



To Make a Madeleine

by Savannah Taylor (Editing and Publishing '22)

I ORDERED a couple of soft tacos, a Crunchwrap Supreme, and a chalupa to go—mild sauce in the bag, please. I used to love to cook dinner and bake a dessert every night, but then work got busy and life took over. Now it is soft tacos and a Fudge Stripe if I am lucky. In a world of Uber Eats and prepackaged meals, it is easy to feel like food is a task. But on days when I find a spare few hours to connect with my kitchen, I am reminded that cooking is an opportunity to learn, create, and connect with others.

Most of my inspiration to cook these days comes from YouTube cooking channels. One day, I saw a video all about a shell-shaped confection. This classic French pastry, the video said, was extremely difficult to perfect, so I went out, found some almond flour, and started baking madeleines. After mixing and messing up several sticks of butter and a few cups of flour, I realized that these madeleines were indeed harder than they looked. I started doing more research to learn some tips or tricks, but I ended up learning all about the history of the little cake and how it has affected both literature and art.

Madeleines are small, distinctively scallop-shaped cakes that are popular during breakfast or for a *goûter* (snack). The cakes have been popular for centuries, but even now there is debate about where they first came from. Some say madeleines were created in the nineteenth century by French pastry chef Jean Avice, but others hold to an older tale, a legend of a young girl in the eighteenth century named Madeleine. It is said that Madeleine had a pastry shop but only knew how to make her grandmother's butter cake recipe. One day King Louis XV visited the Lorraine region, and when he visited Madeleine's shop, she presented him with the cakes. King Louis took the madeleines back to Versailles, and they were soon beloved by the French court. This is not where the legends end though. Others claim that the cakes were made by another baker, also named Madeleine, who passed the cakes out to pilgrims visiting the Lorraine region. It is also possible that the cakes are not French at all, and they originated from a recipe brought from Spain by a pilgrim named Madeleine.

After learning so much about the origin of madeleines, I realized that I had seen these little cakes before! My family used to have a board game called Masterpiece that is based on collecting famous paintings. My favorite painting to collect was always Paul Cézanne's *The Basket of Apples* (c. 1895) for the bright, cheerful colors that swirled across the canvas. Unfortunately, my research showed that I had always ignored the second half of the photo, which features a plate of stacked madeleines. The painting features classic French food beloved by Cézanne: apples, wine, and madeleines, but it also illustrates Cézanne connecting with his culture and community. It seems Cézanne and I were both inspired to create madeleines in our own separate ways, me with a bowl and him with a brush.

As I continued my madeleine-making journey, I visited with Professor Elliott Wise, an assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Arts and Letters. Dr. Wise made madeleines and discussed the history of food in art, explaining, "Art and food have a long, shared history. Ancient Egyptian tombs secured food offerings for the dead by painting bounteous piles of grain, meat, and wine on the walls. Islamic depictions of paradise abound with fruit trees, and Christian altarpieces use images to represent the mystery of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharistic bread and wine. During the seventeenth century, Dutch artists excelled in fastidious renderings of lemons, oysters, and cuts of meat. Paul Cézanne's *The Basket of Apples* builds on that tradition but with a modernist twist as the shifting planes of the table experiment with notions of time and relativity."

Because food interacts with all five of our senses, often food will bring memories along with it. Marcel Proust was an author in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who brought madeleines to worldwide fame with his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In the book, Proust recounts an experience he had where old childhood memories resurfaced while eating a madeleine. "She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been molded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. . . . I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, . . . An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses" (Moncrieff and Kilmartin 1992).

Proust recounts his memories of visiting his aunt on Sunday mornings. She would be in bed eating her breakfast and would share bits of the butter cakes dipped in tea. This is just another example of the power of food. I love my Taco Bell and McDonald's fries, but nothing quite brings me back to home like my mother's meatloaf. Granted, the recipe came from *Better Homes & Gardens*, but every time I taste it I am taken back to the kitchen in my childhood home: I remember drowning my piece of meatloaf in ketchup-brown sugar sauce, sweeping the floor with our big green broom, and wiping down the speckled marble counters with hand-crocheted dishrags. Whenever I am missing home, I turn to those tried-and-true recipes to take me back.

The magic of madeleines can be found everywhere. Food is something that has inspired people for centuries and will continue to inspire for centuries more. Whether it is in the creation of art, literature, connections, community, or just more food, there is a home to be found within each and every bite. 🍴

Scan the QR code to find our madeleine recipe and more!

