

*origin of a classic*

# Madeleines





# LEARN THE MYSTERIOUS TALE BEHIND THE MADELEINE, THE CELEBRATED FRENCH SHELL-SHAPED PASTRY

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOANN PAI

Marcel Proust famously immortalized the madeleine in his tome *Remembrance of Things Past*, forever infusing this sweet, curiously shell-shaped cake with the romance of turn-of-the-last-century France. Although I've lived in France for 35 years, I've never read Proust, so when I went looking through his works for mentions of the madeleine, I was surprised to find that his character hadn't enjoyed this treat in some gilded Parisian *salon de thé*. Rather, the lad indulges in the "exquisite pleasure" of dipping "the little scallop-shell" of pastry into a cup of tea with his mother at home.

I discovered madeleines in a similar way in my mother-in-law's modest kitchen (oddly enough, her name was Madeleine) when I first married into a French family. They were purchased in large bags at the supermarket or from the local baker—dense, deeply yellow, sweet but not too sweet, fat little things that were like individual pound cakes that nestled in the palm of one's hand. We ate them at breakfast or at snack time, always dipped into hot coffee or cold milk, the liquid softening the tender but firm crumb and infusing the cake with a delicate coffee flavor or the coolness of the milk. Most traditional French recipes have a well-defined beginning, either in modest homes for family consumption or in the luxe kitchens of the royals and nobles. And so, I went looking for the birthplace of Proust's "squat, plump little cakes," curious as to what I would find.

One thing is well agreed upon: all roads lead to the town of Commercy in the Lorraine region of France. The most likely legend brings us into the kitchens of Stanisław Leszczyński, former King of Poland, Grand Duke of Lithuania, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, and, most importantly to our story, Duke of Lorraine. On a visit to his château in 1755, Stanisław prepared to host a *grande fête*. Unfortunately, his pastry chef abruptly and furiously quit, taking all the pastries he had prepared with him. A servant named Madeleine saved the day by preparing a platter of small cakes from a recipe given to her by her grandmother. The banquet guests were delighted, as was



Stanisław, who immediately baptized the cake *madeleine* in honor of the *pâtissière*. He then introduced his daughter, Marie Leszczyńska, wife of Louis XV, to the madeleine, and she, equally enchanted, popularized them at the royal court. But who was this Madeleine?

According to the official version put forward by the *Confrérie Gastronomique des Compagnons de la Madeleine de Commercy*, the official brotherhood of the "Authentic Madeleine of Commercy," Madeleine Paulmier was a young servant in the château called into the kitchen upon the departure of the pastry chef. Another popular but equally unsubstantiated version, most notably put forth by the writer Alexandre Dumas in his *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, also confers the honor on one Madeleine Paulmier, but this Madeleine was a Cordon Bleu chef in the service of a wealthy bourgeois family in the town of Commercy. Already noted for her cooking, upon hearing of the catastrophe at the château, she proposed



her recipe—possibly also learned from her grandmother—and, not having any molds in which to bake these small, individual cakes, baked them in shell-shaped pans used for cooking Saint Jacques scallops.

There is yet another Madeleine whom we can possibly credit for this classic dessert's invention. In the 1600s, Madeleine Simonin was the cook of Jean-François Paul de Gondi, cardinal de Retz, who had been exiled to his property in Commercy. According to lore, Simonin was already making small, oval cakes using a doughnut-like batter, flavored with lemon zest and *la liqueur d'Hendaye*, an alcohol made from fennel and sugar syrup, as early as 1661.

Although the beginnings of the madeleine are disputed, the success of the madeleine is well recorded. After the death of old King Stanisław in 1766, one of his pastry chefs set up a bakery in Commercy where he prepared and sold madeleines. Years later, in 1806, the first recipe for madeleines appeared in chef André Viard's cookbook *Le Cuisinier Impérial*, made simply with flour, sugar, butter, and eggs and flavored with either orange blossom water or lemon zest. Used in varying amounts and combined through different methods, these ingredients remained a staple in recipes throughout history, with batters varying from a dense pound cake known as *quatre-quarts* to a light and airy *génoise* sponge. And while it does seem to be agreed upon that the original *madeleine de Commercy* was flavored with lemon zest or orange blossom water, there is absolutely no rule whatsoever governing the flavorings of the modern madeleine. In the 1990s, young chefs rediscovered the madeleine and ran with it, recreating it in every flavor imaginable, turning something rustic and homey into something chic and trendy.

Still, what has fundamentally defined the madeleine is its curiously distinctive shell shape and its familiar hump. It's possible that the shape can be credited to inventive necessity, with early bakers making them in shells normally used for scallops because of a lack of individual molds. But the shell shape is most likely linked to the pilgrimage trail of Saint Jacques de Compostelle, the Way of Saint James. The scallop shell, the emblem of Saint James, symbolized a spiritual compass, its lines representing the different routes traveled leading to the tomb of Saint James. It's thought that vendors along the route were selling shell-shaped cakes to pilgrims as early as the 11th or 12th century. And as Commercy was fairly close to the town of Châlons-en-Champagne, a stopover along the route, it's very likely that the Madeleine of one of the legends of the cakes, or her grandmother, was familiar with the tradition.

Centuries later, the madeleine has become a classic French treat for breakfast, snack time, and coffee breaks. At once homey and elegant, madeleines are simple to make and can be flavored as simply or as creatively as you like, making them the perfect treat for any occasion.

## TRADITIONAL MADELEINES

Makes 8 to 10 madeleines

Recipe by Jamie Schler

*Orange blossom water was a traditional flavoring for the madeleine when it was first created and then became popular. This is my recipe for the more classic, traditional madeleine.*

Unsalted butter, softened

- 1 large egg (50 grams), room temperature
- 5 tablespoons (60 grams) granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon (2.5 grams) orange blossom water
- ¼ teaspoon (1 gram) vanilla extract
- ½ cup (62 grams) all-purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon (1.25 grams) baking powder
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (60 grams) unsalted butter, room temperature (see Note)

1. Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C). Using a soft pastry brush, brush softened butter into 10 to 12 madeleine pan wells to coat. Lightly dust with flour, and tap out excess.
2. In a medium bowl, beat egg and sugar with a mixer at medium speed until thick and creamy, 1 to 2 minutes. Add orange blossom water and vanilla, and beat for 1 minute.
3. In a small bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt; using a wooden spoon, stir flour mixture into egg mixture until smooth and well combined. Add room temperature butter, and beat at medium speed until smooth, creamy, and well combined, about 1 minute.
4. Spoon 1 heaping tablespoon (about 20 grams) batter into each prepared well. (These do not have to be spread or smoothed out.)
5. Bake until risen with distinctive bump, center is set, and edges are just golden brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Carefully remove from pan, and let cool completely on a wire rack.

**Note:** As opposed to softened butter, room temperature butter gives no resistance when pressed and is easy to spread. ▢



