

RETRO

Gets Racy

Chefs bring nostalgic desserts up a notch for a signature edge

AN EVOLUTION IN RETRO is an oxymoron — by their very nature, retro pulls us into the past and evolution pushes us into the future. But baking and pastry is where this kind of oxymoron can thrive. It's where that friction of push and pull, confounding norms and expectations, propels creativity into daring, exciting forms and flavors.

Retro desserts have had their day in the sun with an unabashed celebration of childhood novelties and days-of-yore recipes: towering coconut layer cakes, whoopie pies, cream-filled cupcakes, banana puddings, cherries Jubilee, and the ubiquitous s'mores. And with this five-year renaissance of retro, we have of course delighted in creative spins, where pastry chefs add signature touches to memory-laden desserts. These subtle twists were the first tentative step in the trend's evolution: classic chocolate whoopie pies filled with vanilla buttercream give way to chocolate whoopie pies with salted caramel buttercream. Now, we're seeing opportunity in the trend's next brave leap, where whoopie pies stay true to the experience but experiment with flavor combinations.

The whoopie pie's traditional chocolate cake-like cookie is now spiced pumpkin cookie and the filling is now an orange-scented ginger cream-cheese filling.

“Desserts are about fun and indulgence,” says The Hartman Group's Melissa Abbott. “It's a reflection of our nostalgic past and the pulse of pop culture. It's the one food category where experimentation and riffs are welcomed. From fried Kool-Aid balls at the state fair to handcrafted alternative-flour cupcakes, a hint of whimsy and a strong narrative are the cornerstone of creating demand.”

Indeed, childhood stories inform retro desserts, strengthening their pull with diners and fueling warm nostalgic fuzzies when they see them on the menu. But where we see the trend going helps move it from novelty to signature, and helps operators use it as a platform for growth.

Although a freeing sense of abandon in flavor combinations marks the next phase of this trend, stay tethered to the desserts' original builds. “There's an expectation of

experience with this kind of dessert,” says Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. “A cream puff should have the texture and flavor of a cream puff, no matter what's in the pastry

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Familiar always sells. Spinning retro desserts is a natural way to tap consumer confidence in the familiar while presenting something with a new flavor slant.

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PRISCILLA MARTEL

Familiarity with innovation: The PB&J Bon Bons at Seattle's Local 360 are made up of creamy peanut butter breaded in panko then nestled in blackberry preserves.



ERNIE SAPIRO PHOTOGRAPHY

Why Now Sentimental is coming back, especially if consumers can't replicate it at home. Dessert as a category just hasn't broken the code yet and, as a result, the opportunity to innovate is always present.

– MINDY ARMSTRONG

or in the cream.” Consumers may be ready for an inspired, unique take on red velvet cake, but the interpretation should somehow tickle the memory of that dish, otherwise the effort can come across as too contrived or pointless.

“I think it's a combination of putting a contemporary spin and truly innovating while keeping it familiar,” says Technomic's Darren Tristano. “Take a risk, maybe with new drizzles, crusts and toppings. And maybe add an element of customization, which is definitely a trend that's here to stay.”

THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

Yes, old-fashioned desserts that stand the test of time are generally yummy, but they also tug on a very deep part of

At RN74 in Seattle, Pastry Chef Kim Mahar recalls the classic American shake-and-fries combo with her Malted Milkshake and Paprika French Fries, with chocolate sorbet, paprika ganache macaron, Whopper dust and paprika-salted fries.



“Creating something special that taps into childhood memories is fun and engaging. Consider retro desserts served in smaller portions to share and enjoy with friends and family.”

CHARLIE BAGGS

our collective heartstrings. From a business perspective, that tugging can lead to a whole lot of brand love.

“The menu language around your interpretations of retro desserts is really important,” says Justin Beckett, chef/co-owner of Beckett’s Table in Phoenix, Ariz. “It’s especially effective in social media, where you can immediately connect with people on something familiar, and hopefully, newly creative.” His Creamsicle Crème Brûlée is one such example. “Who can’t relate to a childhood popsicle?” he asks. To accentuate (and elevate) that orange flavor, he steeps orange rinds and segments in a cream and egg mixture that’s also scented with orange flower water. “All the flavors come out on the back end, really subtly, and the creaminess from the custard is similar to the texture of a creamsicle,” says Beckett. He also sells a pretty traditional Upside-Down Cake, but instead of crowning it with the ’50s classic maraschino cherry, he pairs the cake with a housemade amarena cherry ice cream. “It’s an homage to the maraschino,” he says. Whenever he runs it, it sells out.

“Chefs are relying on America’s traditional desserts to entice diners into finishing their meal with these fabulous sweets.”

CHRIS CASSON

Evoking happy memories of a classic treat, the Old Fashioned Cheesecake Sundae updates the ice cream to Vanilla Bean Cheesecake garnished with whipped cream, cherries and a swirl of chocolate.



THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY BAKERY

ON THE MENU

Edgy Retro Desserts

- ROASTED BANANA CAKE** ~ With burnt caramel and coconut ice cream
RIO GRILL, CARMEL, CALIF.
- UPSIDE-DOWN CAKE** ~ Warm pineapple-almond upside-down cake with brown-sugar ice cream
NEL CENTRO, PORTLAND, ORE.
- EDGE BAKED ALASKA** ~ Salted butterscotch ice cream, chocolate-covered Cocoa Krispies
EDGE RESTAURANT & BAR, DENVER
- JELLO & PUDDING** ~ Passion fruit, white-chocolate peanut-butter ganache, roasted banana, vanilla wafer
ART & SOUL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

In Chicago, revamped retro is a foundation in the formula at The Hearty Boys restaurant. With an emphasis on updated comfort foods of mid-century America, the menu builds off nostalgic classics ranging from tuna casserole to banana cake.

“We view retro desserts through a very specific lens,” says Dan Smith, chef/co-owner. “We look at them, love them, then tear them down and rebuild them into something that fits our style.” Tang powdered orange drink helps play up their retro-but-better vibe. Smith makes a Tang sorbet, scooping it in a nifty coupe dish, drizzling it with champagne syrup and topping it with seasonal berries. “The syrup really adds an adult note because it’s kind of boozy,” he says. And during its wildly successful brunch, he serves Mimosas with a side of three Tang ice cubes, letting guests customize the “Tang-y” sweetness. He also prepares a Nutella Pop Tart with Salted Caramel (using a pop tart recipe courtesy of Gale Gand). He starts with pâte brisée, then fills it with Nutella and salted caramel and finishes it with a spread of salted-caramel icing.

New Orleans’ Restaurant R’evolution, powered by the Rick Tramonto/John Folsie partnership, gets in on the amped-up retro-dessert trend, too. Pastry Chef Erin Swanson created an Inside-Out Root Beer Float with Red Crème Soda and Root Beer Ice Cream. “She reverses all of the flavors, literally turning this classic diner dessert on its head,” says Tramonto. Also on the menu are housemade ice creams with comfort cues, in Toasted Marshmallow and Red Velvet Creole Cream Cheese flavors. “We respect the foundation, but then evolve those retro flavors into our style.”

A MOMENT FOR PUDDINGS

Say the word “pudding.” There. Don’t you feel comforted? It’s one of those desserts that instantly recalls childhood’s kitchen tables — where most of us sat, eating thick, soft, sweet banana pudding, or chocolate pudding, or maybe tapioca. Chefs have been spinning out modern takes of these for awhile now, but we’re seeing retro-style puddings poised to capture the limelight.

At SoBou in New Orleans, Executive Chef Juan Carlos Gonzalez brings together two retro desserts for his Cherries Jubilee Bread Pudding with brandied cherries and Tahitian vanilla-bean ice cream. At the multi-unit level, California Pizza Kitchen recently introduced a Salted Caramel Pudding, and Yard House upped the ante with its Salted Caramel Butterscotch Pudding topped with housemade whipped cream, chocolate cookie crumble and Maldon sea salt.

In Denver, pudding is given two slots on Edge Restaurant & Bar’s dessert menu. Warm Sticky Toffee Pudding sees a side of whisky ice cream and a finish of organic turbinado sauce. Diners can also treat themselves to a Meyer Lemon Pudding Cake with a blood orange creamsicle, citrus pound cake “croutons” and lime caramel. Further on the fringe of edgy retro is Houston’s Kata Robata, where Pastry Chef Chris Leung engages pudding’s adaptable nature for his Japanese-influenced dessert menu, serving a chocolate pudding made with black sesame cake, candied and powdered sesame, caramelized banana, roasted banana sorbet and yuzu.

The Hearty Boys’ PB&J Wonder-Bread Pudding fits snugly within its profile of modernized classics. “As much as we all deny it, we love ingredients like Wonder Bread,” says Smith. Using muffin tins, he pours custard over the bread (using the crusts as lining). “Because the Wonder Bread is so light and airy, it soaks up the custard beautifully,” he says. Smith adds peanut butter mixed with sugar and cream cheese and a black pepper-strawberry-balsamic jam. A custard-dipped square of Wonder Bread crowns the pudding, which then gets baked in the oven.

TAKING S’MORES FURTHER

Cosi laid down the gauntlet years ago when it introduced its tabletop fire pits for make-your-own s’mores. Indeed, housemade marshmallows and graham crackers combined with gourmet chocolate have blazed the trail for the s’mores renaissance. But with amped-up retro, s’mores will get a little crazy. The Hearty Boys moves the s’more away from tradition with ginger-snap shortbread and salted chocolate ganache. Smith places the marshmallow on one cookie and torches it in the oven

“Don’t forget dessert cocktails! You don’t need a lot of dessert drink options, but you should have at least one great one. There has been a torrent of new confectionary liquor/liqueur product launches, from chocolate to whipped cream to different types of cake and everything in between. I am also seeing some adult milkshakes and floats with retro flavors popping up. Clearly, there is a consumer interest in these nostalgic flavors.”

DAVID COMMER

How to Work It Three easy “edgy retro” dessert options: breakfast for dessert (donuts, pancakes, waffles, ‘jam’ and maple); updated old fashioned (crisps, cobblers, buckles, grunts, slumps, upside-down cakes, pies, whoopie pies); and drinkable desserts (retro coffee drinks, dessert cocktails, boozy shakes). — ROBIN SCHEMP



ABE & LOUIE'S

The ultimate in comfort dessert, Butterscotch Bread Pudding complements the classic steaks served at Abe & Louie's in Boston and Boca Raton, Fla.

until it puffs. He then adds ganache, caps it with another cookie, squishes it and adds a squiggle of ganache on the plate. “It’s still a s’more, but presented in a fun, new way.”

Justin Beckett grew up in a holistic, no-sugar, macrobiotic household. Every summer, his grandparents took him camping, where they would indulge on s’mores. Cut to 20-plus years later and Beckett has gone whole hog with his interpretation at Beckett’s Table. His Chocolate-Dipped Bacon S’mores with caramel, housemade marshmallow, whipped peanut butter and graham cracker are a huge seller. “Bacon was kind of my gateway meat, leading me away from vegetarianism,” he says. He uses thick-cut, salty, smoky bacon, laying it flat on a sheet pan, then baking it. He then dips the whole strip of bacon in 54 percent dark chocolate and freezes it. “It’s been on our menu since day one and I won’t take it off,” he says. “It’s important to bring back memories with these desserts. They automatically help your customer relate to you and your food.” ☺

“ We tend to think of desserts and dessert drinks as only an after-dinner opportunity. Traditional daypart lines are blurring, especially among Millennials, who may decide to treat themselves to dessert as an afternoon snack. ”

DAVID COMMER