

# FOOD & WINE

## FIRE UP THE FEAST

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A WHITE TRUFFLE BONANZA  
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...AND PEACE ON  
EARTH (REALLY)



DECEMBER 2018



ANGIE MAR'S FLAMBÉD  
JUNIPER-RUBBED ROAST DUCK  
+ 3 MORE CENTERPIECE BIRDS  
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# Leading Edge In Japan, a fifth-generation knifemaking family crafts chef-quality pastry blades for bakers.

By Gabriella Gershenson

An employee lays out knife blades to dry after tempering at Fujita Heat Treatment in Seki, Japan.



PHOTOGRAPHY: KENJI TAKIGAMI

Nagomi cake knife, \$124; and Nagomi bread knife, \$155; nagomijapan.jp

“**I** HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE to cut a croissant like this before,” says Ayako Watanabe, the former head pastry chef at Dominique Ansel Bakery in Tokyo and current director of project management at Tartine Japan. Ayako is referring to the 5-millimeter slivers, equal parts air and crumb, which she demonstrates in a YouTube video using a Nagomi bread knife. “Usually you have to put pressure on a knife, and it crushes something like a croissant, which is so delicate,” says Ayako. “When I showed the cross section of a croissant as a thin slice on Instagram, it got more likes than any other post. Everyone was like, ‘How did you do it?’”

This isn’t just a party trick. For some bakers, getting a good cross section is essential to quality control. “In Tokyo, we would cut every viennoiserie and send cross section pictures to Dominique [Ansel], and that’s how he’d know that production was good,” says Ayako. As for the home cook, this same bread knife works just as well on a monster sandwich as it does on a pain au chocolat.

In that same video, Ayako demonstrates Nagomi’s cake knife, a thin, curved, serrated blade with a rounded tip. She cuts through a mont blanc dessert, which is chestnut puree piped perilously high around a mound of chantilly. Impressively, this mountain of mush resists collapse as the knife bisects it—ta-da! The big reveal is a fruity core with borders as neat as can be.

Such a cake can take days to prepare. The wrong knife can undo all of that work in short order. While savory chefs have all kinds of knives designed with them in mind, bakers haven’t been able to say the same—until now.

The idea for chef-quality bread and cake knives came from Yukari Watanabe (no relation to Ayako), who runs a baking school called Bread and Pleasantness in Gifu city, next to Seki, both of which are in the Gifu prefecture of Japan. Her husband is Takahisa Watanabe, a fifth-generation knife manufacturer and the owner of Mitsuboshi Cutlery Co., the maker of Nagomi knives. He started to develop pastry knives using feedback from Yukari and her students. The result? Two new knives that feature serrated blades with rounded teeth. Nagomi’s 8-inch bread knife has a flat cutting surface with a pointed, raised tip designed to slice through yeasted breads with crisp crusts, while the curved, flexible cake knife lightly cuts through cakes with fine crumbs, preserving their lofty structure. (“A straight blade can crush a cake,” warns Takahisa.) As for what’s next, “I am developing scissors,” says Takahisa. “But I won’t come out with them until mine are better than the competition.”



### A Knife Is Born The 500-year evolution of Nagomi knives

Seki is one of the world’s centers for knifemaking. In 1876, the Japanese government made it illegal to carry samurai swords, so most swordsmiths transitioned to manufacturing items for home use.

While Takahisa Watanabe’s family has been in the business of crafting samurai swords for a good 500 years, they did not make their own line of knives until he started Nagomi in 2015. “Yukari’s students were asking her for the best cutlery set, and I was bringing in other brands,” says Takahisa, who previously only made proprietary knives for companies such as KitchenAid, Cuisinart, and Sabatier. “She said, ‘Why don’t we have our own brand?’”

Today, the making of the Nagomi knives carries the same spirit as Takahisa’s ancestors used in making ancient katanas. Within Seki, Nagomi knives travel from specialist to specialist, most of whom, like Takahisa, come from families who have been doing it there for generations. It starts with a company that presses the blades out of steel, another that hardens and tempers them, a third that fashions the wooden handles, and a fourth that grinds down the blades. Assembly, buffing, and sharpening happen at the Mitsuboshi factory. The entire process takes about three months and five different companies to complete.

**Japanese Chestnut Tea Cake**

ACTIVE 25 MIN; TOTAL 3 HR 30 MIN  
SERVES 8 TO 10

*Ayako Watanabe, the founding pastry chef of Dominique Ansel Bakery in Tokyo, created this not-too-sweet chestnut cake with a fine, light crumb. Using cold butter and chestnut paste incorporates plenty of air and volume when whipping the batter, which will make the cake nice and light. This recipe was also inspired by Watanabe's visit to Mitsuboshi Cutlery Co. in Gifu. Find Clement Faugier chestnut paste online at amazon.com.*

**Cooking spray**

- ¾ cup unsalted butter (6 oz.), chilled**
- 1¾ cups chestnut paste (such as Clement Faugier), chilled**
- 5 large eggs, beaten**
- 2½ Tbsp. granulated sugar**
- 5 large egg yolks**
- 2½ Tbsp. (1¼ oz.) gold rum**
- ⅓ cup almond flour (about 1¼ oz.)**
- 1 Tbsp. baking powder**
- 1 cup peeled, cooked, and ready-to-eat chestnuts, divided**
- 1 Tbsp. powdered sugar**
- 1 cup crème fraîche**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Generously coat a 9-inch springform pan with cooking spray. Place butter between two sheets of parchment paper. Using a rolling pin, beat butter to ¼-inch thickness. Remove and

discard top parchment paper sheet. Cut butter into approximately ⅓-inch pieces.

2. Place chestnut paste in bowl of a heavy-duty stand mixer fitted with paddle attachment. Beat on medium speed until smooth, about 1 minute. Add butter pieces; beat until smooth, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape down sides of bowl as needed. Add half of the beaten eggs; beat on medium speed until mixture separates and looks broken, about 20 seconds. Remove paddle attachment from stand mixer; attach whisk attachment. Add granulated sugar to mixture; whisk on medium speed until combined, about 30 seconds. Add egg yolks, rum, and remaining half of beaten eggs; whisk until smooth, about 30 seconds. Add almond flour and

baking powder; whisk on low speed until just combined, about 30 seconds.

3. Pour half of the chestnut batter into prepared springform pan. Roughly chop ⅔ cup chestnuts; sprinkle over batter. Top with remaining batter, spreading evenly over chopped chestnuts. Cut remaining ⅓ cup chestnuts in half crosswise; gently press into top of batter.

4. Bake in preheated oven until cake is golden brown and center springs back when gently pressed, about 45 minutes. Cool cake in pan on wire rack 20 minutes. Remove sides of springform pan; let cake cool completely, about 2 hours. Sprinkle with powdered sugar. Slice cake, and dollop crème fraîche evenly onto servings.

