



Chocolate continues its reign as the top-selling dessert flavor. Classics like the three-layer cake at Cameron Mitchell's Cap City restaurant have proven menu longevity.

Make Mine CHOCOLATE

On its own or paired with fruits, pastries and beverages, America's favorite flavor generates sales

BY PRISCILLA MARTEL

Ringling up bigger dessert sales may be as easy as simply adding more chocolate in more forms to the menu. A perennial favorite, chocolate is the top-selling dessert flavor on restaurant menus, according to Technomic's 2010 Dessert Consumer Trend Report. In fact, sales of specialty chocolates and confectionery bars have remained strong despite the recession — a trend that savvy operators can build on with inventive applications for the various types of premium chocolate available in both traditional and novel forms.

"Creative ways with chocolate can add value to the mainstream menu," says Kara Nielsen, trendologist at the Center for Culinary Development in San Francisco. Using real chocolate as opposed to cocoa powder or a flavoring may make all the difference in creating an appealing chocolate experience. Nielsen cites the new line of mocha coffees at Caribou Coffee. Menu copy describes the Turtle Mocha as "made with your choice of premium chocolate (dark, milk or white), melted into steamed milk."

"The real chocolate makes it a more authentic experience," she says.

"Differentiating the quality of the chocolate helps sales as well," she adds, noting that Dallas-based Dave & Buster's, with more than 55 locations across the country, is among chains citing Belgian chocolate on its fondue menu.

"Use a brand or at least call out cocoa-solid percentage," Nielsen advises. But know your consumers' taste preferences. Some bittersweet may be too bitter for the American palate, warns Brian Hinshaw, vice-president and executive corporate chef of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, based in Columbus, Ohio, with 17 units and seven different concepts in six states.



BLACK ANGLUS

In its new *S'mores Seduction*, Black Angus Steakhouse upgrades the campfire classic with a hot-from-the-oven chocolate-walnut cookie topped with graham crackers, toasted marshmallows, Hershey's chocolate squares, ice cream and a generous drizzle of rich chocolate syrup.

The company uses primarily Callebaut but selected Valrhona for a sauce served with profiteroles. "Valrhona has a slightly sour, more bitter finish, but that one dessert is so rich and decadent, it worked," he says.

"Chocolate-makers add certifications to help differentiate their products," notes Packaged Facts' Curtis Vreeland. "This is especially important during recessions."

ENGAGE THE EXPERIENCE

S'mores, sundaes and fondues let diners play with their food, enhancing the dessert experience. Chocolate plays a strong supporting role in playful, nostalgic and customizable desserts. Nielsen recommends using chocolate to customize a sundae. She suggests offering a toppings caddy with an assortment of chocolate add-ons.

"This brings a nice experiential as well as customizable element, and you can add some fun," she says.

Chocolate consumption is tied to mood elevation. Sometimes that little touch of chocolate like the mix-ins offered at an ice cream shop will excite the customer, or the unexpected presentation of crumbled brownies or chocolate pudding layered in a glass.

FRUIT AND CHOCOLATE

Look beyond classic fruit-and-chocolate flavor pairings, including banana, orange and raspberry, to modernize and customize dessert offerings. Mango and pineapple work well with chocolate, as do many types of berries.

It is a question of balancing the acid in the fruits with the right chocolate preparation, one with the appropriate sweetness and lushness from dairy or cocoa butter.

"Most restaurants don't serve fruit beyond what it is," says Rick Perez, corporate chef with Dole Foods in Westlake Village, Calif. To help menu developers get creative with fruit usage, Dole devised a fruit-pairing wheel to make flavor recommendations across many applications.

Among pairing recommendations are peaches or cherries with chocolate, as in a chocolatey Black Forest Martini made with pureed fresh-frozen dark sweet cherries. Serving fruit sandwiched between layers of cocoa-spiked shortcake can update a traditional dish.

Chocolate-fruit blends also speak to the local food movement. Huckleberries and chocolate are a popular combination; Sam's Chowder House in Half Moon Bay, Calif., drizzles its flourless chocolate cake with a huckleberry sauce.

Technomic's Dessert Consumer Trend Report indicates that healthful, non-traditional desserts like fruit and yogurt are more popular with female consumers. A fruit-chocolate dessert option — even a simple indulgence like chocolate-covered strawberries — brings with it fruit's inherent fresh and healthful appeal.

"Traditionally, customers seem more likely to indulge in chocolate desserts during or after dinner," says Knouse Foods' Rosa Brantley Garcia. "A lunch that includes a mini chocolate dessert is a great way to promote dessert in the middle of the day."

MILKY WHITE CHOCOLATE

Chocolate's range of flavor and creaminess makes it a natural to enliven menu classics. While much of recent media attention has been on dark chocolate, white and milk varieties have strong roles on the dessert menu.

"White chocolate is a forgotten jewel," observes Christopher Boos, executive pastry



THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY BAKERY

Chocolate sauce is “one of the simplest ways to transform a dessert into a creation with a made-in-the-back-of-the-house look,” says The Cheesecake Factory’s Chris Radovan. Here, a cayenne-hinted dark-chocolate drizzle adds an exotic, signature profile.

chef at Dunkin’ Brands. “The milk notes within white chocolate and that creaminess can add a depth of flavor to a dessert.”

At Cameron Mitchell, the White-Chocolate Key Lime Tart is an indulgent spin on the familiar pie. Chili’s White-Chocolate Molten Lava Cake updates a dish that has seen menu longevity, and white-chocolate sauce updates the classic Fudge Brownie Sundae at Prospector’s Bar & Grill in Spokane, Wash.

And don’t overlook milk chocolate, which is undergoing a renaissance similar to what has happened with dark chocolate. Milk-chocolate frosting softens the richness of a dark-chocolate cupcake, and its peanut-pairing power is unrivaled, as evidenced by an influx of new peanut-butter-and-chocolate desserts.

“We’re seeing the beginnings of a return to the chocolate most of us grew up with, which was milk chocolate,” says Chris Radovan, VP of research and development for The Cheesecake Factory. His current product development includes a milk-chocolate item geared to anticipated demand.

SPIRITED PAIRINGS

The nibbling and tasting trend is another opportunity for chocolate-dessert menu development. Cooper’s Hawk Winery & Restaurants menu house-made truffles and chocolates paired with a flight of sweet wines. This newer chain of casual restaurants with onsite wineries also offers chocolate-covered strawberries, cheesecake lollipops and other small sweet bites on the dessert menu.

“Chefs should be sourcing out high-quality bonbons,” says food historian Alexandra Leaf, to create a simple, small-plate approach to dessert. “Properly stored, they will last a long time.”

Marcia Petravicus, co-founder of Sip Smoke Savor, recommends pairing filled chocolates with Scotch, a combination inspired by her love of single malts.

“The texture of the chocolate, the mouthfeel, is part of the pairing” she says, adding that the spicy components in the chocolate and the Scotch are complementary. Petravicus works with chef Michael Antonorsi of Chuao Chocolatier in Carlsbad, Calif., a company known for its more-savory flavor combinations.

For dessert pairings, she recommends pulling out the caramel notes in a matured Scotch by pairing it with a chocolate-caramel tart.

“The creamy flavors of chocolate go best with sweet, full-bodied, high-alcohol wines,” observes wine writer Natalie MacLean. Among her top chocolate pairings are dark chocolate and Banyuls from France and chocolate-covered biscotti with Italian Recioto della Valpolicella.

She suggests wines to complement 50 chocolate dishes in her online matching tool at www.nataliemaclean.com/matcher.

ACCESSORIZE WITH CHOCOLATE

Chocolate need not dominate a dessert to influence a sale; clever attention to toppings, drizzles and garnishes can elevate the experience.

“One of the simplest ways to transform a dessert into a creation with a made-in-the-back-of-the-house look is to garnish with chocolate sauce or chocolate curls,” says Radovan.

The range of flavors that pair with chocolate is limitless, from herbs like rosemary and mint to savory spices. Capitalize on the appeal of chocolate by experimenting with how chocolate accessories are flavored.

Consider identifying sauce origins, as in the Sugar and Spice Beignets with Venezuelan Chocolate Fondue at Hatfield's in Los Angeles. Or try an unexpected flavor in a chocolate sauce, such as chiles, whiskey or oatmeal stout.

Ice cream is one of the strongest growth categories in limited- and fast-service restaurant venues, according to Technomic. Chocolate can piggyback on the frozen dessert's enduring popularity.

Keep the beloved molten or flourless chocolate cake, Nielsen recommends, "but play with the accompanying ice-cream flavor, even if it's chocolate malt or chocolate pecan."

Among newer ice-cream flavors being rediscovered is stracciatella, an Italian-style chocolate chip made by pouring melted chocolate into ice cream as it spins. The effect is an ice cream specked with thin shreds of chocolate.

The ever-expanding variety of chocolate shells and garnishes makes adding chocolate enhancements easier than ever. White-, dark- and milk-chocolate leaves, curls, shells, cylinders, shot glasses and spoons are available from a growing number of suppliers.

"By adding even one element to the plate, no matter how small, an operator can achieve huge customer impact at minimal added cost," notes Radovan.

Local bakeries and pastry chefs like Jean-Francois Bonnet at Tumbador Chocolate in Brooklyn, N.Y., are coming up with their own take on such nostalgic branded sweets as Ring Dings, Hostess Cupcakes and Mallomars. These are ideal paired with specialty beverages.

Chocolate beverages also continue to hold appeal, from the chocolate martini to modern creations like Lulu Almaguer's Chocolate Fig Manhattan, served at Madera in Menlo Park, Calif. In a glass rimmed with cocoa nibs, she combines chocolate, bourbon and fig flavors.

Nielsen advises piggybacking on the milk-shake trend by offering something with chocolate to round out the experience. A dark-chocolate coating on a biscotti or crisp rice treat can enhance its value.

By the time people get to the end of their meal, they face palate fatigue, says Nielsen. They are looking for a sweet closure that won't disappoint. Chocolate is one flavor with that appeal. ☺

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Take-Away TIPS

PLAY THE FIELD: Chocolate can hook up with a wide range of unexpected partners, including mangos, pineapple and peaches, savory herbs and spices, even beer and Scotch.

C'EST SI BONBON: For an upscale, small-plate or shareable approach to dessert, offer chocolate bonbons as the finishing touch.

DARK AND LIGHT: Make use of chocolate's full range, from dark and bittersweet to milk and white chocolate. Call out cocoa content and brands.

