

Happy endings

Chefs who underestimate the potential of a decadent dessert to sign off a meal could be missing out on some sweet success

Desserts are a surprisingly divisive topic. Ask the experts how well they are currently selling and you will get a variety of conflicting answers, statistics and opinions.

It all depends on the nature of the venue, its price-point, the clientele, the service, the day of the week even. "Consumers are reappraising occasional indulgent treats like desserts," says Lora Simons, marketing manager at food distributor 3663. "They have less disposable income and, simultaneously, they're being bombarded with government health warnings. Over the past year, we've seen a decline in sales of desserts by just over two per cent across ambient and frozen."

This is echoed by London Restaurant Barometer which, in March, highlighted declining dessert sales as a factor in a dip in trade at 60 per cent of the capital's restaurants, and by restaurant consultancy Underdog. "People have started going lighter or skipping dessert, and cheese sales are definitely on the wane," says Underdog's co-owner Will Beckett.

Elsewhere, however, particularly at higher-spend restaurants, chefs and owners are bullish. Alison Seagrave, former head chef at Harvey Nichols' Second Floor restaurant in Manchester, who opened Macaroon, a new cake/dessert café in Rochdale in May, says she cannot bake cakes fast enough. Likewise, at Harvey Nichols, she says she saw no evidence of people swerving the sweet stuff. "Maybe in retail it's talled off, but even in January, I wouldn't hear, 'can I have fruit salad?'. You're still getting, 'can I have cream and ice-cream with that?'"

Despite a slight decline in overall sales, 3663 reports pockets of buoyancy. "Traditional desserts are performing well," says Simons. "They've maintained sales volumes and show no signs of slowing."

If the overall picture is somewhat confusing, one fact is indisputable: desserts remain a key part of restaurant business. Not only are they fundamental to a diner's lasting impression of a restaurant - "If the dessert is excellent, you're halfway there," says

Words
Tony Naylor

L'Anima head chef, Francesco Mazzei - but compared with starters and mains, which usually contain an expensive protein ingredient, they are also cheap to make. Even when using artisan chocolate or gold leaf, a from-scratch dessert should yield 80-85 per cent GP. "As such, they're a big part of boosting profits," says Beckett.

But who will make your desserts? Fewer and fewer people are training as pastry chefs and, outside of traditional five-star hotels, there are fewer jobs for them. Most modern restaurants argue that they cannot justify the cost of employing a dedicated pastry chef who, because they usually work in a very methodical, technical, accurate way, cannot pitch in elsewhere when the kitchen gets busy.

Beckett questions this logic. "Each business needs to decide whether it's right for them, but a pastry chef can be worth their weight in gold, especially if they make bread, which will cost about 10 per cent of what you pay a baker. A good pastry chef earns in excess of £35K, but ought to be able to help make that money back in increased GP, improved dessert sales and general customer satisfaction."

Most kitchens let a sous chef handle desserts, or share the responsibility. If so,

A pastry chef can be worth their weight in gold. They can increase GP, improve customer satisfaction and boost sales



3G's new chocolate brownie is the 12th dessert to be added to its Select range

given that most chefs are more interested in savoury dishes, the head chef needs to make sure desserts are being treated seriously. Head chefs need to encourage younger brigade members to think creatively about desserts and, if need be, to practice their artisan pastry skills. "In 20 years I'm worried that everyone will be able to use foams, but nobody will be able to do a puff pastry," says Mazzei, who trained as a pastry chef. "I would love to think that one day a chef would be someone who knows about bakery, pastry, ice-cream and cooking."

Pre-prepared puds

In large mainstream hospitality environments, particularly if the kitchen lacks equipment, buying-in prepared desserts is an option. Bought-in desserts offer a lower GP, around 55-60 per cent, but offer simplicity - just defrost and plate-up. Foodservice company 3G, for example, says its individual portion desserts, such as mille feuille strawberry tart and its new chocolate brownie offer easy portion control and minimum wastage.

Plus, you can add-value by tweaking them with, say, fresh fruit, homemade coulis, or by partnering them with luxury ice-creams, such as Mövenpick's new VSOP Cognac (£14.50 for 2.4l). The ice cream, which blends floral notes of VSOP Cognac with Cognac-marinated Granny Smith apple pieces, is just one of Mövenpick's extensive range of flavours, which also include balsamic vinegar, crème brûlée and tiramisu.

Alveston Kitchens, the frozen dessert

How to sell desserts

Think about the words you use to describe a dish. "Menu psychology is a big thing," says Macaroon owner Alison Seagrave, and key words like 'warm' and 'sticky' invariably guarantee high sales. Likewise, if you are using premium ingredients, make that 'added-value' clear. "Providing detail on the provenance of ingredients, such as the origin of 'single origin' couverture, helps lift the dessert from the everyday," adds David Bentley, sales director at Town & Country Fine Foods.

Cake stands and dessert trolleys, once regarded as naïf, are experiencing a bit of a renaissance in the right setting thanks to the growth in afternoon tea. If you can display desserts in a credible way, it may help drive sales, says 3663's Lora Simons. "People choose food with their eyes and desserts are great for this."



Atul Kochhar's Coconut Passion Fruit dessert is on the menu at Vatika

brand owned by Heinz, recently ran a competition to demonstrate how easy it is to add value to its desserts - which include New York cheesecake, luxury raspberry pavlova and lemon and pannacotta flan - by using a few additional ingredients and some imagination. Competition winner Lucie David, head chef at The Duke of York Inn in Somerset, says, "My top tips for presenting desserts would be to keep it simple - the accoutrements should never get in the way. The simple addition of delicate sauces, coulis, fresh fruit or a mint leaf all add value to a dish and leave customers feeling that some effort has been put into this often neglected part of the meal."

There are interesting products on the market, too. For instance, Speciality Desserts' mini classics, from 3663, reflect a wider trend to mini and sharing desserts. Town & Country Fine Foods, meanwhile, carries a range of frozen DeBailleul products, handmade in Brussels.

In terms of building a menu there are certain staples which always sell. It should include, says Seagrave, a chocolate dessert, a cheesecake and a brûlée. Seasonality and locality are less important. Regional classics, like Manchester Tart, may add interest, but generally do not sell that well. Similarly, while discerning customers may appreciate the use of quality, seasonal fruits, most good dessert ingredients will be continental rather than British.

At Michelin level, meanwhile, the very nature of desserts is changing rapidly. The

trend is to lighter desserts, smaller portions ("You don't want guests having to undo their trousers," warns Seagrave) and a general blurring of distinct boundaries between sweet and savoury.

"If used excessively, which many chefs believe it has been, sugar can mask flavour," says Food People consultant Charles Banks. "There is a groundswell towards less sweet, more flavourful desserts, using fruit and vegetables to add sweetness." The dessert world, he adds, is also increasingly an area for "fun, humour and play". The use of micro-herbs, like lemon cress, gels, foams and novel ice-creams is increasingly common.

At his new Edinburgh restaurant, 21212, Paul Kitching has recently been serving a variety of desserts based around a 'savoury' cheesecake. It is still sweet, but much less so than traditional cheesecakes, and includes a little truffle oil and dried, powdered mushroom. Remove the sugar, pair it with a savoury sauce, and it could easily be served as a starter. "It's a different way of thinking," says Kitching. "I said to the kitchen, 'don't think desserts, just another course that's sweet'. I want to move away from pastry to more cream and texture. Why? It's just a bit obvious and dull, and we're sick of lining pastry cases."

The end of pastry in desserts? Remember where you read it first. ■

Inspirational afters

We asked chefs to name their killer desserts. Here's what they said:

The Conversation Piece - Baked Alaska **The Royal Oak, Maidenhead.**
Head chef Dominic Chapman

"Perhaps it's that people haven't seen this 'blast from the past' for years, or the idea of baking ice-cream, but it's certainly a talking point."

Reworked Asian - Coconut passion fruit (coconut cake, passion sorbet, sesame brittle) **Vatika, Hampshire.** **Head chef Jitin Joshi, created by Atul Kochhar**

"Classically, it's quite monotone and heavy but I added passion fruit seed jam and banana passion fruit sorbet for acidity."

Sweet and Savoury - Chocolate mousse, smoked fudge, butternut squash cannelloni, rosemary and pine nuts **The Pass, Horsham.** **Head chef Matt Gillan**

"I was looking at flavourings for a lamb dish but I needed a sauce, and wanted something slightly different, which led me to chocolate. Later, I thought, 'if that combination works in a savoury dish surely it'd work sweet?'"

Fresh and lively - Crispy Apple Bamboo **Roka and Zuma, London.**
Head Pastry Chef Julien Philippe

"This dish was inspired by Japanese gardens and bamboo sticks. We imitate the gardens with our apple bamboo sticks which are made by drying paper thin layers of green apple and shaping them into a tube, which is filled with an apple scented foam."

Modern Luxe - Valrhona chocolate fondant, coffee parfait, with hot milk chocolate and cardamom soup **Cinnamon Kitchen, London.**
Pastry chef James Mossman

"This dish has it all: hot, cold, crumbly, crunchy, silky and smooth."

Kids' Stuff - Home-made ice cream cones **Boxwood Cafe, London.**
Executive chef Stuart Gillies

"Everyone loves ice cream, and something fun like this takes people back to being a child again."

Light Bite - Madagascan vanilla roasted pineapple, citrus consommé, yoghurt-basil sorbet **Le Pont de la Tour, London.**
Pastry chef Joanne Todd

"A lighter option that still enables guests to indulge their sweet tooth."

Clever Creativity - Sweet curry **Restaurant Sat Bains, Nottingham.** **Head chef Sat Bains**

"This dish was initially developed by Alex Bond. He loves curry and started incorporating certain spices with fruit, to try and elevate the flavours of both and create a dish that was sweet but not sugary."

British Twist - Cherry Eton Mess **Restaurant at St Paul's, London.** **Head chef Candice Webber**

"I enjoy coming up with dishes that nod to the overlooked history of British food, with wonderful fresh British ingredients."

Reader Giveaway

Mövenpick Ice Cream is offering two lucky winners the chance to scoop a summer saving. To win 12 presentation glasses, 20 bespoke dessert menus, a roldipper ice cream scoop along with £50 worth of free ice cream, worth £220 in total, email dbarton@splashcommunications.com quoting 'Restaurant'. The first two names to bit the Inbox will win the prizes.