Cream Puffs or Gougères

Once you know how to make choux (it's French, and pronounced like "shoe") pastry, you can make cream puffs, eclairs or cheesy gougères. You'll need butter, flour and eggs, and then you can fill them with whipped cream (or even ice cream!) or make cheesy savoury puffs by stirring in some aged Gouda, Parmesan or Gruyère.

Choux pastry is a completely different process than making other kinds of pastry, which you typically try to keep cold. In this method, you heat butter and water in a saucepan on the stovetop, then stir in the flour, which makes a mixture that looks like mashed potatoes. You then gradually beat in your eggs, and wind up with a batter that's a bit like very thick pudding. From there you can stir in some cheese and make cheesy savoury gougères, or spoon or pipe them into rounds for cream puffs to fill with whatever you like!

Choux pastry:
1 cup water
1/2 cup butter, cut into pieces
pinch salt
1 cup all-purpose flour
4 large eggs

For cheesy gougères, you'll need about 1 cup grated Gruyère or aged Gouda or half as much Parmesan
For cream puffs, a couple cups of sweetened whipped cream

Preheat the oven to 375˚F.In a medium saucepan, bring the water, butter and salt to a simmer, cooking until the butter melts. Turn the heat all the way down and add the flour all at once. Stir until the dough comes together into a smooth ball, cleaning the sides of the pan. Turn the heat off and stir the ball of dough around for a minute or two to dry it a bit. Transfer to a bowl and let sit for a few minutes to cool slightly. (If you like, spread the dough out a bit in the bowl to allow it to cool more quickly.) Crack the eggs into a bowl or measuring cup and beat them lightly with a fork.

Pour in about a quarter of the egg and beat with an electric mixer or by hand until combined; it will separate into slimy lumps at first, but then will come together.
Add the rest of the egg the same way, about an egg's worth at a time, beating in each addition, until the mixture is smooth and glossy. It should have a consistency thicker than cake batter—you should be able to pipe it. If you're making cheesy gougères, stir in the grated cheese.

If you like, spoon the batter into a piping bag fitted with a large round tip, or into a large zip-lock bag and cut off a corner. Or you can drop it in spoonfuls onto a baking sheet. On a parchment-lined baking sheet, pipe it out into mounds or drop by the spoonful, making them about half the size you'd like them to be once cooked, and spacing them

at least an inch apart. With dampened fingers, gently tap any pointed tips to keep them from burning. Alternatively, drop the batter in rounded spoonfuls onto your sheet.

Bake for 20 minutes (for small cream puffs) or 30 minutes (for larger ones), until puffed and golden. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. If you like, poke the side of each puff with a bamboo skewer or the tip of a small knife to allow excess steam to escape. (This will keep them crisp.)

When you're ready to fill the cream puffs, poke a small hole in the bottom or side of each puff with the tip of a paring knife. Put your whipped cream into a piping bag (or zip-lock bag, and cut off a corner) and pipe into each puff—you'll feel them getting heavier as they fill. If you like, drizzle them with chocolate sauce.

Makes about 2 dozen cream puffs or gougères.