



PRESS RELEASE

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A certain je ne sais CROISSANT

The French created the croissant as a breakfast pastry, but Britain has adopted it as a savoury snack. Which maker's product suited our tasters best? Jan Learmonth finds out.

Thundering along at 300 kilometres per hour, the 400m-long, 18-carriage, yellow-nosed Eurostar delivers passengers from London's Waterloo to Paris's Gare du Nord in just three hours. (Well, it will once the damage from the recent fire in the tunnel is repaired.) What better place than en route to France, the home of the croissant, to taste a selection of ready-made croissants?

The bread croissant became popular in France in the 1700s, but in the 1920's was rejected in favour of layers of pastry that gave a lighter, tastier product-the famous crescent shape, however, remained. In France, they are now mainly served at breakfast, accompanied by butter and a selection of preserves. Here in the UK. The croissant has become popular as a snack with a savoury filling.

Caterer & Hotelkeeper last month invited a panel of tasters from across the industry to test a selection of croissants aboard the Eurostar on the way to Paris. Each taster invited has responsibility for purchasing croissants for his or her company. The croissants under scrutiny were served according to manufacturers' recommendations, all were tasted blind and detailed questionnaires were completed after each was tasted.

WHAT MAKES THE IDEAL CROISSANT?

The following criteria were used:

- Visual impression: does the croissant look appealing? Is it evenly glazed?
- Texture: is the pastry light? Crispy? Flaky? Does the croissant have a moist centre that pulls apart in layers, but can also be cut neatly?
- Flavour: does the croissant have a natural buttery flavour? Does it taste freshly made?
- Aroma: does the croissant have a pleasant, yeasty aroma?
- Overall quality: bearing in mind the price, size and value for money, tasters were asked whether they would serve the items in their establishments.

CHART TOPPERS

The croissant supplied by London pâtissier Bagatelle stood out in the tasters' opinions, as it looked appealing, the inside was a good buttery colour, and it had a well-layered texture and taste. Its price caused the only reservation. At 60p per croissant, some tasters felt it would be impossible to make 65% gross profit on it. The Premier all-butter croissant from Bake-house also received two stars. At 22p each, the tasters considered it an excellent buy, with its crispy outside and moist inside. Also recommended were the Charentes-Poitou croissant from Bridor UK, the croissant beurre from Délifrance, and the croissant au beurre des Charentes from Délice de France, each of which was considered a quality, well-priced, tasty croissant.

THE TASTERS

Adam Franklin is head chef at the Riverside Racket Centre health and fitness club in Chiswick, west London. Here he has responsibility for two restaurants, a 250-seat brasserie and a 40-seat fine dining room, which average 450 covers per day between them. Customer profile is upmarket, with an average spend of £9 for lunch and £25-£35 for dinner.

Franklin has buying control over breakfast goods and is not entirely satisfied with the croissants he is currently supplied. He was using the taste test to source a better-quality croissant with a natural taste and a quality, hand-rolled appearance.

Jackie Mueller is conference manager for the 187-bedroom Novotel hotel, Lambeth, London. One 107-seat restaurant serves 300 breakfasts, 40 lunches and 100 dinner covers daily, with average spend £9 at breakfast and £13 at dinner. Weekday customers are mostly corporate businessmen; weekend guests tend to be more families. Croissants are served with butter and preserves during conference coffee breaks, ad at the buffet breakfast in the restaurant. Novotel currently buys Bridor fresh croissants and frozen Délice de France croissants for back-up. Mueller's ideal croissant has a light texture, is made with not too much butter, and is golden brown and glazed. A cost of 20p is acceptable.

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James Harris is product and equipment manager for the Cross Channel Catering Co (CCCC) based at the Waterloo International railway terminal. This is the onboard catering service provider for Eurostar, host to the taste test.

With 220 first-class seats, 550 standard-class seats, and 44 departures daily, CCCC feeds from 30,000 to 35,000 customers each day. Average spend in standard class is £2.80. Croissants are served on all departures. CCCC buys in Bridor fresh-baked croissants for Eurostar services on which there are no baking facilities. Delice de France frozen croissants are used when on-site baking is possible.

Harris is always eager to source pre-prepared products for easy regeneration on board, products that reflect the tastes of the three countries in which Eurostar operates. A croissant of 60g weight, 45-50p cost, traditional shape and a high butter content is what he looks for. Judy Ruback is a director of Quarter Food and Wine, London. Her company targets boardroom functions feeding up to 100 people, although she does some catering in private homes. Average spend on food is £15 for lunches and £7.50 for breakfasts.

Ruback's company has two contracts with City Livery Halls. One is for 210 people, the other 75. She buys croissants from Sally Clarke's bakery, although for budget-conscious functions she uses a frozen product.

Ruback always buys a 100%-butter product, and likes a rolled, 3-D appearance. Her ideal croissant will cost 40p, be slightly crusty, and have a buttery but not greasy taste, one that doesn't leave a fatty residue on the residue on the roof of her mouth. The taste test provides an opportunity to compare standards, evaluate prices and check out new products and suppliers.

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CROISSANTS TASTE TEST - THE RESULTS

STAR RATINGS

Products were awarded marks and rated according to a star system

- ** Outstanding
- * Recommended

CROISSANTS

Croissant pâtissier - Bagatelle

In the taster' opinion, this was the best of the selection.

50 g, £15 per case of 25, 60p each
- Positive reaction from tasters: Excellent layered texture; looks hand-rolled; attractive buttery yellow inside; five-star croissant.
- Less-favourable comments: A touch too pricey.

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Premier all-butter croissant - Bakehouse
65g, £13.25 per case of 60, 22p each
- Positive reaction from tasters: Liked the traditional crescent shape; crispy outside; moist inside but not soggy.

- Less-favourable comments: Edges dry and flaky; a little bland; slightly dark at edges; a little more butter would help the flavour.

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Charentes-Poitou - Bridor UK

55g, 22p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Looks home-made; smells natural; can taste the butter; well layered.

- Less-favourable comments: Dry taste, a little too large; not enough flavour.

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Croissant au beurre des Charentes-Delice de France

70g, £10 per case of 40, 25p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Has a rustic

appearance; good price; nice yeasty aroma; good size.

- Less-favourable comments: Slightly uneven colour; fatty after-taste.

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Croissant beurre - Délifrance

55g, £18 per case of 60, 30p each
- Positive reaction from tasters: Value for money; good shape and structure; reasonably buttery.

- Less-favourable comments: Dull, dry appearance; no glaze; a little dear.

Butter croissant-Arkady Craigmillar

55g, £17.99 per case of 80, 22p each
- Positive reaction from tasters: Nice golden colour; compact shape.

- Less-favourable comments: Collapses when handled; not enough aroma.

Raw butter croissant - Frigifrance

60g, £25.20 per case of 180, 14p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Wonderful colour; would cut well and hold jam nicely; good contrast between exterior and inside.

- Less-favourable comments: Odd shapes; bland flavour; more like a brioche.

Croissant beurre fin - Leatham's Larder

50g, £27.53 per box of 200, 14p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Crisp outer layers; buttery flavour.

- Less-favourable comments: Heavy texture; flat and small; a little too sweet.

Jumbo butter croissant - Pullman Foods

75g, £11.37 per case of 36, 32p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Like the crescent shape.

- Less-favourable comments: Far too large; feels spongy and soft.

Butter croissant-Sara Lee

50g, £6.30 per case of 24, 26p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Quite tasty.

- Less-favourable comments: Soft, flat outer; tastes salty; eccentric looking shapes.

Croissant au beurre - Baker & Spice

70g, 50p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Looks like a million dollar

- Less-favourable comments: Artificial butter flavour; doesn't deliver its initial promise; chewy.

Bridor butter croissant light - Speciality Food Services

60g, £30.75 per case of 180, 17p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Home-made feel; nice centre.

- Less-favourable comments: Over-varnished look; outside too crunchy

Butter croissant - Kara Foods

52g, £8.57 per 50, 17p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Good value for money; nice-looking bread product; like the shape.

- Less-favourable comments: Tough to pull apart; heavy, stodgy texture.

Vitofour pre-proved straight butter croissant - Country Choice

55g, £14.65 per case of 60, 24p each

- Positive reaction from tasters: Appears value for money.

- Less-favourable comments: Bland taste, too many air pockets inside.