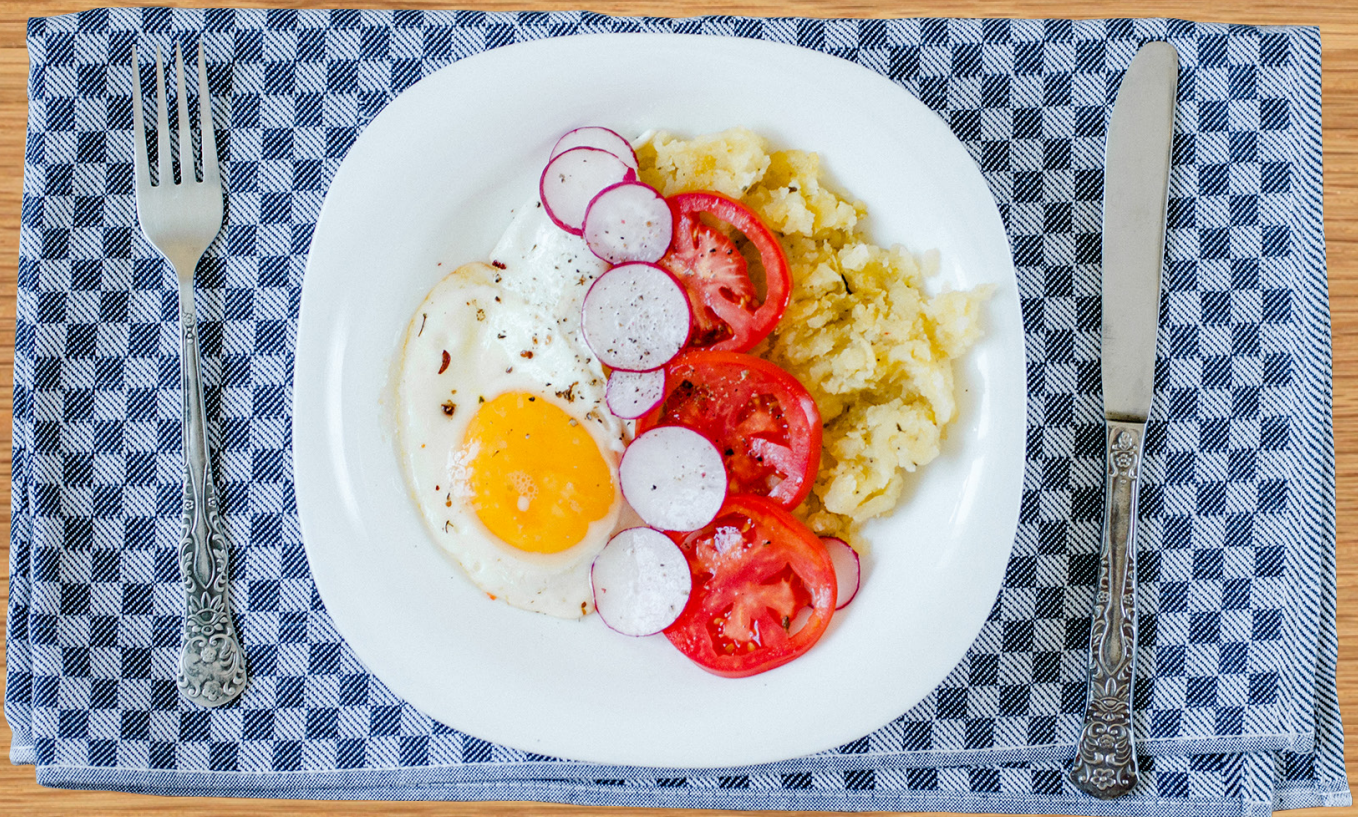


LUCKY PEACH

Breakfast par egg-celence

The best ways around the globe to start your day



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croissant crazy

All pastries have a past, and the beloved croissant is no exception.

by Lily Starbuck

A freshly baked, quality croissant is a marvel. It is part architecture and part alchemy; a miracle rendered in butter, flour, and sugar that is simultaneously crisp and pillow-tender, ethereally buttery yet light enough to eat at the start of the day.

The modern croissant is made up of water, milk, flour, yeast, sugar, and fat—usually butter, sometimes margarine. The crescent-shaped pastries are fashioned from laminated dough, usually with a ratio of three parts butter to ten parts flour. Pastry chef François Payard (a third-generation baker and the chef of FP Patisserie in New York) says that when the pastries bake the butter makes little pockets of steam in the dough, which creates the layers that give a croissant its unmistakable flakiness.

You know you have a perfect

croissant when you cut it in half and see “alveoli”—Payard adopts the word for the sacs in our lungs—in the middle.

But how did buttery little crescent moons with lung sacs in them make their way to our table? By following the history of those ingredients and the people who put them together, the story of the croissant tells the story of Europe as a whole. Rising and falling empires, wars, and marriages all contributed to the croissant as we know it today.

Fifteenth to Sixteenth Century

The tale of the croissant begins in Austria in the 1400s, with the kipfel, a crescent-shaped morning pastry. Made with brioche-like dough, it was denser and less flaky than the croissant we know today. The exact history of the kipfel is hazy: the word was used in Austrian cuisine as far back as the thirteenth

century, referring to crescent-shaped sweets, but it does not refer specifically to the Viennese breakfast pastry until the fifteenth century, according to Jim Chevallier’s August Zang and the French Croissant. (A dessert called gateaux en croissants appeared at a Parisian banquet for Catherine de’ Medici in 1549; however, that word likely referred to crescent-shaped cakes and confections, not the pastry we know today.)

In the sixteenth century, the royal court of Vienna appointed its first court confectioner, an official recognition of the baking and confectionary innovation going on in Vienna at the time. By 1568, Vienna was home to a few confectioners’ shops, thanks to the trickle-down influence of the royal court and the increased availability of sugar, though sugar was still an expensive luxury and its consump-

tion was limited to the wealthiest segment of society.

Seventeenth Century

In 1653, the first documented recipe for pâte feuilletée (puff pastry), appeared in François Pierre de la Varenne’s *Le Pâtissier François*, the first book to catalogue French pastry arts. After Varenne codified it, this spiritual antecedent to croissant dough became essential to the French pastry repertoire.

A popular croissant creation myth dates back to this era. Legend has it that during the 1683 siege of Vienna a group of bakers discovered Ottoman Turks tunneling into the city. To celebrate their discovery, they created a crescent-shaped pastry modeled after Turkish flag. The problem with the story: crescent-shaped baked goods existed in Austria long before, and a similar myth exists for the Turkish siege of Budapest just three years later.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, falling sugar prices allowed wealthy non-royals in Paris to enjoy sweets that were once exclusive to the courts, similar to what had happened in Austria in the previous century. When Louis XIV moved the government from Paris to Versailles, Paris became a site of rebellion against the ancien régime, a large part of which involved meeting to discuss new ideas over tea or coffee and pastries.

Eighteenth to Nineteenth Century

The marriage between Austrian princess Marie Antoinette and French king Louis XIV is often attributed to the creation of the croissant in France. In order to fully embrace her new country, the new queen was forced to cut ties with her family, even having to leave her beloved dogs back in Austria. In the court of Versailles, where it was custom for the king and queen to eat in front of an audience, it is said that Marie Antoinette refused, enjoying her beloved kipfel—one of the only comforts to remind her of home—in private. Many believe that she christened the kipfel the croissant, thereby bringing it into fashion in France. The story is apocryphal: a flaky pastry going by that name did not exist until well into

the nineteenth century. Still the tale points to a truth about pastry at the time: it was still reserved for people in high society. The democratization of pastry and sweets would not come until many years after the French Revolution.

Baking ingredients, like eggs, butter, cream, chocolate, and sugar, were still expensive in the early 1800s, but rising wealth in Vienna between 1815 and 1848 meant that pastry culture was accessible to an ever-growing segment of the population. The same was true in Paris, where the population doubled between 1815 and 1861. While café culture in Paris had been around for about a hundred years, pastry shops were just becoming ubiquitous, feeding the appetites of the growing bourgeoisie.

It was at one of these new pastry shops where the French croissant came to be. In the late 1830s, journalist August Zang opened Boulangerie Viennoise, an upscale pastry shop in the heart of Paris specializing in treats from his native Vienna. He introduced the kipfel along with pain viennois (a Viennese-style sandwich



bread), both of which became widely popular in the city within ten years, and he coined the term viennoiserie for the family of French breakfast pastries. This kipfel was made with noticeably flakier dough than traditional brioche-based versions, and people began to refer to it as the croissant because of its crescent shape—though references to croissants made with true, yeasted puff pastry dough did not come until the 1900s.

In the years leading up to the Franco-Prussian War, butter became more expensive and scarce. In a sign of pastry’s importance to the French diet, Napoleon III hosted a competition to create a butter replacement. The result was margarine, which all but replaced butter in pastries of the time, and is often used by French bakeries today.

François Payard, who comes from a long line of bakers, says, “When my grandpa and my dad worked together in France, margarine was cheaper. That’s why they were using it, and that’s the

reason why the French started specifying croissant au beurre, meaning “with butter,” as opposed to the croissant ordinaire, made with margarine.

Twentieth Century to Present

Various recipes for a French pastry called a croissant appeared in the years after Zang’s bakery opened, but the first one to refer to a croissant based on pâte feuilletée did not appear until the beginning of the 1900s. A French baker named Sylvain Claudius Goy wrote a recipe in 1915 that specifically mentions pâte feuilletée, calling to roll the dough and laminate it with butter just as one would for the puff pastry—though the croissant dough would include yeast, which a traditional puff pastry does not. This technique remains at the core of the modern croissant.

The importance of quality ingredients and skilled labor for the croissant became apparent during the twentieth century. During World War I, sugar rationing was common in France, and selling pastries was temporarily banned as a result. After World War II, the rise of mass-produced food meant that croissants were more accessible than ever before. By the 1970s, many French bakeries were buying prefabricated, frozen croissants or croissant dough—a trend that continues today. In the U.S., mass-produced croissants and croissant dough also took off with the introduction of refrigerated Pillsbury Crescents in 1965 and frozen croissants by Sara Lee in 1981.

The democratization of croissants cemented its place at the heart of French breakfast, but its craft and quality remain under threat. In 2014, only 10 to 20 percent of the estimated thirty-five thousand boulangeries in France made fresh croissants (given the label fait maison, meaning homemade). Frozen croissants save bakeries money on labor, the most expensive part of the baking process.

“We don’t think about it so much in America, but labor is a staggering cost in France,” says David Lebovitz, an American pastry chef-turned-cookbook writer based in Paris. “Even bakers who you wouldn’t think are selling frozen croissants are. It makes sense: a croissant costs about a euro, which is pretty cheap if you look at the cost of butter and labor. It’s not easy to make money off that.”



Today, the croissant is ubiquitous outside of Europe, particularly in the U.S. While French bakeries struggle with preserving tradition, pastry chefs in America are looking to reinvent the classic croissant. Dominique Ansel, the former pastry chef of Daniel in New York City, is at the forefront of this with his now-infamous Cronut, a deep-fried, cream-filled doughnut-croissant hybrid.

Even traditionalists like Payard have experimented. His popular ham-and-cheese croissant is not something that his grandfather would recognize. But Payard says he is reluctant to experiment too much. "Croissants are the only piece of pastry that does not have to be innovative to be good," he told me. "You have to understand people: they don't always like too many complicated things. I believe what they like to get for breakfast is what they like to get for breakfast. It's routine."

Lebovitz agrees. "The French have a very vertical view of food," he says. "And what they do is very good, like the traditional croissants. They're not necessarily encouraged to think outside the box. If you said, let's add hazelnuts to this croissant, they'd say 'Huh?'" Why change a good thing?

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Reviews from our editors who have tried out the recipe

Very delicious, but it's so much work. Laminating the dough was the most challenging part for me. My family loved how the croissants turned out, but I won't be making them again unless it's for a special occasion.

Sarah Kingsley, senior editor

I felt like Gordan Ramsay! It was really cool being able to make something as fancy as croissants in my own kitchen. 10/10 for fun and flavor!

Laura Rowe, illustrator

The croissants turned out to be worth two days of work. I had my doubts when I first saw the recipe, but I'm definitely writing about this in my next column. If you're looking to impress your friends, make these croissants!

Matt Collins, food blogger

The Perfect Croissant Recipe (from Weekend Bakery's site)

Note: This recipe requires 48 hours, or two days, to do it properly!

Ingredients

For the croissant dough:

- 500 g French Type 55 flour or unbleached all-purpose flour / plain flour (extra for dusting)
- 140 g water
- 140 g whole milk (you can take it straight from the fridge)
- 55 g sugar
- 40 g soft unsalted butter
- 11 g instant yeast
- 12 g salt

Other ingredients:

- 280 g cold unsalted butter for laminating
- 1 egg + 1 tsp water for the egg wash

1 ounce = 28 grams and 1 pound = 453 grams

Scan QR code for full recipe!

