

Lifestyle

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Aerial view showing an agriculture field next to a native Cerrado (savanna) in Formosa do Rio Preto, western Bahia state. — AFP

INVENTOR OF GUILT-FREE DESSERTS IS WORLD'S TOP PASTRY CHEF



French pastry chef Jessica Prealato of the Plaza Athenee hotel poses for a portrait in Paris. — AFP photos



Her desserts are often not at all sweet and she couldn't give a fig if people complain that they don't look great on Instagram. But that did not stop Jessica Prealato being named the best pastry chef on the planet Tuesday by the World's 50 Best Restaurants ranking. The 32-year-old French woman, who is about to have her first child, is the creator of a whole new genre of guilt-free patisserie. For Prealato it is not about how a dessert looks, it's how it tastes-and the feel good glow afterwards. The subtle and sublime creations she turns out at the three-star Michelin restaurant of the Plaza Athenee hotel in Paris are a rebuff to the sugar-rush burn of food porn.

Yet even she has not dared to have her father-a patissier forged in full-on sugar worship of French tradition-taste her creations that match strawberries with pine shoots and lemon with seaweed. "He would not understand what I do at all," she told AFP. Prealato has eschewed the sugar high to go for what her boss at the Plaza Athenee, the French superchef Alain Ducasse, calls "naturalité"-or naturalness-bringing out the full range of flavours that an ingredient already has. What Prealato also does is use ingredients that would never normally make it onto a dessert trolley. So you have malted beer sorbet with barley crumble and hop galettes, cherry olive vinaigrette or vanilla Jerusalem artichokes with truffles.

Sugar as seasoning

"We shake people up," Prealato laughed. She has already produced a book of 50 of her desserts called "Desseralite", including her "All Rhubarb", where the often astringent plant is served roasted, raw, fermented, grilled and poached. "I love to use vinegars and try every style of cooking so that I get the most flavours out of a product," said Prealato, one of a tiny number of female patisserie chefs working in three-star restaurants. Some of her peers have criticized her for the unfussy way she presents her food, claiming that it is not sophisticated enough for such an upscale establishment.

And four years ago when she was starting out at Alain Ducasse at the Plaza Athenee she said that the famed chef left her in tears when he refused to taste one of her first fruit-based desserts. "I can see why now," she said. "I had presented it like a patisserie chef usually would, with lots of mousse, cream and a tuile. "For him, a dessert didn't have to be about these things." So Prealato "took everything away... today I rarely ever work with chocolate or coffee." Instead her desserts play with sourness and acidity, and she uses sugar as others would salt-for seasoning.

Pretty isn't everything

"I understand why some clients may not like that," she said. Initially hurt by such negative feedback, Prealato has become used to it. It also makes being



crowned the world's best pastry chef all the more sweet. "I am amazed. It's enormous for me. I never would have guessed that my patisseries would go that far." With a frankness rare at the top of her profession, Prealato admitted that "they aren't exactly beautiful to look at.

"They may seem very simple but a huge amount of work goes into making them," she said. On average it takes a month to create a new recipe and her dessert menu changes rapidly with the seasons. Nor does the Earth generally shake when Prealato puts them on Instagram-unlike her Parisian rival Cedric Grolet who won the title last year and has more than 1.3 million fans who eagerly share his visually stunning creations. "My poor 20,000 followers!" Prealato joked.

Unlike Grolet-who like her is something of a sugar skeptic-she said she doesn't have the time to make her desserts look good by putting them on a white background. Nor does she have anything against traditional French patisserie, which she loves-she just doesn't want to spend her life making them. "I came here (to work with Ducasse) because I was sick of doing chocolate pistachio and cherry almond all the time. Some of the classics "are so good I don't see how you can revisit them," she said.

None of the members of her Franco-Italian family of cooks and patissiers have tasted her latest creations. "When I go home we don't talk about my work, and my parents don't really know what I am up to, which is fine by me. "We love to sit down together and eat food you can share-it's often not fancy at all." —AFP

World's most costly painting on Saudi prince's yacht

Since its sale for a record \$450 million, the whereabouts of the "Salvator Mundi," said to be painted by Leonardo da Vinci, has become one of the art world's greatest mysteries. On Monday, London-based art dealer Kenny Schachter, writing for the website Artnews, offered answers: the painting now resides on the gargantuan yacht owned by powerful Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Since its record-setting sale at Christie's in 2017, the painting, in which Jesus Christ is depicted emerging from darkness blessing the world with one hand while holding a transparent globe in the other, has never been exhibited in public, triggering doubts about its ownership, whereabouts and authenticity. Many art experts are split over whether the painting is genuine, saying it was not painted by the Italian master personally but instead by his workshop.

The Wall Street Journal first reported that the painting was bought by Saudi prince Badr bin Abdullah, who acted in the name of the Saudi crown prince, known by his initials MBS. Riyadh never confirmed or denied that report. AFP could not corroborate Schachter's column, and in a nod to the opaque nature of international art sales, he wrote, "In the murky Middle Eastern waters nothing is quite crystal clear." But citing several sources including two involved in the sale, Schachter claims the painting "was whisked away in the middle of the night on MBS's plane and relocated to his yacht, the Serene."

After saying the painting was originally found in shards and had to be reconstructed before its auction, he asks, "what harm could the occasional splash of seawater do?" Schachter later wrote that the painting will remain onboard the massive yacht until it is relocated to the Al-Ula governorate, which Saudi Arabia is aiming to transform into a culture and tourism destination. — AFP



In this file photo Christie's employees pose in front of a painting entitled 'Salvator Mundi' by Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci at a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London ahead of its sale at Christie's New York. — AFP