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Topping Off Holiday Meals

DESSERTS

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Faced with the pleasant but pressured bustle of organizing holiday get-togethers, smart hosts know that simplicity is the key to survival — except, that is, for dessert, which can add a sumptuous touch to the most modest spread and requires nothing more than a trip to the bakery.

A festooned conical tower of glazed cream puffs called croquembouche (crackle in the mouth) can be both dessert and centerpiece. The fanciful bûche de Noël, or yule log, comes in several combinations of cake and striated “bark,” decorated with holiday or forest motifs. Gingerbread constructions can be traditional or fashioned into cabins, A-frames or castles.

Some bakers even offer a special cake for Twelfth Night, called galette des rois or gâteau des rois or simply king’s cake. It features a round of flaky pastry enclosing cream or frangipane and a hidden trinket or bean; traditionally, the lucky recipient of the slice with the charm becomes king or queen of the evening.

For a personal spin on a confection, order it at least a week in advance, especially in this busy season.

Maarten Steenman, pastry chef and co-owner of **La Tulipe** in Mount Kisco, will take special orders for any cake you can think up. Few pastry chefs are as enthusiastic about constructing gingerbread homes as he: Walls of hand-cut sheets of homemade gingerbread support a roof with snow, icicles and a “smoking” chimney. A classic galette des rois and four yule logs are available this year (\$38 for eight inches): chocolate with praline, chocolate with chocolate, chestnut with rum and white with lingonberries. A croquembouche here is 20 inches high and costs \$235, and 7-inch wine cakes like Sauternes-Champagne mousse cake go for \$33.

Carved into the corner of an old bank on Purchase Street in Rye, **Pâtisserie Salzburg** continues to attract a clientele faithful since Manfred Hirz opened his first shop in Armonk 11 years ago. Mr. Hirz owns the Rye patisserie with Christine Ponton, who says that customers coming in for the Austrian and Swiss specialties line the sidewalk at holiday time. Bûche de Noël here comes in four combinations of white or chocolate cake covered in a bark of chocolate, lemon or white butter cream. Snow,

Saint Nick, holly leaves and berries decorate the logs (\$45 for 6 to 8 servings; \$75 for 12 to 14). The king’s cake is \$16 and hides a chocolate coin. Stollen, classic cinnamon stars (zimtsterne), and doughnuts filled with apricot or raspberry jam (sufganiyot) are also offered.

The tiny glass case at **Pâtisserie Lulu** in Scarsdale is lined with stunning pastries and cakes, evanescent on the tongue yet thick with decoration of remarkable artistry. Ingredients are organic and local wherever possible, and even preserves are made on site and from scratch. Jay Muse, the owner and pastry chef, has composed a full holiday menu. Limited editions of his logs, both yule and Hanukkah, are \$45 for an eight-incher and come in dark chocolate, organic vanilla bean and lemon coconut. These are decorated with either holly, berries and meringue mushrooms or with dreidels, a menorah and a star of David. Other special cakes (about \$150 each) include a giant menorah, a snow-girl with a Pucci scarf and even an edible Xbox.

The appropriately named **Magnificent Edibles** in White Plains celebrates the season with a beribboned croquembouche, priced

from \$145 for a 12-inch tower to \$295 for one 25 inches tall. Festive gingerbread log cabins, as well as more traditional buildings, start at about \$50. The king's cake — here, puff pastry filled with almond cream or fruit — contains a golden, edible dragée for the lucky recipient (\$20 for a seven-inch round, \$34 for the nine-inch). Bûche de Noël — chocolate, mocha or Grand Marnier — runs \$12 for 5 inches to \$49 for 20 inches of pastry log.

La Renaissance Pastries in Larchmont is roomy enough for a few tables and deep, red velvet chairs, décor that sets an opulent mood for the classic French-style pastries baked here. Yule logs come in dark, white and mocha chocolate (\$32 for eight inches). For Twelfth Night, a classic galette des rois is \$20 for an eight-incher.

Up north in Pawling, Shannon McKinney always whips up something unusual in his **Corner Bakery** kitchen. He has not priced his holiday specials yet, but his dense raisin stollen with marzipan center always sells out fast and, he says, is lovely sliced and toasted at breakfast. Belgian chocolate cakes and rich bûche de Noël as well as his traditional eggnog chiffon pie also go quickly. Hanukkah cookies are decorated with blue-sugar stars and dreidels.

Bea Ebinger, owner of **Beascakes** in Armonk, likes to change the gingerbread confection every year. This year, the work in progress is a gingerbread and chocolate carousel with either horses or reindeer. The kitchen is kosher, and for Hanukkah there will be a dreidel-shaped cake (under \$40), apple cake and chocolate ganache cake. A special black plum tart with frangipane (for about \$30) is available as well. Leaves of molded chocolate and meringue mush-

rooms top her mocha and chocolate ganache bûche de Noël.

Chiboust Bistro and Bakery in Tarrytown is mostly bistro, and the pastry displayed in the small front shop at the entrance is made with the restaurant's single-portion desserts in mind. But the manager says that if one of these little cakes or tarts appeals, customers can order it in a larger size. The hazelnut napoleon, for example, comes in 6-, 8- and 12-inch squares; and a classic apple tarte Tatin or an apple crumble will be enough for the holiday dinner table. Two flavors of bûche de Noël are planned (though the price has yet to be determined): chocolate with chestnut and chocolate with vanilla cream, both under pavings of chocolate bark. Or try the popular and pretty plum-and-frangipane tart or the one with poached pear (\$26 each).

At first glance, **Connie's Bakery and General Store** in Mount Kisco seems to be just a gift shop displaying local Hudson Valley handmade items, farm products and gift baskets, a noble philanthropic enterprise that donates 100 percent of its profits to charities. But beyond the narrow entrance, the baker's tables and the ovens are in full use. In charge of training the program's apprentices, **Simeon Manber**, the pastry chef, gears up for the season with a simple gingerbread country cottage with a removable roof that allows small figurines or gifts to be placed within, if desired (\$35 to \$40). An 8-inch bûche de Noël is \$34 and comes in chocolate with vanilla butter cream, and the reverse, both under chocolate bark. Also on hand are Hanukkah doughnuts and cookies with designs in bright sugar crystals. This year two special cakes are offered: peppermint

patty cake of chocolate and vanilla layers and mint butter cream (\$18 for a 6-inch round); and a "gift box" cake, an 8-inch square tied with a red marzipan ribbon.

Kaye Hansen and Peter Simon, owners of **Riviera Bakehouse** in Ardsley, offer some elaborate holiday cake sculptures, like a completely decorated three-dimensional tree, 6 to 8 inches high with an angel on top (about \$75), and a three-dimensional snowman, 6 to 9 inches tall, with hat and scarf (\$60 to \$75). Theme cakes this year include a New Year's Eve in New York cake, the skyline circling the sides and Central Park ice skaters on top; and a Winter Wonderland of scenic white chocolate appliqués and a snowman. Among other items, there's a real German stollen and a bûche de Noël (12 inches for under \$30).

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BEASCAKES 29 Maple Avenue, Armonk; (914) 273-3612.

CHIBOUST BISTRO AND BAKER Y 14 Main Street, Tarrytown; (914) 703-6550 or www.chiboust.com.

CONNIE'S BAKERY AND GENERAL STORE 41 South Moger Avenue, Mount Kisco; (914) 242-2014 or www.connies.org.

CORNER BAKER Y 10 Charles Colman Boulevard, Pawling; (845) 855-3707 or www.McKinneyandDoyle.com.

LA RENAISSANCE PASTRIES 140 Chatsworth Avenue, Larchmont; (914) 834-0244.

LA TULIPE 455 Lexington Avenue, Mount Kisco; (914) 242-4555.

MAGNIFICENT EDIBLES 208 Mamaroneck Avenue, White Plains; (914) 948-7673 or www.magnificentedibles.com.

PA TISSERIE LULU 40 Garth Road, Scarsdale; (914) 722-8300 or www.sweetsbylulu.com.

PA TISSERIE SALZBURG 77 Purchase Street, Rye; (914) 921-4458.

RIVIERA BAKEHOUSE 660 Saw Mill River Road, Ardsley; (914) 674-0000 or www.rivierabakehouse.com