

(Originally published in *Sauce* magazine, 2007; more about the theory of making the puffiest puffs)

IN THE GAME OF PÂTE À CHOUX, THE CLASSICAL METHOD WINS

BY JULIA M. USHER

I've often wondered why *pâte à choux* sits on the bench while puff pastry plays first string in most bakers' line-ups. After all, *pâte à choux* (pronounced *paht-a-shoo*) rises just as impressively and with substantially less work.

Equally inexplicable is this pastry's lack of recognition for anything other than cream puffs and *éclairs*. Yet, it makes a delightful appetizer when filled with a savory mousse or spread. You can also press it through a pastry bag and boil small pieces into *gnocchi*. Or add Gruyère cheese and bake it in a big ring to create the classic Burgundian bread *gougère*.

Ever since discovering these virtues in culinary school, I've been as devoted to a particular method as to the pastry itself. For years, I've used an adaptation of the recipe in Madeleine Kamman's *The Making of a Cook* for the simple reason that it consistently delivers airy and delicate puffs. Well, there's that reason and the fact that I've never met a credible challenger . . . until recently, that is.

Leave it to Shirley Corriher, the mad food scientist of Food Network fame, to throw a crazy curveball of a recipe into her book *Cookwise*. Her recipe claims bigger, better and drier puffs, and dismisses traditional methods, such as Kamman's, as yielding only "ordinary" results. More of a good thing is always fine by me, but the promise of no gooey insides was the real kicker. You see, the only part of Kamman's method that I don't like is the removal of soft dough (occasionally required when large puffs don't bake through to the center by the time they're done on the outside.) Corriher's recipe might be all hype, but I'd never know unless it squared off with Kamman's in a kitchen test.

Corriher and Kamman begin their recipes in perfect agreement. They combine the water, butter and salt in a saucepan and bring the mixture to a full boil. Then, and only then, do they add the flour - not gradually, but all at once. Corriher explains that rapid immersion in very hot water is the only way to ensure that all the starch in the flour instantly swells. More swelling means more water absorption and thicker dough, which, in turn means that more eggs can be added later. Since eggs are the primary leavening agent - the ingredient that leads to light, hollow puffs - adding the flour, the right way, is not an inconsequential step. Even though Corriher uses 1/4 cup less water to every cup of flour, and bread flour instead of all-purpose flour, both recipes look like the same batch of mashed potatoes at this point. From all outward appearances, the game is tied.

Here's where the methods diverge. Kamman insists on re-cooking the mash on the stovetop to remove excess moisture. Her logic is as before: the drier the dough, the more eggs she can incorporate in the next step. Corriher skips the stovetop re-cooking altogether, possibly because she uses less water in the initial mix. Again, the recipes look nearly identical, so rather than dwell on Corriher's omission, I turn to the eggs.

While Kamman beats in 4 to 5 whole eggs, Corriher uses more whites than whole eggs, asserting that whites have a superior drying effect. Substitute 3 whites for 3 whole eggs, and you won't end up with gooey insides, she says. Ahh, so that's her trick. I pop the authors' puffs in two different ovens, eager to see if the whites will work their magic as Corriher has promised.

A mere 10 minutes later, I smell the acrid odor of burning butter and flour emanating from the Corriher oven. Strike one for the food scientist: She bakes her puffs in the bottom third of a "rising" oven (preheated to 300°F, but turned to 450°F when the puffs go in.) Sadly, but not surprisingly, her *pâte à choux* scorches on the bottom before it ever inflates. Meanwhile, sitting on the middle rack at an even 400°F, the Kamman puffs are gorgeous, having already expanded to nearly triple their original size.

When I break open one of the Corriher puffs, I am further dismayed. Strikes two and three: the outer shell is dense and rubbery, and the inside is wet. So much for Corriher's theory on whites. Perhaps if she hadn't dismissed the stovetop drying step, her puffs wouldn't be so damp? As for the puffs' likeness to hockey pucks, Corriher had a plausible rationale for using bread flour at the start. ("Dough puffs much better when there are strong elastic sheets of gluten to hold in the steam.") But, given that beating is widely known to activate gluten and toughen dough, you'd think she'd have been more cautious before making a wholesale high-protein (high-gluten) flour switch.

I try several variations of Corriher's recipe after this initial match, and the closest I come to Kamman's quality is with a version using all-purpose flour and egg whites, baked in the middle of the oven. Though this dough swells nicely without burning, it lacks the rich color and flavor that are the hallmark of whole eggs. Call me a diehard fan if you must, but, to me, the outcome of this contest is clear: Some things, especially good things, are better left untouched.