



"Amy's adventures are of fairy tale magnitude. This book made me smile."

—Johnny Iuzzini,  
James Beard Award Winner,  
Author of *Dessert FourPlay*,  
Head Judge  
*Top Chef Just Desserts*

# Paris

## MY SWEET

A YEAR IN THE CITY OF LIGHT  
(AND DARK CHOCOLATE)

—AMY THOMAS—



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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over a period of years. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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To my dear family and friends in the States, who always supported me and enthused about my life abroad, but lured me back with their love.

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And to Allyson and Fred, without whom there would never have been a story to tell.

*Merci.*

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“Nine of every ten persons say they love chocolate. The tenth lies.”

—Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

“And I have the firm belief in this now, not only in terms of my own experience but in knowing about the experience of others, that when you follow your bliss, doors will open where you would not have thought there were going to be doors and where there wouldn’t be a door for anybody else.

If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track, which has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living.”

—Joseph Campbell

“Your good friend has just taken a piece of cake out of the garbage and eaten it. You will probably need this information when you check me into the Betty Crocker Clinic.”

—Miranda to Carrie on *Sex and the City*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE



Some names have been changed to protect people's privacy.

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— [ P R E L U D E ] —

LE TOUR DU CHOCOLAT

I guess you could say my story began with a bicycle and some bonbons. At the time, it just seemed like a fun summer vacation: it was 2008, and I did an apartment swap with someone in Paris. I had already visited earlier that year, but what can I say? When the invitation to spend time in the City of Light (and Dark Chocolate) comes knocking, my first response is “*pourquoi pas?*”

I’ve just always been one of those girls. I spent a college semester in Paris, and it was then I fell in love with the city’s beauty and grace—and Nutella street crepes. When I returned to the States, I wore silk scarves and a black beret; the only thing missing from my clichéd uniform were the Gaulois cigarettes.

I binged on French films, schooling myself in *nouvelle vague* directors, falling especially hard for Eric Rohmer, before contemporary movies like *The City of Lost Children* and *Amélie* seduced me. I studied the Lost Generation, reading Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Janet Flanner, and built a mini library so I’d never be far from Paris. I had books about cats in Paris, dogs in Paris, expats in Paris, Parisian interiors, Parisian gardens, and Parisian cuisine, organized by neighborhood; bistros of Paris, *pâtisseries* of Paris, and shopping in Paris. I became a regular at a café in my neighborhood in San Francisco simply because it served *café au lait* in little bowls instead of mugs, and I had more Eiffel Tower tchotchkes than I am comfortable admitting.

I was just another Francophile, like you. Until that summer of 2008.

That trip was the first time I was in Paris during the summer, and it was absolutely amazing. I loved that it was light out until after 10:00 p.m., giving me several extra hours to roam back-alley streets and sit by the Seine. I was excited to discover new neighborhoods like Bercy and Canal Saint-Martin and new “bistronomy” restaurants like Le Verre Volé and Le Comptoir du Relais. I got sucked into the semi-annual sales, *les soldes*, and hooked on Vélib’s, the public bike-sharing system.

And then there were all the *chocolatiers*.

By that time, I was just as obsessed with sweets as I was Paris. I had a column in *Metro* newspaper called “Sweet Freak” and a blog by the same name. I knew every bakery, dessert bar, *gelateria*, tea salon, and chocolatier in New York City. When I traveled, I built my itinerary around a town’s must-visit sweet spots.

So naturally during that week in Paris, I researched the city’s best chocolatiers, mapped out a circuit, and then Vélib’ed between eight of them. It was exhilarating and exhausting, not to mention decadent. It was a chocoholic’s dream ride. I wrote about my Tour du Chocolat for the *New York*



*Times*, and it went on to become a top-ten travel story for the year. As I was secretly plotting a way to spend more time eating chocolate in Paris, the in-house recruiter of the ad agency where I worked casually walked into my office one day and asked if I wanted to move to Paris. I was getting transferred to write copy for the iconic fashion label Louis Vuitton. It all happened so suddenly, and seemed so magical, that I had to ask: was Paris my destiny or sheer force of will?

I guess it goes to show that you just never know where life will take you. You search for answers. You wonder what it all means. You stumble, and you soar. And, if you're lucky, you make it to Paris for a while. Here's what happened when I did.

❁ ..... ❁  
A WHOLE NEW BATCH OF BONBONS

Can one question change your life? I'm willing to bet a twenty-five-piece box of Jean-Paul Hévin bonbons on it.

In the fall of 2008, I was sitting in my office, living what I considered to be a pretty great life. I was single, owned a cute apartment in the East Village, and I was braving New York's dating scene. I had the best friends in the world and a jam-packed social calendar. I enjoyed my job as an advertising copywriter. But what I really loved were my moonlighting dalliances: exploring bakeries, dessert bars, gelaterias, and chocolate boutiques and documenting my delicious discoveries for my "Sweet Freak" blog and *Metro* newspaper column, along with other local magazines and newspapers. You could say my life was good: easy, fun, *comfortable*.

I was enjoying my afternoon bonbon (a piece of 78 percent dark chocolate, hand-delivered by my boss who had brought it back from a business trip to Germany; it had these lovely little bits of cocoa that added a nice semi-crunchy texture to the sharp flavor). I was definitely coasting. My creative directors at Ogilvy & Mather, the agency where I worked, always made sure I wasn't overloaded. Which was a good thing since my best friend, AJ, and I were often in the habit of lingering over kingly royales at Keith McNally's fabulous Meatpacking District bistro, Pastis, until 2:00 a.m. On that particular autumn day, I was wondering if Rafea, the Romanian gazillionaire I had met the night before, was going to call when Allyson, the agency's in-house recruiter, walked into my office.

"What do you think about Paris?" she asked, pausing in the doorway to adjust her Ugg boot. I was surprised to see her. I had been with Ogilvy for two years, so there was rarely a reason for her to come into my office. I put the chocolate aside—already looking forward to getting back to its thin, almost bitter bite later—and gave her my full attention.

"Why, are you going over for vacation?" I asked, her visit suddenly making sense. A few months prior, I had spent a week in Paris, touring the best chocolatiers on the city's Vélib's—three-speed bicycles stationed all over the city that, for just a euro a day, were there for the taking and leaving. It was genius because it not only allowed me to hit up multiple chocolatiers each day, but also kept me from the annihilation of the bonbons from going straight to my ass. After my return, three colleagues who were planning trips to Paris had asked me for my must-eat-sweets itinerary. I thought Allyson might be a sweet freak too.

"No," she said, brushing her bangs out of her eyes, still all nonchalant as she took a seat in front of me. "Well, actually, they're looking for an English-speaking writer in the Paris office." Pause. Or

eyes locked. “I thought of you.” We both started to smile. “On the Louis Vuitton account,” she finished dramatically.

I spun myself around in my Aeron chair and laughed. “*What?* They’re looking for an English-speaking writer in Paris? To work on Louis Vuitton? And you’re asking *me?*” That elicited three nodding smiles from Allyson, and suddenly my life was changing.

The next few months were a blur of interviews, portfolio reviews, negotiations, and paperwork. They were also an emotional roller coaster. Of course I wanted to go live in Paris and work with one of the best fashion houses in the world. What Louboutin-loving, Coco-worshipping, macaron addict would I be? But what about my cute East Village co-op that my dad, an interior designer, and I had just finished decorating? What about my New York-based freelance network? And my “Sweet Freak” column? What about my circle of friends who, after having graduated from our roaring twenties to our (more or less) refined thirties, were now my modern family? And my crazy black tabby cat, Milo? What about him? Would I have to leave him behind, or could I get a French work visa *pour deux*?

As I waited forever for an official offer—a little preview of the maddeningly slow pace in Paris—my enthusiasm ebbed and flowed. When I wasn’t mentally plotting shopping sprees in the Haussmann Marais or sunset picnics in the Jardin du Luxembourg, I was hoping the whole thing would fall apart. That way, I wouldn’t have to make a decision at all and I could stay in New York, not because I was too chicken to leave, but because circumstances beyond my control kept me there. I read the same ambivalence in my friends’ faces. Every time I told a close friend—for, being slightly superstitious, I had been guarding the potential move to Paris from most people in case it fell through—I felt a pang as I watched their face cycle through the emotions: shock, awe, thrill, disbelief, despondence, acceptance, and, finally, enthusiasm.

Although, when I told Rachel Zoe Insler, the chocolatier who had just opened a chocolate boutique in my neighborhood, Bespoke Chocolates, her face immediately shone with envy.



The first time I bit into one of Rachel’s truffles, I was instantly smitten. But the first time I met her, I was charmed. She’s got the smarts and talent of a chocolatier trained in London, but the cool, down-to-earth vibe of someone who can cop to loving Tasti D-Lite frozen dessert. *How could someone who produces such exquisite specimens of chocolate be so...ordinary?* I wondered. Every time I visited her chocolate shop, tucked in a hidden alley off First Street, she’d be wearing yoga pants and clogs, hair pulled back in a bandana, Jack Johnson playing on iTunes. Shortly after she opened her boutique, we had bonded by sharing our childhood sweets obsessions: hers, Baskin-Robbins bubble gum ice cream; mine, cream-filled Hostess CupCakes. So ordinary.

Rachel had lived in the East Village for years—the only thing that gave her edge. Or so I thought until I learned about her European training and tasted her amazing chocolates. “Here,” she said on one of my early visits, handing me a 70 percent Colombian dark chocolate truffle. “Let’s start simple.”

It was impossibly creamy, a real melt-in-your-mouth gem. “Good grief, that’s amazing, Rachel.” She smiled and nodded in agreement. I guess she knew she had a hopeless devotee on her hands. She indulged my insatiability and curiosity by feeding me new flavors on every subsequent visit.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” I responded to the zingy and aromatic Southampton tea truffle, picking up on hints of apricot in the Ceylon tea. “Heaven,” I moaned, gripping the marble countertop where she’d mixed and tempered her bonbons, after tasting the strawberry balsamic truffle, made with strawberry purée, eight-year-old La Vecchia Dispensa Italian balsamic vinegar, and 66 percent dark chocolate which was then dusted with freeze-dried strawberry powder.

It wasn’t until I knew for certain that I was trading the East Village for the Right Bank that I sampled Rachel’s masterpiece: her signature pretzel-covered, sea-salted caramel that had crackled with salty pretzel bits coating the 66 percent cocoa shell and creamy caramel center. “Pop the whole thing in your mouth since it’s really liquidy caramel inside,” she instructed. I obliged, her eager guinea pig. Sweet-salty had by then become a really popular combination, practiced by everyone from fellow chocolatier Rhonda Kave, who had a small shop, Roni-Sue, in the Lower East Side’s Essex Street Market, to Pichet Ong, who had once been Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s pastry chef and had gone on to open a succession of bakeries and dessert bars downtown. But Rachel’s salty-sweet, one-two punch was absolutely sublime.

“It’s the caramel,” I gushed. “The texture. It sort of blends both extremes into a big gooey mess of deliciousness that melts on your tongue.” She laughed at my professional explanation. “Do you think they have anything like this in Paris?” I asked, licking flicks of caramel left on my fingertips.

“It’s probably a little too messy for the French.”

“True,” I said, while Rachel kindly pointed to her chin, indicating to me that I had a string of caramel there. “I don’t know how I’m going to do it,” I continued, dotting my face clean. “It’s going to be hard being so prim and proper all the time.”

She was looking at me, slightly confused. “What are you talking about?”

So I shared my back-and-forth, wait-and-see drama of the past several months, and she started buzzing with excitement. “Oh my god, that’s incredible! You have to promise you’ll sample every last chocolate in Paris,” she said. “No, every last chocolate in France. In *Europe!*” she laughed. Deal, I told her. Fifteen minutes later I said good-bye, buoyed by her enthusiasm and my box of six assorted bonbons.



When I shared the news with AJ, my best friend of twenty-five years, that I had finally received a formal offer, it was a whole different story. I could barely even look at her.

“Seriously?” she choked, both on my news and on a cupcake crumb.

“I know, can you believe it?” We were sitting on a bench outside Billy’s Bakery, a Magnolia Bakery spin-off (or rip-off, depending whom you asked, seeing as it was started by an ex-employee of the famed West Village bakery and had the same retro vibe and menu going on, right down to the ratio of Nilla Wafers in the giant vats of creamy banana pudding). The advantage of Billy’s was that the *Saturday and the City* tour buses didn’t stop here, so we weren’t confronted with our embarrassing Jersey alt egos. It was also right around the corner from AJ’s Chelsea walk-up. We often treated ourselves to Sunday sweet, either doing new recon for my “Sweet Freak” column or indulging at one of our old faithfuls: City Bakery or here at Billy’s. It was our time to catch up on the week and recount the

previous night's antics if we had been brave or desperate enough to take on Manhattan's Saturday night scene.

Every time we were at Billy's, AJ got the banana cupcake with cream cheese frosting, a house specialty. I usually felt it my duty to try something new—like the Hello Dolly, a graham-cracker crusted bar, layered with a tooth-achingly sweet mélange of chocolate chips, pecans, butterscotch, and coconut, perhaps a big old slice of German chocolate cake, or just a modest sugar-dusted snickerdoodle. But today—out of alliance or nervousness, I wasn't sure—I had also ordered a banana cupcake: a wise choice, as it was especially spongy and fresh. I was licking the frosting off my fingertips, watching the stream of yellow cabs zooming down Ninth Avenue, while AJ quietly contemplated my news.

“Wow. No.” She sat gazing down at her empty cupcake wrapper, the nutty cake and cream frosting long gone. Of course I had told her months ago they were looking for writers in Paris and that I was the lead candidate. She had been privy to the blow-by-blow interviewing, negotiating, contract drafting, and waiting over the past few months. But it had taken so long, I don't think either of us thought an official offer letter would ever come through and the move would actually happen.

We'd had a nearly identical conversation earlier that year when AJ interviewed for a job in Venice. In fact, our lives had been eerily parallel since we met on the first day of seventh grade, skinning eleven-year-olds in the Connecticut burbs, sitting near each other during gym class roll call. AJ's family had just moved to town from Iowa. At the time, I didn't know that her giant blue eyes and impossibly friendly attitude were hallmarks of the Midwest. But it wasn't long before we were inseparable and I got to learn other key traits of my corn-fed best friend: loyalty, modesty, and a great desire to have fun, even at the cost of being complete dorks.

Although the past two years in New York had been the only time we lived in the same city at the same time since graduating high school, our friendship never skipped a beat. When AJ decided against the job in Italy, I had breathed a sigh of relief. In our midthirties, we were having the time of our lives being single and crazy together in New York City. Brunching and gallery hopping? Dancing all night? Flirting with men? Check, check, and check. She was my soul sister. We were wondertwins. I couldn't imagine life without her sweet smile, steadfast support, or our shared wardrobe. I know we both felt we dodged a bullet when she took herself out of the running for Venice. But now here I was: preparing to leave New York for Paris.

The last of the burnt-orange leaves had just fallen from the trees, and the city air was clearer and crisper than usual. Every time someone opened the door next to us, the warm baking smells—cinnamon, sugar, nutmeg—deliciously danced by our noses. “That's so great, Aim,” she said, changing her tone of voice on the spot. As a leadership management coach, training international C-level executives how to be effective communicators, she was always the best at seeing the positive side to a situation and encouraging others with the right words and genuine support. “You should be so proud of yourself!”

“Yeah, well, there's still a lot of paperwork like the visa application and official stuff like that, so who knows what could still happen? It *is* a luxury brand, after all,” I rambled on. “People aren't exactly spending money on logo handbags these days. Without anything signed, I wouldn't be

surprised if the opportunity vanished as suddenly as it appeared.” My lame rationalizing was beginning to take on a guilty undertone. AJ just looked at me, knowing as well as I did that I would soon be leaving.

As tormented as I had been over the months, deliberating between life in two phenomenal cities, I had gradually begun to want nothing more than to escape New York. It still made me sad to think about leaving my friends and family and comfy life. But it was becoming increasingly clear that change was for the best. I was thirty-six. Most of my friends were already on their second or third kids and buying matching living-room sets, while I was acting like a twenty-five-year-old, trolling bars in which the male-to-female ratio was about one to three on a good night. The economy was tanking, friends were getting laid off, and the refrain that we should be happy just to have jobs was getting old. I tried to say nothing of depressing—especially since I was being given more and more work on even a copywriter’s biggest nightmare: health care.

If I stayed in New York, one week would bleed into another. Thirty-six would turn into thirty-seven, and suddenly I would be celebrating my fortieth birthday the same way I celebrated my thirtieth: gathering friends for \$15 cocktails at some candlelit bar downtown. Everything was beginning to feel like a threat or a joke, including my once-beloved job. And frankly, I was getting too old to dance all night. I guess the thought of leaving it all behind allowed me to see my life with less kind eyes. It prompted me to think about my needs in a new way. And I couldn’t help but ask: was I really as happy as I had thought I was?

“I’ll give it a year,” I declared to AJ. “I mean, I can’t *not* go; it’s like fate or something, right? The opportunity to move to my favorite city in the world—well, besides New York—just walked through my door. I have to try it for at least a year or so.”

“I agree—you’d be crazy to pass it up.” AJ was always so thoughtful and insightful, it forced me to be more so too. “What do you want to get out of your time there?”

“Hmmm, good question.” I paused, letting my reflections from all the months of waiting air on a planning surface. “It will be great for my portfolio, working on Louis Vuitton, so there’s that. And hopefully I’ll get to write about some of my travels while I’m there. Because I definitely want to travel. I want to go to Portugal and Greece, and the south of France, and if I can sell some article about it, awesome.”

“Mmm-hmmm, go on.”

“Well, I want to learn French. Maybe take some cooking classes...” I was beginning to get that dreamy feeling that Paris always sparked in me. *This is really going to happen, isn’t it?* “I want to explore the city’s best sweets and bakeries. And...maybe I’ll even fall in love...”

The smile AJ gave me was simultaneously sad and happy. We were entering a new chapter. “Sounds perfect.”



In the end, everything fell into place. After five long months of waiting (there it was, the *escargot* pace again), the papers were signed and I had a one-way ticket in hand. I shipped eight boxes of clothes and shoes, packed my laptop and a suitcase, and steeled myself for the transatlantic flight with

Milo—our first trip together. And then, just like that, I was in Paris.

As on all my previous visits, my senses were jolted awake during my first few hours off the plane. With the limestone architecture and the buzz of scooters, the sound of church bells and the smell of chickens roasting at the *boucheries*, it was an exercise of total indulgence. Alive. I was in Paris, and I felt *alive*!

I ditched my suitcase, unleashed a still-drugged Milo in my dingy hotel room, and started sauntering down the hill in South Pigalle—SoPi as the increasingly hip-to-New-York-acronym Frenchies called it—wondering how long I could hold out for a warm and melty Nutella street crepe, one of my favorite things to eat in Paris. I was happy to have a cool new neighborhood to explore, seeing as Ogilvy had put me up in a not-so-cool hotel next to the Moulin Rouge. Only four o'clock and already drunk eighteen-year-olds and retired Japanese tourists spilling out of tour buses like camera-wielding samurais made the neighborhood a minefield.

Beyond the main boulevard were an astounding number of XXX bars that finally gave way to indie music shops and cafés, where, despite the damp March air, people sat on terraces, smoking and talking in small groups. From across the street, I was drawn to a maroon awning: A l'Étoile d'Or. *Hmmm*, I wondered, *qu'est-ce que c'est?* Guidebook stickers plastered the door—badges of legitimacy displayed at restaurants and boutiques around town—so I knew it must be a popular place. But I didn't know I was about to encounter a legend.

I stepped through the door into a little shop of wonders. The tile floor looked like it had been there for centuries, glass shelves were jammed with colorful tins, and walnut moldings gave a cozy and inviting feel: it was the perfect old-school candy parlor. Best of all, there was chocolate—chocolate everywhere! In the center of the room stood a display case, jammed with petite trays of bonbons. Next to it was a table of stacked bars—Bernachon *tablettes*. Come to find out, this is *très* rare, as hard as anyone outside the Lyonnais bean-to-bar chocolatier, Maurice Bernachon, has the privilege of selling them. There were glass jars flaunting mountains of caramels, suckers, pralined nuts, licorice, and more exquisitely wrapped bars and boxes everywhere I looked. “Bonjour!” a husky voice boomed out of nowhere.

I looked up and saw a woman magically appear from the back room. *Oh my.*



The name Denise Acabo doesn't mean much to 99 percent of the world's population. But that other one percent is fanatical about her. She's one of the greatest connoisseurs of French chocolate, after all.

It took me a moment to recover, looking at this dame in a tartan plaid skirt and blue vest, with long blonde braids and bifocals and—wait, was that? yes, it was!—the scent of Chanel No. 5. I would later discover Acabo is a cult character in Paris. But that day, she was my secret discovery. For more than her signature look, or even her choco-knowledge, it's her irresistible charm and infectious enthusiasm that reels people in.

Everyone who walks through the doors of her boutique is treated like the most important person in the world. She grabs you by the arm and gushes about her candies: that they're the best of the best and that she's the exclusive carrier in the city. She'll tell you how the cab drivers come in and clean her

out of Le Roux caramels and that Japanese tourists fax her magazine articles in which she's appeared. She talks a mile a minute and is as much an entertainer and *theatrice* as a chocolate connoisseur. She could prattle on about *pralinés* for hours—and she will, if you're not careful. I looked at my watch when she paused for a breath and was shocked to see that thirty minutes had passed. It's a shame I could understand only a fraction of what she was saying.

Beyond the language barrier, my head was beginning to spin with all the choices. At the Bernachon table, I stared at all the amazing flavors—espresso, orange, hazelnut, rum raisin—wondering how to choose. But it was simple: I let Denise do it. (And thank goodness. When I unwrapped my *pâte d'amande pistache* chocolate bar back at the hotel, it was like inhaling vats of molten cocoa in a chocolate factory. Delicious without even taking a bite. Between the richness of the 62 percent cacao and the sweet grittiness of Sicilian pistachio paste, I thought I had ascended to chocolate heaven.)

When it came time to selecting bonbons, Denise was equally strong-willed. After careful consideration, I chose six from the case, but she shot two of them down. “Eh,” she started with a look of disdain. It was an expression I would get used to in Paris. “Non, non,” she wagged her finger and pointed to another tray instead. “*Celui-ci? Ça, c'est le mieux.*” She wanted to make sure I had the best of the best, so I wound up with a selection from all over the country—Gevrey-Chambertin, Bourges, Lorraine—and from many masters, including Henri Le Roux (salted caramel), Bernard Dufoux (balsamic vinegar truffle), and more from Bernachon (a praline noisette). Even with my impressive haul, there were so many exquisite sweets that I didn't get, including the famed Breton caramel. She's a smart woman, giving you reason to come back.

All of this, six hours into my first day. Walking back up SoPi's hill from A l'Étoile d'Or, this time oblivious to the peepshow bars and pools of tourists, I was glowing from within. I'd have to email Rachel and tell her I was already sampling bonbons. That I'd had my first lesson in Paris—from a fast-talking, kilt-wearing, kooky chocophile. That it looked like my life in Paris was going to be the most delicious learning experience.

### More Sweet Spots on the Map

*In Paris, you can toss a truffle in any direction and hit a world-class chocolatier. (C'est dangereux!) A l'Étoile d'Or is great, as it pulls in all kinds of French chocolates that are tough to get your hands on, like Bernachon tablettes (bars) from Lyon and Bernard Dufoux bonbons from Burgundy. But some of my favorite city-based chocolatiers include Michel Chaudun, Michel Cluizel, Jacques Genin, and—sigh—Jean-Paul Hévin (in the 7e, 1er, 3e, and 1er, respectively).*

*New York has nothing on Paris when it comes to chocolatiers. So I was especially bummed when Rachel shuttered Bespoke in May of 2011 (thank God I made a couple runs for her peanut butter honey squares and pretzel-covered sea-salted caramels before she did). Despite that big loss, there are still several other great artisanal chocolate-makers around town, including*



*Rhonda Kave (Roni-Sue's Chocolates on the Lower East Side), Lynda Stern (Bond Street Chocolates in the East Village), and Kee Ling Tong (Kee's Chocolates in Soho).*

☀️.....☀️  
CUPCAKES — THE COMFORT OF HOME

What can I say about my first weeks in Paris? They. Were. Heaven. I knew such euphoria wasn't sustainable—thirty-six years of experience had taught me that you can always count on a startling crash after the delicious sugar high. So I relished every second of it.

After three weeks in the crummy Pigalle hotel, which skeeved me out to the point where I wouldn't let the blankets touch my face or my bare feet come in contact with the carpeting, I was happy to finally be settling into my new apartment, my new routine, my new life. I was luckier than most. Not only had I come to Paris to live my dream, but somebody else was navigating the nuances of French bureaucracy and footing the bill on my behalf. Ogilvy set me up with a real estate agent who was as tenacious as any New York broker, orchestrating a single marathon day in which we viewed eleven apartments.

“Operation Dream Pad!” I chirped, driving along the traffic-choked quay overlooking the Seine, on our way from the third apartment in the ninth arrondissement—one of those “up and coming” neighborhoods that was slowly being infiltrated by trendy restaurants and young families—to our next appointment across town in the coveted sixth arrondissement, Paris's Upper East Side, if you will.

I knew the neighborhood profiles thanks mostly to Michael, one of my two friends in Paris. I had met him at a party in New York, one week prior to my Tour du Chocolat vacation. Chatting in a giant Chelsea apartment, The Strokes and Hot Chip thumping so loudly it jiggled my skat, I leaned toward this River Phoenix–lookalike telling me he lived in Paris. When he went on to specify that he lived in Canal Saint-Martin, I made him promise to show me around the neighborhood, then unknown to me, the next week.

Sure enough, eight days later, I was staring at his back as he took me on my first Vélib' ride, guiding me past the canal's peaked iron bridges and enchanting locks—where Amélie had skipped stones, I excitedly pointed out—to the flat and sprawling Parc de la Villette for a picnic. It was the ultimate romantic summer evening in Paris. Eight o'clock, but the sun still hung in the sky. We had a bottle of rosé, a perfectly crunchy baguette, and a big, stinking hunk of Camembert.

Except there was no romancing.

Not even five minutes into our bike ride, Michael started launching into his exploits of an escapades with Gallic women—code for *Don't get any ideas, missy, I have more sophisticated conquests than you*. Biking home that night, alone, I was disappointed that this storybook rendezvous was wasted on a platonic encounter. But it turns out a friend, not a fling, was the perfect outcome.

All those months when Ogilvy took forever with the contract and I was wavering about moving Paris, it was Michael whom I emailed, and Michael who responded right away with plenty of Parisian persuasion, plus encyclopedic knowledge of expat living. The second, tenth, and eleventh arrondissements were the hippest places to live, he reported. I would have to set aside my own transportation fund since France didn't deduct taxes like they do in the States. Do not bring an American DVD player, but buy one in France, with the correct voltage and compatible technology. All the insights and tips he had shared helped me feel more confident in situations like this, driving around with a foreign real estate broker, trying to find the perfect home. And sure enough, by the end of the day, I had narrowed the eleven apartment options down to three contenders, and I got my top choice: a sixth-floor walk-up in the second arrondissement.

Paris is a city of villages, each *quartier*, or neighborhood, its own little universe. The pedestrian-friendly Montorgueil quartier I now lived in was, as far as I could tell, one of the city's best—dynamic, central, and young. And with my new apartment's lofty ceilings, exposed wood beams, and views of the Centre Pompidou to the south, Sacré-Coeur to the north, and hundreds of zinc rooftops peppered with terra-cotta chimneys in between, it was like my own little tree house in the city. It suited me and Milo just fine.

The Ogilvy office elicited the same schoolgirl titters from me. A classic *hôtel particulier* right off the Champs-Élysées, I sat overlooking the famed boulevard, beneath sixteen-foot-tall ceilings painted with frescoes of chubby cherubs and fair maidens and dripping with crystal chandeliers. When my boss showed me the rooftop terrace (yes, a *rooftop terrace*, on the *Champs-Élysées*; this was my new *workplace*), I thought I was going to bump my nose against the Eiffel Tower, it was so close.

Remembering how efficient—and fun!—the Vélib's had been the previous summer on my chocolate tour, I relied on them instead of the Métro to get to work every morning. This public bike-sharing system has over twenty thousand industrial-looking road bikes stationed at kiosks around the city that are yours to take, so long as you have a daily, weekly, or annual subscription. The bikes have three speeds, little bells for warning heedless pedestrians that you're coming their way, and wire baskets for carrying your bags—or, if you're a super-chic Frenchie, your adorable Jack Russell terrier.

I'd hop on a bike around the corner from my tree house, wind around the delivery trucks in Japantown's narrow streets, and join the cacophony of revving scooters and gushing fountains in Place de la Concorde, where King Louis XVI had been guillotined over two hundred years ago.

The square's grandeur and beauty shocked me anew every day: the scale of the gold-tipped Arc de Triomphe monument, the magnificent dome of Les Invalides in the distance, and, further still, peeking over the top of the sculpted trees, the Eiffel Tower. It was like being part of a moving orchestra—my beating heart and pumping legs trying to match the rhythm of the trucks, buses, taxis, cars, scooters, and pedestrians swooshing through the motorway.

Then I'd peel off to Avenue Gabriel and give my silent respects while pedaling by the U.S. Embassy and President Sarkozy's residence, admire the grand dames strolling the sidewalks in the posh eighth arrondissement, and then finish my ride. I parked the Vélib' in the closest kiosk to the office, which just so happened to be outside the grand and historical tea salon with some of the best cakes and macarons in the city: Ladurée.

Two mornings a week, I went to the office early to meet Josephine, my French tutor, arranged by Ogilvy. With her perpetually perspiring brow, rosy cheeks, and powdery perfume smell, she reminded me of my third-grade teacher, Miss Dickus. Or maybe it was just because I felt like a schoolgirl taking lessons again. The office was always quiet at 8:30 a.m., save for the cleaning crew's vacuum giving us ninety minutes of conversational and grammatical lessons—well, less the fifteen minutes that Josephine always reserved for complaining about the weather, the Métro, being overworked, or a combination of all three.

As keen as I was to learn French, always completing my homework and paying close attention to Josephine's perfectly planned lessons, I soon learned that language is not my strong suit. But still, I did what I could and started a list of handy slang, picked up from colleagues and fashion websites, that was almost more essential than the *passé composé* and “er,” “ir,” and “re” verbs. I learned words and expressions like *ça marche* (that works, or, okay) and *ça craint* (that sucks); *talons hauts* (high heels) and *baskets* (trendy sneakers); *malin* (wicked smart or cool) and *putain* (literally, a whore, but used as an expression of frustration, anger, or awe). I learned that the French like to *manger les mots*, creating shorthand like *bon app* for *bon appétit*, *d'acc* instead of *d'accord*, and *resto* rather than *restaurant*. After years of being on cruise control, there was now something new to learn every day.

It was almost stupid how picture-perfect my new life was. The whole thing felt like a cliché, even to me. There I was, in the fashion capital of the world, working on one of the most recognizable and successful luxury brands. One day, as I wandered around the Louis Vuitton flagship store on the Champs-Élysées—part of my *professional obligation*, for God's sake—I literally pinched myself. Was this for real? Why was I there? How was I suddenly living in Paris, among the €2,000 evening dresses and 98 percent dark chocolate bars? Was it fate? I didn't have the answers, but I smiled with giddiness, hopelessly in love with the entire world.



As smiley as I was, my enthusiasm was not infectious.

“Avez-vous du pain complét ce soir?” I asked, waltzing into “my” *boulangerie* one evening for some whole wheat bread. Surely, the squat, bespectacled madam behind the counter recognized me by now? I had been coming in for weeks, demonstrating not only my loyalty to her business, but also my appreciation for French culture. Each visit, I requested a different kind of bread: a round and rustic *boule au levain*; *pain bûcheron*, kneaded and roasted to crunchy perfection; the *baguette aux céréales* with its delightful mix of sesame, sunflower, millet, and poppy seeds. It was my duty to understand France's abundance of deliciousness.

“Non, madame.” Blank face. She wasn't budging. So what if I ate whole wheat? I was still *un étranger* in her eyes, not a Frenchie. I felt a momentary pang of defeat from her indifference. With other recent roadblocks due to my inability to decipher the deposit forms at the bank, the milk labels at the grocery store, the processes (or lack thereof) at the office, and, generally, just what the hell everyone was saying to me, being unceremoniously shut down was a feeling that was beginning to edge in on my bliss more and more often. It was after seven o'clock and the shelves were nearly depleted.

I had a new bread addiction for which I needed a fix, *tout de suite*. Suddenly, as if my guardian angel and Houdini had been conspiring in the kitchen, a young man dusted in flour appeared from behind a curtain with a cylindrical basket of fresh baguettes. My smile returned. “Pas grave,” declared. “Une demi-baguette, s’il vous plaît!”

The woman pulled one of the golden specimens from the basket—the man sauntering back behind the curtain from where he magically came—deftly sliced it in two, and slipped one half in a paper sack—*une demi-baguette*, perfect for the single girl. “Avec ceci?” she asked in that French sing-song way, drawing out the “ce” and especially the “ci,” peering over her wire-rims. The French were always pushing a little more on you.

“Non, c’est tout,” I replied, happy for this little exchange that made me—almost—feel like I belonged here. I grabbed the change she plunked on the counter and turned on my heel. “Merci madame!” I bellowed, careful to enunciate each syllable like the good French student I was.

“Merci à vous,” she replied, the ingrained French *politesse* kicking in. “Bonne soirée.”

Out on the sidewalk, in the damp April air, my smile erupted again. Through the thin *boulangère* paper, I could feel the warmth of the baguette, making it irresistibly squishy in my hand. It was one of God’s gifts to the world, I had decided: French bread, fresh from the oven. There was no way I was waiting until I was back at my tree house to indulge. I tore a piece of the baguette off, trailing crumbs behind me, and crunched into it. The crust resisted for a moment and then the crisp outside revealed the doughy, dense, and spongy inside. How could four little ingredients—flour, water, yeast, and salt—produce something so otherworldly? I stopped on the sidewalk, my eyes rolling in the back of my head as I chewed very, very slowly, savoring the baguette’s flavor.

I opened my eyes and a girl smoking outside a bar was staring at me. I had become infatuated with French women, more so than the slim-hipped, effeminate men, developing girl-crushes daily. Their lips were always painted perfectly in magenta or tomato red. Their eyeliner was at once retro and modern, like Brigitte Bardot’s. And their hair was always disheveled but perfectly so, as if they’d just had a romp in bed. They were sexy, stylish, and gorgeous. I felt horribly dull with my brown hair and *au naturel* makeup—both pretty much unchanged since the day I graduated from college. Whenever I was around a particularly *jolie femme*, I could hear Edith Wharton whispering in my ear, “Compare me with the women of France, the average American woman is still in kindergarten.” *Touché, Edith.*

The girl outside the bar was in Parisian uniform: slim jeans tucked into short cowboy booties, a leather coat hanging off her thin frame, and an oversized scarf, which, like her hair, was effortlessly yet studiously haphazard. I smiled. I felt a bonding moment between us, her looking at me, me looking at her, just two girls of the world. But she just pulled an impossibly long drag from her cigarette and tossed it in the gutter, and subtly rolled her eyes before disappearing back inside the bar. Paris was cool; apparently, I was not.

In fact, I knew I wasn’t. Edith Wharton wasn’t the only thing I had been reading. I had been dipping into all the tomes about living in and adjusting to France and I suddenly recalled a small but important gem. That in America, everyone smiles at strangers—your neighbors, the checkout girl, the cop giving you a ticket for doing 45 in a 35-mile-per-hour zone—as a friendly, pacifying gesture. In France, the only people who smile at strangers are mentally retarded.

I found the insight so ridiculous and funny and, if I were any example, apparently true. I laughed out loud and continued down the street with my baguette, looking “touched” for sure.

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As American as I appeared with my big, dorky grin on the outside, I was beginning to understand—deep, in-my-bones understanding—the French appreciation for food.

Nobody at the office deigned to eat lunch at their desks as we had habitually done in New York. Little pockets of colleagues broke off and ceremoniously ate together. A small group of twenty-something-year-old women would have their meals, packed from home, in the office kitchen, while most of the guys went out to local cafés. I tried not to mind not having anyone to lunch with yet, and quickly learned not to “eeeet in zeee streeeeet,” as one of my colleagues caught me doing one day—a true faux pas to the always-proper Parisians. Instead, I took advantage of the break to explore the neighborhood.

Offices cleared out and boutiques were closed from noon until 2:00 p.m., while the sidewalks, *boulangeries*, and bistros came alive. The French got so much pleasure out of shopping for and eating food every day. Mealtime was sacred. Food was celebrated. It wasn’t forbidden or an enemy for which the French needed gym memberships, cabbage soup diets, or magic powders and pills (though I do have my suspicions about French women and laxatives).

What’s more, there were entire shops devoted to singular foods: stocky, pot-bellied men in waders and boots and white lab coats stood outside *poissonneries*, even in the coldest weather, showcasing filets of the catch of the day, while other boutiques offered scores of colorful and alluring tins of foie gras. On Sunday afternoons, so many people stood in line at the *fromageries*, *boulangeries*, and *boucheries* that I made a game out of counting them. How wonderful that families were stocking up for their big Sunday *repas*, doing all their food shopping the day of the meal, at small neighborhood businesses. Back home, we’d load up a giant grocery cart once a week at a superstore, and then shelve the packaged goods in the pantry until memory or hunger called them forth. Fresh, local, and delicious was not the marketing mantra du jour in Paris. It’s just the way it was.

Before choosing my apartment, I hadn’t really understood why Michael was so gung ho about the second arrondissement. My previous visits to Paris had given me the impression that it was more commercial and touristy than residential and charming. But I soon discovered that my neighborhood was one of the biggest foodie meccas in the city, anchored by the four-block pedestrian stretch of rue Montorgueil. By my count, it had two cheese shops (*fromageries*), four produce markets (*marchés*), four butchers (*boucheries*), one of which was devoted to chickens (*un rotisserie*), a fish market (*poissonnerie*), four chocolate boutiques (*chocolatiers*), an ice cream shop (*un glacier*), six bakeries (*boulangeries*), four wine stores (*caves au vin*), an Italian specialty shop, and a giant market filled with heaps of spices, dried fruits, nuts, and grains that were sculpted into neat domes and sold by the gram. There was even a store devoted just to olive oils. And all of these were interspersed between no fewer than a dozen cafés, a couple florists (*fleuristes*), and myriad *tabacs*, where weathered old men bought their Lotto tickets and drank beer with their mutts and neighbors.

Walking that stretch of food paradise that was my new neighborhood, which I made sure to do

least once a day, made all my senses tingle: produce—towering stacks of purple-flecked artichokes and pyramids of pert, shiny clementines—was displayed like kinetic sculptures, changing shape as the day went on and the inventory decreased. The pungency of ripe, stinky cheeses duked it out with the smell of savory fat drippings falling from chickens that roasted on spits into pans of peeled potatoes below. And even though I hadn't eaten red meat in over ten years, I still took the time to peer into the *charcuteries*, marveling at the coils of sausages and terrines of pâtés and how wonderfully they were displayed. The food was treated so respectfully that I had no choice but to genuflect. It was glorious.

And then there were the *pâtisseries* and *boulangeries*. While I had arrived in Paris with the names of only two friends scribbled on a scrap of paper, I had a carefully researched, very thorough two-page spreadsheet of must-try *pâtisseries*. I got right to work.

Within weeks, I had explored all the *boulangeries* and *pâtisseries* near me and quickly became obsessed with Stohrer's *pain aux raisins*. Come to find out, Stohrer wasn't just the prettiest and most charming bakery on rue Montorgueil, but it also had the most illustrious roots, having been started in 1730 by King Louis XV's royal pâtissier, Nicolas Stohrer. I'd never been interested in *pain aux raisins* before, always preferring a rich and melty *pain au chocolat*, a rectangular croissant hiding two *batonnettes* of chocolate inside, to something with ho-hum raisins. But one morning when I saw Stohrer's pastry pinwheels, filled generously with *crème pâtissière* and riddled with raisins looking especially puffy and inviting, I gave it a try. It was still slightly warm. It was sweeter than I expected. I was smitten.

Inspired, I set off for other *boulangeries* and *pâtisseries* in the city. There was Les Petits Mitrons, a cute little pink *pâtisserie* in Montmartre that specialized in tarts: chocolate-walnut, chocolate-pear, apple-pear, straight-up chocolate, straight-up apple, apricot, peach, rhubarb, fig, *fruits-rouges*, strawberry-cream, mixed fruit, and on and on. From there, I ventured east to one of the city's other hilly quartiers, Belleville, searching for the best croissant in Paris.

As I pedaled through the working-class neighborhood on my way to La Flute Gana, a *boulangerie* I had read about, I had a happy jolt, suddenly remembering one of my favorite all-time French movies, *The Triplets of Belleville*. The image of those three crazy animated ladies, snapping their fingers, swinging their *derrières*, and singing on stage evoked such unadulterated glee, which was matched once I arrived at the *boulangerie* and bit into my long-anticipated croissant: a gazillion little layers of fine, buttery pastry dough, coiled and baked together in soft-crunchy perfection.

Every weekend, my sweet explorations continued this way. On the chichi shopping stretch of rue Saint-Honoré, I indulged in Jean-Paul Hévin's Choco Passion, a rich nutty and fruity cake with a flaky praline base, dark chocolate ganache, and chocolate mousse whipped with tart passion fruit. In the Marais, a neighborhood alternatively known for its Jewish roots, gay pride, and fantastic shopping, I sampled Pain de Sucre's juicy and herbaceous rhubarb and rosemary tart. I discovered that the wonderful 248-year-old, lost-in-time candy and chocolate shop in the ninth arrondissement, À la Mère de Famille, carried dried pineapple rings, a treat I had been obsessed with for three decades (don't ask me I think it's a texture thing). And I started developing a new weakness for Haribo gummies, available at any old crummy supermarket.

As I cruised by the Jardin du Luxembourg, just beginning to burst in an array of spring greens, with

a belly full of matcha-flavored ganache from the nearby Japanese pâtisserie Sadaharu Aoki, rationalized that pastry hunting was a very good way for me to get to know my new hometown. But I continued Vélib'ing around town and eating up Parisian sweets, no one could have been more surprised than me to discover that cupcakes were now storming the Bastille.



I think it's safe to say that by 2007 or 2008, cupcakes trumped apple pie as the all-American icon sweet. And I witnessed their rise to sugary stardom firsthand in New York.

When I moved to the city in 2001, the trend was just taking off. At the time, I was also on the brink. I was almost thirty years old, excited and hopeful for all that might be. After spending my twenties in San Francisco, much of it in a seven-year relationship that ultimately wasn't "the one" and in an advertising career in which I always felt the desire to write for a glossy magazine tugging at me, I had moved back east to pursue my dreams. I had proven to myself that I could be an advertising copywriter. Now I wanted to be a New York writer, who had a byline in the *Times* and lunched at Union Square Café. The world was my proverbial oyster. But, since I don't like briny delicacies, I considered the world my cupcake instead: sweet and inviting, familiar yet new, indulgent but only modestly so. And just when I thought I had tasted every possibility—yellow cake with chocolate frosting, chocolate with vanilla buttercream, peanut butter cup—a new cupcakery would open, and there would be a whole new inspired menu to bite into.

As I blazed my personal cupcake trail, Carrie Bradshaw and Miranda Hobbes sent the whole world into a cupcake tizzy. Once those two sat chomping into their pink frosted cupcakes, dishing on Aidan in the third season of *Sex and the City*, the *petits gâteaux* became inescapable. And Magnolia Bakery, the location of their sweet moment, went from modestly successful to insanely popular to polarizing and reviled.

Magnolia was started in July of 1996 by two friends, Allysa Torey and Jennifer Appel. On a quiet corner in the West Village, they launched a genius concept: old-fashioned baked goods—perfectly frosted three-layer cakes, freshly baked pies dusted with cinnamon, fudgy brownies, and tart lemon squares—served up in an adorable, wholesome space that could have been Betty Crocker's own kitchen. But as the business soared, the women's relationship soured. Three years after opening, they split, with Allysa running the original bakery solo, and Jennifer moving to Midtown to open Buttercup, a bakery with virtually the same exact menu and aesthetic. Both of them churned out prettily pastel cupcakes, and the city ate them up.

Buttercup, probably because of its unsexy midtown location, fared just okay, but Magnolia was a gangbuster. The more popular it became, the more people loved to hate it. The staff was infamous for being snippy. The lines, which grew so long they snaked out the door and around the corner, started annoying the neighbors. Then the *Sex and the City* tour buses rolled in and put everyone over the top. The bakery and its cupcakes became synonymous with Carrie Bradshaw wannabes, tottering in their high heels and not caring about on whose front stoop they were dropping their frosting-laced wrappers.

The cupcakes themselves were hit or miss, love 'em or hate 'em. While cake flavors were the standard yellow, chocolate, and red velvet, and generally tasty, it was the frosting that sent everyone



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