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Good
Taste
The Gourmet Issue

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Amelia Marneau

MARCHÉ MODERNE

Amelia Marneau balances it all. She manages the front of house and the entire pastry department at Marché Moderne. At the award-winning restaurant she co-owns with her husband, Florent, she oversees the business, tends to the restaurant's needs while simultaneously caring for her two teenage children, and remains a rock for her husband as he copes with an ailing father back in France. Marneau juggles all this with grace, and when she smiles she reminds you of a TV personality a la Giada De Laurentiis mixed with a dash of Nigella Lawson.

Marché Moderne's stunning Newport Beach location, which opened last fall, is a dreamy setup just steps away from Pacific Coast Highway. Here, an open kitchen on one side of the dining room displays the chef and a few line cooks like players on a stage. The other side features a classic bar leading to a patio. Always the businesswoman, Marneau quelled the costs and controlled the budget for the new restaurant.

"Florent wanted this big red slicer. I told him it was expensive; we have a budget. But it was something he really wanted – so we got it," says Marneau. "Now it's displayed in the corner of the glass window" that showcases the pristine kitchen. The slicer is both functional and a beautiful kitchen accessory for diners to admire.

Marneau has always been Marché Moderne's secret weapon. Florent's cooking is lauded, but it is her mille-feuille that people wait all week for to savor. (She serves it only on weekends.) It is simple yet executed to perfection. Delicate layers of sweet custard, heavy whipped cream and crisp puff pastry transport you to a romantic Parisian cafe. Her mille-feuille is the epitome of classic French cooking, and it has been her signature dish for some time now.

The funny thing is that people always assume that Marneau is French. Which, she admits, is understandable since her husband, Florent, is undeniably French and the couple own a French-inspired restaurant. Even their two children attend a French school, Lycee International de Los Angeles' Orange County campus. But Amelia is in fact not French. She is Italian.

It was her Italian grandma who compelled her to cook. Before you have time to conjure up romantic ideas about her nonna, Marneau, who is always the realist, whips you back to reality.

"My grandma was a terrible cook," she says with a laugh. "That's why I learned, so I could finally eat something that tasted good."



Amelia Marneau concocts delicate fillings for her macarons.

Marneau, who was raised by her Italian grandmother, spent summers visiting her mother in Naples, Italy. During those formative jaunts, she built up her palate. She gathered fresh produce from farmstand markets and taught herself to cook.

Later, a visit to Alice Waters' Chez Panisse in Berkeley solidified that she would cook for a living. After excelling in both pastry and culinary arts school, she cooked in several respected restaurants. Marneau was making a name for herself, and then she met Florent at Aubergine in Newport Beach. After she was married, her career trajectory changed. As Marché Moderne's head chef, Florent took the spotlight and Marneau gladly ceded; perfecting her craft as a pastry chef. People loved the restaurant. Critics wrote about the food and others celebrated the Marneaus as a talented culinary couple. But, it was always Amelia Marneau's beloved desserts that diners would crave.

Her latest creation pays homage to her Italian roots. A delicate coffee-flavored macaron filled with creamy panna cotta and a layer of whipped mascarpone is set to be another best-seller. "It's my take on tiramisu," she says. "I try to not make my desserts too sweet. It is always about balance. At first, I worried about making a coffee dessert because what if people don't sleep. But it's just so good, I did it anyway."

Marché Moderne, Shops at Crystal Cove Shopping Center,
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