

# LIGHT AS

# air

EGG WHITES, SUGAR, AND A WHISK ARE ALL IT TAKES TO MAKE THE MOST ETHEREAL OF DESSERTS. NO WONDER MERINGUES HAVE INTERNATIONAL APPEAL.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER BAKER TEXT BY GAIL MONAGHAN



**A TRUE WONDER** of the culinary world, meringue is essentially just egg whites and sugar, ingredients that undergo a miraculous transformation when infused with air. The result is a floating, billowing affair that tops lemon meringue pies, insulates the chilly interiors of baked Alaskas, makes buttercreams and macaroons possible, and serves as muse for countless other lofty creations.

Although the basic recipe has changed little in the 400 years or so since these humble components first came together, it has been refined in three slightly different ways to create French, Swiss, and Italian interpretations. Meringue's many incarnations, however, have evolved considerably, occupying an array of contrasts and forms. They can be meltingly soft, airy, and nonconformist, or precise and architectural with interiors ranging from surprisingly crisp

to seductively chewy. Multitiered dacquoise holds its own at the most elegant black-tie event, and rustic pavlovas feel at home with weeknight suppers. A fancifully frosted cake embodies structured formality; floating islands embrace a loosey-goosey, devil-may-care quality. Soufflés are hot; baked Alaskas are cold. Some meringues are towering; others diminutive. There are the snow white and the colored, the plain and the flavored. They are all delicious.

Mastering the skills for making meringue may take the finessing that comes only with experience—facilitated by the foolproof methods illustrated on these pages. The truly difficult part lies in deciding which possibility to pursue. But then, practice makes perfect.

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PINEAPPLE DACQUOISE  
WITH LAYERS OF SILKEN BUTTERCREAM,  
CARAMELIZED PINEAPPLE, AND CRISP PRALINE

# French MERINGUE



THE EASIEST AND MOST BASIC approach to meringue is adding sugar to whipped egg whites, one tablespoon at a time, until the perfect equilibrium of thick, smooth, and glossy is achieved. The ethereal texture that results is the inspiration for many a delicate dessert. This meringue can be shaped any which way: scooped into elegant ovals and poached to form silken, fanciful “floating islands”; spread atop pies and baked until browned; or piped into rounds and baked until slightly chewy or crisp throughout to create featherweight macaroons and dacquoises waiting to be layered with frosting, custard, fruit, or whatever the cook may fancy.



FLOATING ISLANDS  
WITH RICOTTA CREAM AND APRICOTS  
POACHED IN VANILLA-BEAN SYRUP



**PINEAPPLE DACQUOISE** French meringue is enhanced with ground nuts, forming a sturdy dacquoise batter. Pipe it into spirals (a circle traced on parchment ensures perfect rounds), and bake the batter at a moderate temperature until firm and dry. Layer to lofty heights with a medley of contrasting yet compatible fillings.



**FLOATING ISLANDS** When poached gently in milk, meringue takes on a sumptuous taste and a smooth, creamy texture that belies its virtual lack of fat. Scoop and shape into small ovals using a pair of dessert spoons. Keep the milk just below a bare simmer—it should give off steam but maintain a still surface.

# FRENCH MACAROONS

FASHIONED FROM MINIATURE MERINGUES  
IN AN ARRAY OF TINTS AND TASTES



**MACAROONS** The basic batter and the fillings for these delectable little desserts can be varied endlessly simply by adding different flavorings and colorings; for starters, there's chocolate, coconut, peanut, pistachio, raspberry, and vanilla bean. Piping the perfect macaroon takes a little practice. Treat it as you would a rosette, bringing the pastry tip to the side of the circle, rather than forming a peak, to finish.

# SWISS MERINGUE



THIS INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL MERINGUE is achieved by whisking egg whites and sugar over simmering water until the sugar has dissolved completely, and then removing it from the heat and beating it slowly until cool and firm. It's far more stable than its French counterpart, yet not as hardy as Italian meringue. It brings a silken smoothness to buttercream, but its most common, and arguably most stunning, application is a winsome, swooping shell that's baked until firm to the touch though still compellingly chewy within.



## CHOCOLATE PAVLOVA

CRADLING DARK-CHOCOLATE CREAM,  
GENTLY WHIPPED CREAM, AND  
CHOCOLATE SHAVINGS



**PAVLOVA** Cocoa and brown sugar lend this meringue a denser, moister, creamier texture than usual. Smooth the decadent mixture into a circle traced onto parchment, using broad strokes to minimize deflating while creating a crater in the center for the filling.

## SWISS MERINGUE BUTTERCREAM IN A SPECTRUM OF PASTEL HUES



### OMBRE BUTTERCREAM

① Add softened butter to the whipped meringue 1 piece at a time. This will initially deflate the mixture to the point of appearing soupy, which is normal. Continue to beat until the buttercream is smooth and glossy. It may appear curdled along the way; keep beating.

② Starting at 1 corner of frosted cake, pipe plain buttercream into several rosettes. Squeeze buttercream from pastry bag into a bowl, and add coloring to attain desired shade. Resume piping, and repeat as desired, gradually creating an ombre effect. (For the cake recipe, see [marthastewart.com/meringue](http://marthastewart.com/meringue).)

# Italian MERINGUE



THIS STURDY MERINGUE is formed by heating a sugar syrup until it reaches the soft-ball stage. The syrup is added slowly to softly beaten egg whites and then beaten vigorously until stiff, glossy peaks form. Although overbeaten French and Swiss meringues will lose their ability to peak when piped, Italian meringue is far more forgiving. The least fragile meringue, it brings sturdiness to mousses and semifreddi and is also harnessed for such grand applications as baked Alaskas (large and small). Italian meringue's unwavering stability allows the resulting desserts to be finished in the oven, frozen, or torched to dramatic effect.



## BAKED ALASKAS CONCEALING CLASSIC NEAPOLITAN FLAVORS



**BAKED ALASKAS** Individual servings of baked Alaska start as gelato—strawberry and vanilla—and chocolate cake that are layered in teacups and frozen overnight. Just before serving, spread the meringue onto each mound, and then bake or torch until evenly toasted outside and wonderfully marshmallow-like and gooey inside.



**LEMON SEMIFREDDI** Falling somewhere between mousse and gelato in texture, these semifreddi are made by lightening lemon curd with Italian meringue. To ensure the towering desserts retain their loft even after freezing, gently fold the meringue into the curd in portions, not all at once. Created by James Dunlison, Ayesha Patel, and Avery Wittkamp

SEE RECIPES SECTION  
SEE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

LEMON MERINGUE  
SEMIFREDDI  
WITH TOASTY SPIRAL TOPS

