

## *Skinny Cake*

*By Rachel Dawson*

*A Slice of Pear and Rhubarb Brown Butter Tart*

*One piece of Rocky Road*

*One Coconut and Passionfruit Palmier*

*One Pain aux Raisins*

*A Madeleine*

*A Slice of Lemon Dream Cake*

*One Ricotta, Pear Bran Muffin*

*A slice of Fine apple tart*

*One Strawberry and Rosemary Brulee*

*A Canele*

*One Panna Cotta Lamington*

*A Slice Pistachio, Raspberry and Rose Cake*

When I go to bakeries I ask for one of everything that I want - and that is usually all the sweet stuff; I don't often bother with the salads. To me, bakeries are exciting, wonderful, anxiety inducing places and they smell doughy, sweet and often like sausage rolls. The cabinets are full of possibilities and they promise joy. What is inside these glass cabinets have been carefully crafted since the early hours of the morning, often passing between different workbenches. Nadine from Flour and Stone tells me that the panna cotta sponges are baked and watched carefully in the ovens, then the sponges are cut meticulously and filled with berry compote, then they are covered in chocolate and rolled in 3 different types of coconut flakes, they are chilled, and then put on display. It is always exciting seeing a full tray of them coming towards the display case.

Standing in line, my body sweating, I'm thinking to myself *please, no one take that last palmier*. I like to practice what I'll order and how I'll say it, because of course I already have checked the menu and chosen what I'd like from the cabinet when I was at the back of the line. When it is finally my turn, I ask for everything I want, always prefacing to the staff that I'm 'ordering a few things' to which they always look pleased to hear - most likely because of the money but perhaps because I'm buying with the spirit the very place is intended for. One time I said 'I'm ordering for a few people' and the guy behind the counter replied with a very cool casualness, 'Hell yeah - I could eat all of this myself to be honest.' I wish I could be brave and say something like that.

When they start boxing up everything, I get increasingly self-conscious as the queue grows behind me but at the same time, I feel smug that I've managed to snag the last of a few of the pastries. Leaving, I feel triumphant as if

I've won the race - and it is a race- because bakeries sell out around 1pm so you really must get in early - there is little that is so heartbreaking to see the countertops and cabinets bare, with a single croissant and a ham and cheese sandwich.

Dieting Rachel would never go to a bakery and get one of everything. Even if she did, dieting Rachel would have prescribed a painful run the next morning or would have ridden the entire bus ride home, hating herself for being so greedy.

All the bakeries I've been to have something special about them. There are the Latin bakeries, like Paula's in Fairfield, that make you feel you're in a bakery in Lima, Peru where most of everything is filled with Dulce de Leche. There are the Vietnamese bakeries often owned and staffed by family, with french rolls and finger buns that smash Bakers Delight. There are the places in Sydney, like Cherry Moon in Annandale, with its wooden shelves stocked with jams, relishes and granola, an Apollonia oven that bakes fig leaf loaves and long bois. What remains the same is that I order one of everything that I want, looking for balance; I want a variety of texture: sponges, crumbles, crunches, snaps, creams. I also become bored with one flavour; I need fruity, deep and rich, buttery, intense sweetness. Ordering one of everything might be a necessity for foodies with big families, or an excessive, costly act of indulgence to others, but to me, it's my resistance against the memory of my eating disorder.

I started dieting when I wanted to "look good" for my formal dress. It was a beautiful, tight dress, in a highlighter-yellow color with an open back. It was what people did - you needed to look your best for year 12 formal, and I figured that exercising and eating healthy was the way to do it. The morning after formal came and I hungrily ate not one, but two pieces of wholemeal toast spread with natural peanut butter and topped with banana slices. Over the rest of the Summer before University, I wasn't thinking much about what I ate, only mindful that it should be healthy. I felt thinner than I ever was before and people affirmed it by telling me how thin I had become and how good that made me look. At that stage, I was on a diet but it wasn't a compulsion. But by the time I started University, I thought I wasn't doing enough. I wasn't skinny enough. One day I decided to eat breakfast and go the whole day without food until dinner. It became a challenge and then something that *had* to be - I had to eat as little as possible or my skinniness was in jeopardy. That was when my diet turned into an eating disorder. I became irritable, I was cold all the time, and I was bloody hungry.

My eating disorder was characterized by deprivation, excessive exercise and restriction with some side effects to my hormones and overall mood, although I was lucky to not have experienced a multitude of severe

complications that can accompany eating disorders . My most powerful memory of deprivation were my dreams of donuts falling from the sky, going to bed and waking up with an intense craving for foods that I deemed “bad for me.” I didn’t just restrict dessert though, I measured out my food religiously where a gram more of plain greek yogurt or a full banana instead of a half would play on my mind for the rest of the day. I’d stare enviously at others eating wondrously hearty lunches or friends eating sweet french toast wrapped in tinfoil during lectures. I was constantly faced with deprivation versus satisfaction; if I chose to eat nuts in the movie I’d become resentful towards the person next to me eating lollies and buttered popcorn, but then if I chose to eat multiple cookies in a sitting I’d feel disgusted with myself.

Trapping myself in a diet killed the joy of choosing and consuming what I craved. Dessert was not joyous, it was something that needed to be “worked off.” This notion is imbedded in diet culture - I only needed to go to the salon to hear someone talking about their latest encounter with pizza and how they only allowed themselves one slice. Or those times we serve someone a second slice of cake and they go ‘Oh no, I’ll be rolling if I eat that.’ Or when someone does cave in to desire and they take a second serving of dessert, they cannot help but remark that they’re being ‘naughty.’ Ordering one of everything is my rejection of such remarks and the fearful beliefs behind them.

Perhaps the most overwhelming feeling during my eating disorder was guilt. I felt I didn’t deserve to feel full and I didn’t deserve plentifulness. The countertop in Flour and Stone is abundant and plentiful; scones and sandwiches are piled high, different sorts of pastries and tarts beneath and beside one another, cakes in colors of yellow, pink and brown displayed inside a wooden cabinet, and tall shaggy lamingtons regularly being prepared. Owner, Nadine believes the bakery’s abundant countertop lets people know they’re safe ; abundance in bakeries made me feel safe because I’ve come from a mindset where there was no abundance - there was never enough food. When I choose one of everything, I feel safe because I show myself that there will always be more, not a flavor sacrificed or denied.

I don’t remember a single moment of realization that I was unhappy and hurting my body, but I do remember being fed up with the restriction. You could describe restriction like having a delicious piece of cake being dangled over you, you want so badly to reach up and stuff it in your mouth but you can’t, there’s something around your neck and its this ribbon of messed up beliefs . In the end I went ‘fuck it’ and just ate the cake and still am eating the cake.

The first time I ordered everything I wanted, was for Spring Carnival at Flour and Stone. I looked up the menu and was paralyzed by the selection - basil strawberry tart, millionaire shortbread, tropical rocky road, passionfruit tart, blood orange cheesecake - everything looked exciting. Then I thought *Why don't we get everything we want?* And we did. At the time I felt so shy and hyper-aware of the people in line behind me. I was pretending that they didn't exist but still, wondering what they were thinking about me, *'How could that little brunette girl possibly eat all of that?'*

By that stage, I had done a lot of personal work to overcome my eating disorder, and I don't know if this action would have been so easy had I been back all those years ago at University. But there is always maintenance and if you don't watch yourself, you can fall back into bad habits.

My love of food, dessert namely, is incongruous with my experience of an eating disorder. When I was little, I could be seen hanging around the lolly table whilst the other kids rode around on scooters or played in the jumping castle. A little older, when I was told to peel boiled potatoes I would muck up slices of the potatoes so that they would be imperfect for display and I could eat them. In times like those, calories didn't register with me and I did not give a fuck about them. I cry when I think of torturing myself with guilt, denying myself of one of my first loves.

Nadine talks a lot about the healing power of cake, where a Manjari chocolate cake is used for times of sorrow or 4 different wedding cakes are used to celebrate love. Change was slow and for a lot of people with eating disorders or recovering from diets, healing happens in different ways. But for me, it was through dessert. What came from letting myself eat more freely meant that I no longer felt I was being punished by greek yogurt, avocados, spinach and spelt wholemeal bread. What happened was that these things became delicious again when there was sure to be a slice of cheesecake around the corner.

In the evening following each of my bakery trips, we spread out the bakes on the coffee table and we watch a movie. It's hard to pick where to start, hands hovering over the boxes and picking stray nuts and fallen pieces of cake. As we eat, our fingers are buttery and pastry flakes cover our sleeves and pant legs. We eat and eat, stopping when we're "sugared out." By that stage, I'm full, satisfied and I don't make myself go on a run the next day. The irony of all of this, is that dieting was all for nothing - somehow I look better eating 100 cakes than I did starving myself.

