



Chocolate BURNED & Lessons LEARNED AT PASTRY BOOT CAMP

OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
ATTENDED PASTRY BOOT CAMP AT
THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA FOR
THE ULTIMATE IMMERSION IN ALL-THINGS BAKED

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THERE AREN'T MANY THINGS CALLED "BOOT CAMP" THAT SOUND FUN TO ME. I'm more of a "café-and-coffee" man than a "boots-in-the-mud" kind of guy. But when I heard about The Culinary Institute of America's Pastry Boot Camp, I knew it was a match made in pastry heaven. No pre-dawn wake-up calls, no push-ups, no whistle-blowing instructors, and the only thing feeling whipped at the end of the day is the cream. I spent five days learning hands-on tips and tricks from the masters and seriously upping my baking game. That's the boot camp for me!

As soon as I arrived on campus, I was already starstruck: The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) is where so many of the country's greatest chefs got their start, creating food that's both delectable and showstopping. From household names like television personality Anthony Bourdain and Iron Chef Cat Cora to three of our incredible test kitchen chefs at Hoffman Media, the alums of the CIA are varied and accomplished. I was nervous with anticipation as soon as I set foot on the campus in Hyde Park, New York. Who would my classmates be? What skills would I learn? As I watched CIA students dressed in chef's whites and checked pants hurrying to class or student-run restaurants, I was in culinary heaven.

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BAKE FROM SCRATCH
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It's been a lifelong dream to take a pastry class at a school like this. During high school, I worked at Edgar's Bakery in Birmingham, Alabama, where I spent days following the bakers and pastry chefs, hoping to learn to create beautiful treats like they did. But man, those butterflies! Even with my baking experience in high school and weekend baking at home, I knew I was totally a fish out of water and wasn't sure how I was going to handle five solid days in a professional kitchen. Would Chef like me? Would I get along with the other campers? Would I be able to stop myself from eating my weight in dough and pastries?

At CIA's Boot Camp, each instructor sets the tone for the week, and Chef Hans Welker, our professor, was phenomenal. A former pastry chef in the German Navy (a perfect leader for boot camp) and a Certified Master Baker, Chef Hans has cooked throughout Europe (Zurich, Berlin, Darmstadt) and was the director of the bread program at New York City's French Culinary Institute. Needless to say, he's an expert at pastry. He got hands-on right away and encouraged lots of questions. Through his wit and willingness to jump in and assist each student, he turned what could have been a very stern learning environment into one full of humor—and fun. What a relief for my butterflies! There were 12 students in class (a baker's dozen, if you count Chef Hans) and on Day One, we were all sizing each other up; I wondered if I was going to be out of my league. But Pastry Boot Camp is for pastry fans, not professional pastry chefs. Some students were very serious about pastry, and some even had dreams of opening bakeries, but most of us just wanted to learn to host better brunches.

Almost immediately, friendships and bonds started to form. Everyone was eager to get their hands in the dough, get the mixers fired up, and get the pans in the oven. There was definitely excitement as we suited up in the uniforms we were required to wear every day: Chef's whites were a must, but fortunately for me, the neckerchief was optional (it was itchy). We all got paired with a kitchen buddy. Bethanie, a producer for a media firm in New York City, was mine. We said our hellos with arms stacked with eggs, cream, and vanilla beans. Since everything at Pastry Boot Camp is made from scratch, we had to get cracking! Bethanie and I had a fun NYC-meets-Bama dynamic. (She got used to hearing me say y'all!) Since we were both relatively inexperienced, we were a perfect match—ready to get our hands dirty, eager to make the best products we could, and ready to work as a team. She was my partner in crime, and maybe I should say my partner in crème! for the rest of the week.



We were such a good team that we finished early on the first day, making *crème anglaise*, *pâte à choux*, and cherry *clafoutis*. Everyone else was still hustling and cleaning, and Bethanie and I were just resting on our laurels, congratulating each other. Well, it's true that pride cometh before the fall. On the morning of Day Two, we discovered that we'd finished early because we'd completely missed Chef's instruction to make our own pastry cream! We needed that pastry cream from Day One to make *éclairs* on Day Two, so we were scrambling! Luckily, another good-natured team let us borrow theirs. (Thanks, Jennifer Lyn.)

Pastry cream is important as it turns out, and not just for teaching life lessons. We used it over and over throughout the week, mixing it into Italian meringues, piping it into those *éclairs*, and more. We learned piping techniques that we used in practically everything, and I turned out to be a natural, even though I'd never done it before. They called me the "Prodigy of Piping." Throughout the week, everyone in the class had a similar moment of glory. Whether baking a sponge cake and icing it, or preparing the perfect *pot de crème*, at some point each person left class with a big smile and a feeling of accomplishment.

We had a lot of laughs in the kitchen, but it could also get intense. Imagine this scene: One team is making a custard on the stovetop while someone else is worried about burning croissants in the oven, and yet another student starts shouting, "Hot pot! Hot pot coming through!" When things started heating up, Chef Hans reminded us that patience is the most important lesson pastry has to teach us. When you're in the kitchen, you get excited and want to move onto the next step. But temperature and timing are so important in baking that patience is key.

I learned that lesson the hard way when I poured too-warm chocolate into cream. When the two met—disaster (see photo above!). The chocolate dried too quickly and seized up, creating small beads in a chocolate mousse that was supposed to be smooth. It was my second great blunder of the week, but in the midst of my mistake, Chef Hans found a learning opportunity: The chocolate still had good flavor, so Chef taught me to hide it with berry mousse. Instead of piping the chocolate mousse in the goblet to create a visible chocolate layer, we kept the chocolate centered in the glass with berry mousse piped all around to hide my messy mistake. In the pastry world, things don't always go according to plan, but you can't be defeated by a little setback. There's no crying over spilled milk, and there's no quitting over seized chocolate!



Class was so much fun, and I loved sharing every moment with our little gang of 12, such as seeing our perfectly browned croissants and *pains au chocolat* come out of the oven. I learned techniques that help me every day in my home kitchen. Yes, it's great to know that I can make a fabulous dessert or produce a perfect croissant if I have a weekend free to create. But I also learned things that come in handy all the time, like how to see the signs of dough being ready, or how to know whether peaks of egg whites are soft, medium, or stiff. I now know how to gauge temperature, texture, and signs of doneness to help me navigate any recipe. These days, I cut my own vanilla beans instead of using paste. I crack my eggs on the counter instead of the bowl. And whenever I'm folding ingredients, I hear Chef's voice in my head saying, "12 o'clock, 6 o'clock, give a quarter-turn. 12 o'clock, 6 o'clock, give a quarter-turn," a method that allows whipped ingredients to be incorporated and retain their fluffiness instead of having the mixture collapse.

Pastry boot camp was a longtime dream that taught me more than I ever expected. Each of CIA's Boot Camps is a different experience. They have courses at all four of their campuses: New York, California, Texas, and Singapore; find a complete list at the CIA website, ciachef.edu. There's no need to be a professional. All you need is the ability to follow a basic recipe, a love of learning, and excitement about all things culinary. ☑

