



# ART IN THE MAKING

*Essays by Artists About What They Do*



*Still life with raw materials*—photographed by Deborah Jones

## ALICE MEDRICH

(1949)

*On Breaking Chocolate Rules*

I always used to say that I stumbled into my career by accident and that it evolved serendipitously — from making the chocolate desserts that established my reputation at Cocolat in the 1970s, to writing cookbooks, and ultimately to the work with non-wheat flours and sustainable upcycled ingredients that occupies me today. Only in retrospect, at 72, do I see the threads that connect my past to my present and how seemingly random opportunities gave me the privilege to do the work that has challenged and inspired me over the past 50 years.

I was raised in the 1950s by parents who believed that one could learn to do anything by doing it. Not knowing or having been taught conventions or rules was neither a barrier nor an excuse. This ethos was not articulated as much as it was lived. My father was a self-employed and self-taught electronics engineer and inventor. He was also an avocational woodworker and a gifted black-and-white photographer. He shot with a camera that he built himself and developed film among the coats in our hall closet before finally building himself a darkroom. He learned to build a cabin cruiser, and then two sailboats, in our suburban backyard — by building them. He taught himself to weld because he needed a boat trailer. My mother meanwhile created an

atmosphere where all projects were welcome — even when the whole family itched for a week after boat-related fiberglass infiltrated the laundry. I grew up with a deep appreciation for work created by hand and I've always known that a craftsman works with the mind and heart as well as the hands. I thought my father was a wizard who could build or fix or invent anything. It was not until after he died that my mother called him an artist — the label had never occurred to us before.

In 1972, when I was 22, my husband's work took us to Paris for a year. I had a bachelor's degree in Latin American history from the University of California, Berkeley, and no plan for the future. When I returned to Berkeley with a hand-scribbled recipe for our Paris landlady's homemade chocolate truffles, the Bay Area was hungry for new culinary experiences, and I needed a career. In the moment, I didn't see the connection between the truffles, the zeitgeist, and my need to find work! With uncharacteristic pragmatism, I started a master's degree in business, hoping a "real" career would materialize. I should have realized that my father's example was too powerful for me to have a straight job or traditional path and that whatever I did needed to include making something. In my spare time, I made and sold my landlady's chocolate truffles to the new gourmet shops and specialty cheese stores that were popping up everywhere. Within four years I ditched

business school to open a chocolate dessert shop, Cocolat. I imagined a place decorated with vintage French chocolate posters and filled with elegant chocolate desserts and confections — mostly French, but not to the exclusion of brownies or the odd lemon mousse or linzer torte or anything else that might take my fancy. No such shop existed anywhere, and I was naïvely fearless. I had acquired a smidgeon of eclectic culinary training, and lots of “practice” at home.

I broke rules — especially chocolate rules. In the earliest days I broke them because I didn’t have formal training and was not aware of them or hadn’t yet discovered them. Later I broke them on purpose because I saw a different way to do something or because I simply did not agree with them. Some of the messes I made turned into opportunities and new ways of thinking and doing things. Some of these new ways influenced the evolution of desserts and chocolate in the hands of other chefs and visionaries in years to come.

In the “practice” period before opening Cocolat — while selling my landlady’s truffles and going to grad school — I was obsessed not only with professional French pastry techniques but also with the repertoire of the French home cook, discovered through the works of Julia Child and her collaborator, Simone Beck. I occasionally sought teachers and did short “stages” in France to enrich the knowledge that I was accumulating through books and practice. One special teacher

was an elderly French woman who taught me to make chocolate truffles that were even more exciting than the simple cocoa-dusted ones that I was already making. The new truffles were hand-dipped, with soft, creamy centers. At first I made them with so little skill that they came out nearly as big as golf balls and supremely ugly. I still shudder at the memory. Had I known that the chocolate should have been tempered and that it was completely wrong to freeze the centers before dipping, I would not have dared to show them — much less sell them. But sell them I did. And customers swooned. The ugly things were outrageously good! By the time I was skillful enough to make dainty, good-looking truffles, my audience was hooked on the big ones. I didn’t fight it, I simply made them — still so wrong in so many ways — better looking.

By the time Cocolat opened, there were no ugly truffles. The desserts and confections in the shop were quite different from any seen or tasted in American bakeries. Sleek, elegant chocolate glazed tortes and fabulously architectural desserts are common today, but in the 1970s they were jaw-dropping, and customers said they tasted even more wonderful that they looked.

My eclectic, self-styled education and odd point of view made Cocolat unique in the world. The menu was a quirky collection of my favorite desserts and confections — mostly but not entirely chocolate and drawn from both the highest and the humblest European traditions. All were



*Young Alice in the Cocolat Kitchen with brioches au beurre – ca.1977*

stunning. All were made my way, by me and a growing band of mostly young women, many of whom had no prior baking or chocolate experience. Here I have to add that in Europe, where similar desserts were common, women worked at the counter in the patisserie but never in production; men made the great desserts and were trained from the time they were teens.

Cocolat customers were like an extended

family of devotees with insider knowledge. They came in regularly for a single truffle or a slice of cake (at a time when cakes were not sold by the slice in American bakeries). They came for dinner party desserts and celebration cakes and proudly brought out-of-town guests and colleagues to see and to taste.

Making the simplest dessert involves thoughtful choices — about ingredients, flavor,

balance, sweetness — and skillful execution. Making an elaborate dessert is more like a high-wire act that additionally requires advance planning, enormous focus, precise timing, and sometimes great daring.

Simple or elaborate, making desserts in a professional setting is simultaneously creative and repetitive, exciting and meditative. Repetition makes skilled hands even more skilled and creates a virtuosity that makes every gesture look like part of an effortless dance. The Cocolat kitchen was a singular workshop; we made desserts and confections that American bakers simply did not make, using better ingredients and using them differently. Iterative tasks allowed me to reimagine and improve techniques in order to produce beautiful handmade desserts more and more efficiently with the same or even higher levels of quality and finish. Improvisation, process design, and sometimes the creation of new tools or equipment came naturally to me — daughter of my father — and was almost as enjoyable as the creation of new desserts.

My first cookbook contract, in the late 1980s, presented a different kind of challenge exactly when I needed it. The business had grown and my work was less and less what I truly loved. And I had a new baby. I took the opportunity that the book provided without seeing how it might alter my future. The task of translating what I knew how to do with my hands, at a very high level of skill, into words

on a page that could enable an ambitious home cook to make an elaborate dessert was deeply satisfying (and really fun). The book, *Cocolat*, is still one of the few chef's books written and home-kitchen tested by the chef. The bonus was the chance to select and collaborate with a new creative team — a photographer and an art director/stylist — and to work on set (where most authors are not allowed) when the photos were shot. A second book, *Chocolate and the Art of Low-Fat Desserts*, was another chance to think differently. “Low-fat” was an obsession of the early 1990s; the prevailing — and truly dismal — strategy for creating low-fat desserts was to replace fat with “fat substitutes” such as egg whites, fruit purees and low-fat chocolate (the idea of which was, and remains, deeply offensive) or to simply focus on fruit desserts. I went the opposite direction, marshaling every pastry skill and trick I knew to get the most flavor and richest textures from smaller quantities of the best ingredients: real chocolate, real butter, real cream. I played with food memory and perception, I juggled ingredients, I fooled the palate. The work required endless experimentation and inventiveness. It was a rich and delicious challenge. The cherry on top was a James Beard Cookbook of the Year Award in 1995.

In 2003 the book *Bittersweet* addressed the new American craft chocolates, explained the impact of cacao percentage on recipes, and provided tools for professional and home bakers to

use chocolates with different cacao percentage in their desserts. In 2014 *Flavor Flours* introduced a wholly novel approach to non-wheat flours and gluten-free baking. Both books required original thinking and thousands of hours of testing and problem solving. Both received critical acclaim and, more importantly, added to the modern baking canon.

Today I am working with new, creative food-related startups, often headed by young female entrepreneurs. I'm doing R&D and creating recipes and products using sustainable upcycled flours made from nutritious and otherwise wasted foodstuffs — ingredients that may feed the future. Am I making art? I surely do not know, but I'm excited to solve new culinary problems with new ingredients, and, in my bones, I feel the same satisfaction and creative frisson that I did in the early days of Cocolat — when I was just beginning to know what I know now.

Meanwhile, when I occasionally design and create an elaborate new dessert, the muscle memory kicks in, and the creative trance descends. I'm still in the dance.

*Alice Medrich is a self-taught pastry chef and chocolatier and an award-winning cookbook author. She is credited with popularizing chocolate truffles in the United States at her influential dessert shop, Cocolat, in the 1970s and has continued to influence established and new chocolate makers and pastry chefs. After a career span-*



*Tribute Cake with extinguished birthday candle – Jones*

*ning nearly 50 years, Alice is currently working with visionary local and international start-ups, creating innovative recipes and plant-based products with upcycled ingredients. She lives in Berkeley, California.*