

The World's Best Pastry Chef

EVERY YEAR, THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF BAKERS and Pastry Chefs confers two heavily watched awards, World's Baker and World's Pastry Chef. In culinary circles, the awards are understood to mean "best"—as in, best baker and best pastry chef. A photo gallery of past winners shows male after male smiling in a white toque on the union's website. •

The most recent photograph, however, features Nina Métayer, the first female winner of the World's Pastry Chef award. You might expect to find the world's best pastry chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant, and Métayer has done that, at Paris institutions such as Le Meurice and Le Grand Restaurant. An entrepreneur now, she runs pastry shops in Paris and has had pop-up stores in London, New York and Tokyo. Her company is called Délicatiserie. She's a married mother of two and an author.

Since winning the world title, she has emphasized two points—that credit for her success belongs to her 40-member team, and that she is the proud representative of the pastry profession and of French excellence around the world.

• Recognition isn't new to her. In France, she's a celebrity, having won *Le Chef* magazine's Pastry Chef of the Year award in 2016, and a year later, the Gault et Millau guide's Pastry Chef of the Year. Still only 36, she remains driven, as evidenced by the hour she rises to start planning her creations: 4 am. • We traveled to the outskirts of Paris to meet Métayer in the warehouse that is home to

her offices, her design studio, her production lines and her testing workshop. From the outset, we made clear that we aren't objective journalists. Our admiration for Métayer is such that we are excited to meet her. Métayer, however, deflected our compliments, saying, "My dream would be for Nina Métayer not to be me, but to be my whole team. Right now I need to be visible to help build up the brand. But once that's done, my passion will be to pass along knowledge, and it will be the team that builds on the values we established at the company's inception. Bread, pastry and gastronomy stem from the same values, from the art of eating, driven by the quest for excellence. Excellence from start to finish. It's not just about a beautiful cake, it's about selecting the best ingredients, the best distribution method, the best craftsmanship. Every detail matters to ensure that in the end, you live an incredible experience."

NINA MÉTAYER is the first female to be named World's Pastry Chef.
She is French of course.

By **AURÉLIA DE LAPEYROUSE** and **SOPHIE GOTELF**.



Is it about the end product, award-winning pastries, or is work an end in itself?

I'm a great believer in the merits of hard work. For me, it's an incredible source of personal fulfillment and I'm grateful that in France, we get to choose the work we do. There are countries in the world where women don't have that freedom.

To feed people, to serve others, is a beautiful feeling. It's about sharing and generosity. Team spirit is also very important, even a craftsman working alone in his laboratory works as part of a team. There's a whole chain right up to the dessert itself. Books aren't the only way to learn. You can learn on your own, but I believe in hard work, practice and repetition. Through your gestures and repetition, you pass along your way of doing things. In fact, pastry-making is a team sport. It's all about training, and experience is the only way to become good at it. Even the creative process is collective. Here, we vote to approve a creation.

When did you know that patisserie would make you stand out from the crowd?

At heart I'm a baker. I got into pastry by accident. Now, though, I'd have to surround myself with bakers to make bread. It was Camille Lesecq, my first chef at Le Meurice, who passed on his passion for pastry. With him, I tasted some really good cakes and that changed my vision of pastry-making. I was amazed and decided to explore further, to become as good as I could be. Because let's be honest, I was really hopeless. I wasn't meticulous, I wasn't patient, I didn't have any of the qualities required for pastry. Quite the opposite. There was nothing elegant or refined about me, far from it. I made bread, carrying bags of flour and throwing them into the mixer. It's because I wasn't good at pastry-making that I decided to persevere.

You're known for an exotic floating island, for a strawberry poppy pavlova, or a rose bouquet. For Easter you've talked about a water lily. Where do your inspirations come from?

My inspirations come from everyday life, the people around me, everything and nothing. It can come from a chat I have with my team that will provoke an image that pops up the day I need it.

Inspiration is all about listening to the world that surrounds you. It can be colors, smells, textures. Above all, you have to let yourself be absorbed by emotions, and the day you need to create, you bring them out. But to create, you first need to know where you're going. Why are we creating? For whom are we

“Pastry-making is a team sport... Even the creative process is collective. Here, we vote to approve a creation.”

creating? Am I creating a dessert on a plate? When will it be eaten? How will it be prepared? How will it be stored? Produced once or a thousand times? At what price? It's all about laying down the constraints to spark creativity.

Once you've got the framework, you can play around, refine, sort and reduce. In other words, you start out with a wide field, then you narrow it down, you try it and see the result. Obviously, it often doesn't work. So we start again in a new direction, rethink, retest, revisit, reconsider, until we reach the moment of creation. The methods and technologies we can use to reach this final point are endless: 3D printer, thermoformer, laser cutters, saws.

What I love about Easter is that it's the perfect symbol of spring and the blossoming of flowers; it's my favorite season. We created a bud a few years ago and now we want the bud to bloom. The inspiration came from my little house in Normandy with a pond full of water lilies. I rarely get to see them open and in bloom, but when I do I'm so excited, I just love it!

Creatively speaking, the water lily is a great source of inspiration, with its delicate petals that can be shaped from chocolate. It all made sense. And then we built around it, creating a tray underneath, assembling the structure to hold it in place, thinking about how to transport it.

What place does creation occupy in ordinary day as pastry chef and entrepreneur?

The best part of my day is being with the production team in the morning from 4 am to 8 am. That's really my favorite time. Then, when all the desserts have been prepared and sent to the various sales outlets, I move on to creation. I check in with my teams to see how our projects are moving forward and we all have lunch together. The afternoon is dedicated to interviews, meetings, development and communication.

Why did you set up your own business?

It's a bit scary to put yourself out there. I'm lucky to have the team I have. I'm not on my own. What's more, I come from a family of entrepreneurs, so it came quite naturally. Even though I didn't want to do this in the first place! I watched my parents work day and night, no weekends, no vacations. They love their work, it's their passion. But as a child, I was worried about this lifestyle where you never know how much you're going to earn at the end of the month and where everything is uncertain.

I would wish for a stable job with five weeks' paid vacation and the chance to work my way up the ladder through hard work. Which is what I did until I



hit the glass ceiling, where I was told: “Stay where you belong and don’t do more.” I realized I didn’t care about salary progression. All I wanted was to develop my skills, work on projects and take part in adventures. I work hard because I love my job; it doesn’t cost me. And I’m not afraid of failure, if it happens, I’ll pick myself back up and do something else.

My parents warned me before I started, they were afraid one day I’d realize that life wasn’t as beautiful as I’d imagined and I’d be disappointed. I like it when it’s hard, it makes success all the more enjoyable.

Does family play a role in your work?

I was often told I couldn’t be a chef and a mother, but family is essential. The people around me are very supportive, especially my parents, my sisters and my husband, they push me to go the extra mile. We work as a family. It’s not always easy, you’re prone to argue, but who can you trust more than your family?

My husband is the COO of my company. He helps me a lot with decision-making. My situation is rather atypical, usually men have the careers with

Métayer rises at 4 am to start conceiving and creating that day’s pastries. “The best part of my day is being with the production team in the morning from 4 am to 8 am,” she says.

women supporting them in the background. For me, it’s the opposite. He was the one who encouraged me in my transition from baker to pastry chef.

I’m extremely grateful for my good fortune. My life is a succession of adventures and new skills. Over the course of my career I’ve had incredible mentors who taught me everything, Denis Baron (baker in La Rochelle) passed on the art of baking, Yannick Alléno and Camille Lesecq at Le Meurice taught me everything about tastiness, Amandine Chaignot gave me the creative know-how and Jean-François Piège made me understand the meaning of what I do.

Do you enjoy being an entrepreneur?

I love it. Being an entrepreneur is a point of pride, and a big responsibility. You direct, you choose, you lead. And you learn. I’m still learning every day as each member of my team has qualities and skills that I don’t have. ♦

AURÉLIA DE LAPEYROUSE is a Brunswick Partner and **SOPHIE GOTELF** is an Associate with the firm; both are based in Paris.