

For the Love of Mooncakes

Mooncakes are a familiar fixture every fall season, lending their sweetness to the time-honoured traditions of Mid-Autumn Festival. As we count down the days to 1 October, we pick the minds of three local mooncake makers who have, through their artisanal touch, enlivened the legacy and timeless innovation of these delightful baked and snowskin treats.

Let's set the scene: the harvest moon is at its brightest and roundest, candle-lit paper lanterns in varying shapes and sizes adorn every household and are paraded on display by gambolling children, while adults gather around the table to partake in playful riddle-solving over sweet golden pastries, ripe pomeloes and roasted teas.



It's the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, which traditionally signifies thanksgiving for a fruitful summer harvest.

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Veteran Pastry master Bruce Lei, who has been making mooncakes for over 40 years.

Something Old

Today, the occasion has taken on deeper cultural significance, drawing together families and communities in heartwarming reunion. "May we live long and share the beauty of the moon together, even if we are thousands of miles apart," goes a famous poem by Song dynasty poet Su Shi.

Sadly, the practice of moon-viewing and lantern-carrying has faded with time and is no longer a common sight around Singapore. "The Mid-Autumn festive mood is not as intense here," muses Pastry Master Bruce Lei, who is Director Innovator (R&D) at Bake Mission, an established confectionery manufacturer that specialises in high-quality baked products and supplies to a diverse clientele base including five-star hotels and supermarkets.

"When I was growing up in Hong Kong, we used to hold full moon appreciation parties on Mid-Autumn night while enjoying mooncakes with family members, close friends and neighbours, surrounded by the laughter of young children running around carrying lanterns with lighted candles," Pastry Master Lei recalls. "Perhaps it's because Mid-Autumn is not a public holiday here. Our weather is also hot and humid, so it does not really feel like autumn as in temperate countries."

Even so, mooncakes remain a festive staple locally, with Chinese households often procuring a box or more for personal consumption or gifting. These can take the form of traditional baked pastries filled with white lotus paste, red bean paste or multi-grains; or the non-baked snowskin variants developed more recently in the 1960s, which come in a myriad of innovative flavours encased within a translucent mochi-like glutinous rice skin.

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“Chinese people have a tradition of sending gifts to business partners and loved ones as a way of expressing gratitude and well wishes during this joyous season,” explains Pastry Master Lei. “Mooncakes are especially favoured because they are traditionally round in shape, which resonates with the meaning of the full moon, denoting wholesomeness, togetherness and perfection in all aspects of one’s life, from family to career to social status.”

Pastry Master Lei would know, given that he has seen, eaten and made his way through plenty of mooncakes over his four-decade-long career spanning Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Singapore. At Bake Mission, he oversees product innovation, fusing his expertise in both Western and Asian pastry techniques to craft unique creations for the local audience. Of all the flavours he’s created over the years, he says traditional ones remain the most popular: the Baked Skin White Lotus mooncake (in both plain and double yolk variations) as well as the Baked Skin Traditional Mixed Nut with Ham are their perennial best-sellers.



Egg yolks are processed and portioned into equal sizes before use.



Freshly-baked mooncakes being transported for cooling before being packaged.

Traditional baked mooncakes are air-brushed with egg wash to produce their distinctive golden-brown hue.



Crafting new flavours is shaped by what is trending during the time of recipe development and what is available in the market. But fundamentally, the mooncake-making process remains the same: it starts with the boiling of golden syrup (to be used in the pastry dough) and the preparation of the desired fillings, such as white lotus paste and salted duck egg yolks. These are all weighed into individual portions while the dough is being mixed.

Once the dough is sufficiently tensile and aerated, it is encrusted around the fillings and shaped loosely by hand into 180-gram balls, before being stamped and moulded into the quintessential round shape with decorative motifs. The resulting pastries are assembled neatly on baking trays, ready for the oven.

To produce their distinctive golden-brown crust, mooncakes are first lightly baked for around 12 minutes, air-brushed with an even coating of egg wash, and then sent back for a second round of baking, making for a total of around 25 minutes in the oven.

During the peak of production season, Bake Mission can produce up to 20,000 pieces daily, relying on a combination of machinery and manpower working up to 16 hours a day.

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Christine Ng, Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef and owner of Simple Indulgence Patisserie.

Something New

Though they have a shorter history than their baked counterparts, snowskin mooncakes enjoy the same cult popularity, thanks to their versatility in taking on a wider range of flavours, from the mainstream (chocolate, ice cream, fruit and alcohol infusions) to the mind-blowingly unexpected (caviar, roast duck and even... coriander?).

Because they do not undergo heat processing, snowskin mooncakes are often kept refrigerated in order to preserve their quality and freshness. But according to veteran mooncake makers like Pastry Master Lei, this wasn’t the case in the past: “When I was working in Hong Kong and Taiwan during my early days, snowskin mooncakes didn’t need to be refrigerated. They were called ‘snowskin’ simply because the skin was white, like snow!”

Owner and chief pâtissier of Simple Indulgence Patisserie Christine Ng agrees, adding, “Our family snowskin mooncake recipe, which was passed down by my uncle, calls for the mooncakes to be freshly made and sold on the spot. They required no refrigeration and were simply packed in paper boxes so that the mooncakes could ‘breathe’.”

At Simple Indulgence Patisserie, mini snowskin mooncakes are entirely handcrafted from scratch under the watchful eye of Christine, who personally handles and oversees every step of the elaborate process. Her attention to detail is matched only by her unwavering dedication to using only real and natural ingredients in her pastries. As she explains, “The food industry, especially for desserts, is moving into mass production, where additives and

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stabilisers are added to prolong the lifespan of the products. I could not find cakes or pastries that did not use colourings, flavourings or additives like baking powder or soda.”

Seeing the gap in the market, the former banker set up Simple Indulgence Patisserie in 2016 with the aim of offering “real food, real flavours”, free of preservatives and artificial ingredients.

Something Borrowed

Being Le Cordon Bleu-trained, Christine already had an arsenal of indulgent sweet treats to fall back on. But when an opportunity came along for her to learn a secret family mooncake recipe, she didn't hesitate. “My uncle was probably one of the first mooncake makers in Singapore,” she recalls. “He used to make and sell snowskin mooncakes in Chinatown back in the 1970s.”

With no succession plan in sight, the savvy entrepreneur decided to take matters into her own hands. Under the mentorship of her uncle, she honed her skills in crafting delicate snowskin mooncakes with every intention of preserving the original family recipe, albeit with a few twists. “Back in the day, my uncle's recipe was already free of additives, but included artificial colouring. To keep in line with our real food philosophy, my mooncakes utilise extracts from fresh ingredients like pandan leaves and butterfly pea flowers.”

While she declines to divulge the full recipe, Christine shares that there are four critical steps that go into making her artisanal mooncakes: the piping of the ganache into truffle shells; the careful enveloping of the paste around the truffle balls; the preparation of the snowskin dough; and finally, the assembly process. As her mooncakes are dainty in size, each component has to be weighed to precise measurements. This is especially so for the traditional Pandan Salted Egg Yolk mooncake, so that the egg yolk, lotus paste and pandan dough meld together in harmonious balance. “It's an extremely labour-intensive process, but highly satisfying when it comes out perfect,” remarks Christine.

“The flavours for our mooncakes are kept close to Singapore's heritage, and developed around ingredients I love, such as Japanese yuzu, passion fruit, pandan and gula melaka.” She acknowledges that even though consumers these days are well-travelled and exposed to different cultures, keeping flavours “classic” is still paramount in her books. And her creations are testament to this: “Our 100% Japanese Yuzu White Truffle mooncake is paired simply with a low-sugar white lotus paste, rather than the regular caramelised lotus, to allow the delicate aroma of the prized yuzu fruit to capture the senses as you bite into it. Similarly, the Butterfly Pea Gula Melaka Coconut Truffle mooncake encompasses flavours inspired by traditional kueh kueh, and is my way of paying tribute to our rich Peranakan heritage.”



Piping coconut white chocolate ganache into truffle shells for the heritage Butterfly Pea Gula Melaka Coconut Truffle mooncake.



Shaping the butterfly pea extract-infused dough around the gula melaka low-sugar lotus paste.

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The delectable snowskin selection by Raffles Hotel.

Something Cool

In a market awash with new innovative trends every year, mooncake makers are getting increasingly imaginative in their quest for the next hit flavour. Besides factory manufacturers like Bake Mission and artisanal bakeries like Simple Indulgence Patisserie, big players like hotels, too, are upping the ante with novel creations set to wow the crowd.

One such example is Raffles Hotel, which has been winning hearts since the 1990s with their iconic Champagne Truffle snowskin mooncakes. The decadent treat features velvety white lotus paste swathed around delicate white chocolate shells piped to the brim with champagne-infused cream, and is best enjoyed with a glass of Billecart-Salmon Champagne Brut Réserve.

Despite the popularity of their perennial favourites, Executive Pastry Chef Tan Chien Lin feels there is a need to constantly reinvent mooncake offerings so as to stay at the forefront of the competition. “Every year, we develop interesting and unique flavours to excite the evolving palates of our discerning guests,” he shares. “Some past examples include our Peanut Butter Milk Chocolate Feuilletine snowskin mooncake, as well as the Strawberry Yogurt and Crunchy White Chocolate Pearl snowskin mooncake.”

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The creative process is often moulded by consumer preferences, Chef Tan explains. “Back in 2018, we observed an increased interest in superfoods, which led to the creation of an Acai Berry and Chia Seeds snowskin mooncake. Lately, it seems like our consumers have a greater appreciation of fruity flavours in their mooncakes. So this year, we’ve come up with a new flavour – Apricot and Sourplum snowskin mooncake – that is inspired by Plum-pickled Tomatoes with Crunchy Turnip and Sweet Vinegar, one of the most popular signature dishes by MasterChef Jereme Leung at his eponymous restaurant 藝 yì by Jereme Leung.”

Still, to consumers, taste is just part of the equation. Mooncakes have to be visually-striking and packed aesthetically, especially if they are meant to be gifted. To this end, Raffles Hotel is proud of their distinctive traditional tin boxes and woven carrier bags, which marry the hotel’s distinguished heritage with a touch of modernity. These have been deliberately designed to be “functional, durable and easily reusable”, showcasing the brand’s awareness in remaining sustainable and eco-friendly in today’s climate.



Earl Grey and Pearl Snowskin Mooncake; Apricot and Sourplum Snowskin Mooncake



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Traditional baked mooncakes are a lasting symbol of Chinese heritage.

Keeping Traditions Alive

Small as they may seem, mooncakes play a big role in conserving the culture and timeless traditions of Mid-Autumn Festival. At their heart, these mini moon-shaped pastries are not just food or art; they are tangible slices of memories, hopes and dreams shared by generations of Chinese around the world.

“I’ve been making Asian pastries for over 40 years now, and I will always remember what my masters taught me,” shares Pastry Master Lei. “There are many precious ancient techniques passed down from them that most younger-generation chefs will never get to know, and so I make mooncakes with the aim of preserving and continuing our 2,000-year history of oriental pastry crafting.”

Similarly for Chef Tan, there is a “sense of duty to uphold high standards” and “privilege to play a part in preserving the longstanding traditions of Mid-Autumn Festival.”

Christine echoes the same sentiment, adding that more so than ever, mooncakes bring joy and a sense of solidarity through difficult times: “With the current pandemic, we sincerely hope our mooncakes can help in carving out sweet memories for our customers again.”

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Did you know?

Traditional baked mooncakes are best consumed 14 to 21 days after production. A mooncake fresh out of the oven is hard, dry and has no shine on its face. Leave the mooncake to rest for at least a week, so the oil gradually rises to the surface and renders a soft and shiny crust. The resting time also allows the fragrance of the salted egg yolk to fuse with that of the lotus paste, thus creating an aroma that is pleasant and well-balanced.

Traditional baked mooncakes are typically 180 grams in size so as to withstand the high heat and long baking time in the oven without drying out. On the contrary, snowskin mooncakes are better kept between 50 to 60 grams, as the soft, sometimes even liquid, fillings can make it hard for the mooncake to retain its upright structure.

Advice from our experts on the best way to consume mooncakes, so you get the most from each bite.

Traditional baked mooncakes

Use a clean, sharp knife to cut the mooncake into six or eight slices, and appreciate the mirror shine of the lotus paste. Best eaten in small bites. Pair with small sips of *tie guan yin*, *pu er*, or *long jing* tea, which will balance out the mooncakes nicely. Apart from tea, traditional mooncakes can also be savoured with autumn festive fruits such as longans, persimmons, pomeloes and even with roots like water caltrop, baby yam, and shelled walnuts.

– Pastry Master Bruce Lei, Bake Mission

A good traditional baked mooncake should meet the following criteria:

- ✓ Colour of the mooncakes must be bronzed and shiny
- ✓ The crust must be thin and light, between 2 to 3mm in thickness
- ✓ The lotus paste must be fragrant and have a velvety texture without being cloying
- ✓ The filling must look like a mirror image of each other when the mooncake is sliced, achievable only when the lotus seeds used are very fresh and when the oil, moisture and sugar in the paste are rightly balanced
- ✓ The salted egg yolk must be oily yet remain fluffy when cut through



Secured a box of Simple Indulgence Patisserie's 'Signature Collection' mooncakes? Here's the recommended sampling sequence:

- #1 100% Japanese Yuzu White Truffle
- #2 Passionfruit Hazelnut Feuilletine Truffle
- #3 Raspberry Black Sesame Truffle
- #4 Japanese Matcha Azuki Truffle
- #5 Butterfly Pea Gula Melaka Coconut Truffle
- #6 Pandan Salted Egg Yolk Lotus

Snowskin mooncakes

Cut them into quarters and savour the layering of flavours and medley of textures. Personally, I like my snowskin mooncakes served cold (not frozen) and paired with some chilled green tea, or perhaps *tie guan yin*. It's a divine experience.

– Chef-owner Christine Ng, Simple Indulgence Patisserie

Our two new snowskin mooncakes, the Apricot and Sourplum as well as the Yuzu and Osmanthus Truffle, are best experienced with the Raffles Singapore Sling Tea, which offers beautiful tropical fruits and sweet-tart citrusy flavours backed by a robust black tea base.

– Executive Pastry Chef Tan Chien Lin, Raffles Hotel

A good snowskin mooncake should meet the following criteria:

- ✓ Simple layering of flavours that create depth beyond each individual ingredient
- ✓ Use of fresh ingredients and not artificial additives, as flavourings and shortening impart a distinct unpalatable aftertaste
- ✓ Texture must be slightly chewy, not rubbery
- ✓ Filling should be smooth, not oily