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SECTION



Chef Shanna O'Hea with her finished buche de noel. Below, from left, O'Hea smooths chocolate buttercream over the cake; rolls the cake into its log shape; and uses a pastry bag to create the meringue mushrooms that will dot the completed product. The French dessert was inspired by the ancient tradition of throwing a yule log on the fire to welcome the return of the sun at the winter solstice.

TO VIEW VIDEO OF CHEF SHANNA O'HEA MAKING A BUCHE DE NOEL, GO TO PRESSHERALD.COM

Photos by John Patriquin/
Staff Photographer

Yule jewel

If you've seen those fancy buches de noel - yule logs - in high-end food catalogues and neighborhood bake shops, you've probably fantasized about making one yourself.

But you never seem to get around to it, because it looks so... difficult.

All those cocoa-dusted meringue mushrooms seem so intimidating, even though they're just egg whites and sugar. The marzipan decorations,



MEREDITH GOAD
SOUP TO NUTS

the expertly rolled sponge cake - it's enough to make you throw up your hands and reach for the Christmas cookie cutters instead.

After spending a recent morning watching chef Shanna O'Hea make her

Making a **buche de noel**, or yule log, is an arduous process to be sure, but if you've the time and the inclination, the potential payoff - a killer dessert and exclamations of awe from family and friends - is huge.

version of a buche de noel, I discovered that while there are one or two tricky steps in making one of these festive cakes, it's the time required that is most challenging.

Most people are so strapped for time these days, they want everything they do in the kitchen to be as quick and easy as possible. This project isn't quick, nor is it as easy as making a few dozen Santa-and-his-reindeer cookies.

But this is one of those holiday undertakings that is truly a labor of love. Think of it as a gift you give your family

- or your guests, given that it will make a stunning centerpiece for your holiday party table. (And you can brag to all your friends that you did it yourself.)

The buche de noel is a classic French dessert inspired by the ancient tradition of throwing a yule log on the fire to welcome the return of the sun at the winter solstice. Folks in the Middle Ages believed that the ashes from this fire could ward off evil and help cure disease.

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GOAD

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No one knows exactly when the idea for a cake that looks like a yule log tickled some French baker's brain cells, but one story says it happened after Napoleon Bonaparte ordered Parisians to close their chimneys to keep out the cold that he believed caused illness. The buche de noel, the story goes, was created as a symbol of familial warmth, since people couldn't actually gather around a warm hearth during the holidays.

In recent years, the cakes have grown in popularity, rivaling gingerbread houses as the go-to, showy holiday centerpiece. From the inexpensive yule logs at the grocery store to the fancy \$85 buche de noel sold online by Williams-Sonoma, they seem to be everywhere.

Shanna O'Hea owns the Kennebunk Inn and its restaurant, Academe, with her husband Brian, who's also a chef. She learned how to make buche de noel from her mentor, Michel Boulard, a well-known private French chef in New York who used to work for the king of Belgium. Every year, Boulard still sends O'Hea a box filled with tiny little meringue birds to place on her cakes.

"When I first worked for Michel, which was 11 years ago now, I had never heard of it before," O'Hea said. "He sort of started a Christmas tradition for us."

During the Christmas season, O'Hea makes two or three buche de noel every week, and serves slices (with a scoop of ice cream) as a dessert special at Academe. She also takes custom orders for the cakes.

"If you want to try making this symbol of the season yourself,



John Patriquin/Staff photographer
O'Hea applies vanilla buttercream vines and flowers to the cake.

For the bottoms, O'Hea said, "you want to do the same thing and then sort of pull upwards, basically like making a Hershey's Kiss."

Be sure you make as many bottoms as tops, and put some variety into your creations. Make some mushrooms big and fat, others small and dainty.

After you have "glued" the caps and stems together, turn them upside down on the tray until they have time to set.

O'Hea usually makes about 15 mushrooms per cake. She recommends letting them dry for 10 days to two weeks. If you have an oven with a pilot light, you can stick a tray of mushrooms in there for 24 hours to speed up the drying process.

To test if they are ready, try digging a hole in the bottom of one of the mushrooms with a toothpick. If the meringue is light and dry, you'll be able to make a hole easily. If it is still wet, soft or tacky, continue to let them dry.

The cake itself can go into the refrigerator when you're done — O'Hea says it will keep for as long as a month — but don't decorate it until you're ready to

serve or display it in your home. The mushrooms (and any of the marzipan decorations) will "all turn into sugar" because of the humidity in the refrigerator. The marzipan gets tacky and wet looking, O'Hea said, and "the birds look like they're crying."

When O'Hea sells a whole cake, she always delivers the decorations separately to avoid this problem, and her customers get the fun of decorating the cake themselves.

THE MARZIPAN MOSS

Making the moss is a little like playing with Play-Dough. Place the powdered sugar on some parchment paper when you mix it with the marzipan and the green food coloring so it will be less sticky. Wearing gloves helps too.

"You can either do it fresh if you want that chewy marzipan, which I kind of prefer, or you can let it dry out and be more crunchy," O'Hea said.

O'Hea uses a spider strainer to make her moss, sprinkling a little powdered sugar on it first so the marzipan won't stick. Any kind of mesh will do, as long as it's not too small. "A chinois would be way too fine," O'Hea said.

Be sure to make clumps of moss in varying sizes, like the mushrooms.

THE BUTTERCREAM FROSTING

The vanilla buttercream holds up beautifully, O'Hea says, so you can make it a little ahead and let it sit for a while at room temperature.

The chocolate buttercream is a little trickier, so O'Hea usually makes it by hand just before she

uses it.

She lets the butter sit out overnight so it will be soft and easier to incorporate. For the chocolate, she chooses Callebaut, but any good-quality chocolate will do.

"I try to melt this (chocolate) a little bit ahead of time," O'Hea said. "If you try mixing it in when the chocolate's still hot, you can have problems of the butter melting too quickly. It's a little bit of a finicky buttercream, which is why I like to do it by hand."

Alternate adding a little bit of the butter, then a little of the cream. Try to keep it the same smooth, creamy consistency throughout this process.

ROLLING THE CAKE

Probably the second most scary thing about making a buche de noel is the idea of rolling the cake.

"You don't want to try to do this with a cake you can't roll," O'Hea said, "because it's just going to be a nightmare."

One of the most important things to remember is to cool the cake on parchment paper so you can use the paper to help you roll the cake, and the cake will be easier to move to a serving platter when you're ready. Even if you're planning to do the whole assembly directly on a serving platter, use the parchment paper — you can trim the paper away later after you've rolled and frosted the cake.

After trimming the edges of the cake, cut off a larger strip on the end, as the recipe instructs, and set it aside. Frost the cake with the chocolate buttercream, then place the reserved strip on the bottom of the cake, where you will be grabbing it with your hands to start rolling. The strip acts kind of like a structural support so the cake won't fall apart when you start to roll it.

O'Hea says that when it comes to rolling — well, you just have to go for it. Kind of like jumping out of a plane, you don't want to hesitate. Grab and roll, and don't worry about the buttercream that squeezes out of the sides. When you're done rolling, you can just scoop up that frosting and smear it back onto the cake.

Pipe the rest of the chocolate buttercream using a tip that is flat on one side and flared on the other. Or take a star tip and squish it. Either method will give you the grainy look of a wood log.

Finish decorating with the small green vines and flowers, then put the log in the refrigerator so it can set.

When you're ready, bring the yule log out, add the mushrooms and moss, and get ready to wow your guests.

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YULE LOG — BUCHE DE NOEL

MERINGUE MUSHROOMS

4 egg whites
1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
Fill a pot halfway with water and bring to a boil, then turn down to simmer.

Put egg whites and sugar in a mixing bowl, place over simmering water, and continuously whisk until all the sugar melts. This should take 4 to 6 minutes. The egg whites will feel warm to the touch.

Beat on high speed with a whisk for 5 minutes, until they are shiny, tripled in size, and fluffy and white.

Place meringue in a piping bag with a wide-mouth round tip. Line parchment paper on a sheet tray. Pipe circles in varying sizes; these will be the tops. Pipe out "Hershey Kiss" forms by pulling up when piping circles; these will be the stems.

Let mushrooms dry on a sheet tray for 1 to 2 weeks, or until firm and crispy.

Make a glaze royale glue (1 egg white, ¼ cup powdered sugar and a dash of lemon juice).

Make a hole in the bottom of the mushroom top with a toothpick, attach bottom, and top with glaze royale glue. Let set. Some mushrooms can be dusted with cocoa powder to give a dirt-like effect.

CHOCOLATE CAKE

1½ cups sugar
10 egg yolks
10 egg whites
6½ ounces chocolate, melted
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) butter

Melt chocolate and butter in a microwave-safe dish with 50-percent power.

Place egg yolks and sugar in a mixing bowl. Slowly incorporate yolks with sugar, adding a little at a time so as not to burn the yolks. Mix on high with a whisk for 3 to 4 minutes, until light and fluffy.

In a clean mixing bowl, mix egg whites until you have stiff peaks. Alternate folding in flour and egg whites into chocolate and sugar mixture, until just combined.

Bake in a 350-degree convection oven (or 375 degrees in a regular oven) in a buttered, parchment and floured pan, un-



O'Hea fashions one of the meringue mushrooms that decorate the cake.

til toothpick inserted comes out clean, between 10 to 14 minutes. Rotate pan halfway through the baking process to ensure even baking.

CHOCOLATE BUTTERCREAM

14 ounces chocolate (good quality), melted
2 cups heavy cream
14 tablespoons (3½ sticks) butter, soft

Melt chocolate in a microwave safe-bowl at 50-percent power and set aside. Alternate adding butter and heavy cream and whisking constantly; the end result should be thick, creamy frosting.

VANILLA BUTTERCREAM

8 egg whites
¾ cup sugar
28 tablespoons (3½ sticks) butter, soft

1 teaspoon vanilla
Fill a pot halfway with water and bring to a boil. Turn down to simmer.

Put egg whites and sugar in a mixing bowl, place over simmering water, and continuously whisk until all the sugar melts. This should take 3 to 5 minutes. The egg whites will feel warm to touch.

Beat on high speed with a whisk attachment for 5 minutes, until they are shiny, tripled in size, and fluffy and white. Add butter by the tablespoon on low speed, until all butter is incorporated.

Wipe down sides of the bowl and turn speed to high on mixer. Mix until combined and buttercream is produced.

If buttercream breaks, place in a hot oven for 1 minute so frosting begins to melt, place back in the mixing bowl on high speed with a whisk, and whip on high until incorporated.

Add vanilla, and reserve three

quarters. Divide the remainder, and make one green (for vines and leaves) and one pink (for flowers).

MARZIPAN MOSS

1 marzipan, 4-ounce tube
¾ cup powdered sugar
3 drops green food coloring
Mix marzipan with green food coloring and 1/2 cup powdered sugar until incorporated.

Marzipan should feel less sticky. Dust spider with powdered sugar.

Push marzipan through a mesh strainer to form moss. Cut off with a knife and reserve.

GLACE ROYAL BIRDS

Know a fabulous chef who will send these to you and paint a face on with red food coloring eyes and brown food coloring beaks.

YULE LOG ASSEMBLY

Unmold cake on parchment paper, which will slide in rolling the cake.

Cut 1-inch strip off of cake, reserve, and frost with chocolate frosting ¾-inch thick.

Place strip on bottom of cake and, using parchment paper, roll cake.

If any buttercream comes out, use a spatula to frost the cake.

Pipe vanilla buttercream on the ends of the log and two knots on top.

Fill piping bag with a flat/ fluted tip with chocolate buttercream. Pipe lines all over log, and seal each end.

Place in refrigerator. Once set, slice each end with a hot knife and each knot on top.

Decorate log with green vines, leaves and, with a small round tip, pink blossoms created with a three-dot combination. Refrigerate and let set.

Scatter marzipan moss, mushrooms and birds all over log and serve.

IF ALL THIS STILL LOOKS LIKE too much work, you can order a buche de noel from Shanna O'Hea for \$49. O'Hea can be reached at the Kennebunk Inn, 45 Main St., Kennebunk, 04043; by calling 965-3351; or by emailing info@thekennebunkinn.com or shanna@thekennebunkinn.com

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