond mixture into the egg whites until just combined.

Use a pastry bag with a large tip to drop quarter-sized rounds about 1 inch apart onto the prepared pans. Alternatively, use a small (1 1/2-2-teaspoon) scoop to measure out small mounds and place about 2 inches apart on the pans. If necessary, smooth the tops with a wet fingertip. Let the macarons sit at room temperature for 20-30 minutes before baking.

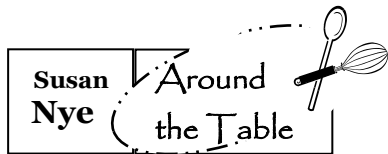
Bake at 325 degrees, switching and turning the pans halfway through, for 10-15 minutes or until the macarons are puffed and tops appear dry.

Cool the macarons in the pan for 10 minutes before transferring to a rack to cool completely. Spread ganache on half of the cookies, top with the remaining halves to make little sandwiches and gently press together.

If you are not going to eat all the cookies the day you make them, store extras before filling in an air-tight container in the refrigerator for 2-3 days.

For a razzle-dazzle presentation, tint the macarons pink with gel food coloring. Or use blueberry jam or orange marmalade and Grand Marnier in the ganache and tint the cookies blue or orange. Alternatively, you can fill the cookies with lemon, orange or lime curd, buttercream or jam and tint them to match. The possibilities are endless.





*Another recipe from Susan Nye:
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Chocolate-Raspberry Ganache

2 tablespoons heavy cream
2 tablespoons seedless raspberry jam
1 teaspoon Framboise
Pinch salt
About 2 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
About 2 ounces milk chocolate, chopped

While the macarons bake, combine the cream, jam, Framboise and salt in a small heavy saucepan. Add the chocolate and heat on low until the chocolate just starts to melt. Remove from the heat, let sit for a few minutes and then whisk until the chocolate is smooth and completely melted.

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