

# 10 - All-Day Desserts

The growing appetite for sweet-somethings is stretching the boundaries of dessert

By Katie Ayoub

As a consumer, there's very little not to love about this trend. Desserts served up in wonderful ways whenever I get the craving? Sign me up. But how did we move from desserts as an after-meal indulgence to an anytime sweet treat? It's not so much a flavor trend; it's a paradigm shift.

Snacking paved the way, with its relentless move from afternoon into mid-morning, late night and all day. All-day breakfast steamed in on the wake of snack repositioning. Consumers, living a busy and somewhat clockless day, have proven that they like breakfast flavors and forms outside of the morning hours. These dining shifts are laying the groundwork for desserts to make that same leap.

Bolstering all of this is today's landscape of cupcakeries, über-cool donut shops, street carts and coffeehouses—all tempting consumers with quick sweets. Cake pops, it would seem, have helped consumers consider a dessert treat during a mid-morning coffee run. Such portable, whimsical and slightly less guilt-inducing treats made way for a mental shift that has clicked into the national consciousness, and restaurants would do well to take a look at both dessert choices and positioning on their menus.

“The birth of the daypart transition is coming from the recovery after the recession,” says Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. “Millennials were the force behind the snacking trend and daypart disintegration.” Indeed, Millennials steer the ship here. Their penchant for customized dining experiences impacts so much in foodservice, including dessert-menu engineering. In its 2013 Dessert Consumer Trend Report, Technomic shares compelling data on eating habits: 35 percent of adults said they eat desserts as mid-morning snacks at least once a week. Nearly half of those surveyed said they eat dessert as an afternoon snack. “Desserts being consumed around the clock is largely attributed to the booming snack trend,” says Technomic's Darren Tristano. “Many desserts are bite-sized and highly portable—two factors consumers look for when seeking a snack.”



Reel Club, a Lettuce Entertain You concept in Oak Brook, Ill., has cleverly extended desserts like its Mounds Bar (coconut ice cream, macaroon cake and hot fudge sauce) into a “Bite of the Night” offering.

PHOTO COURTESY OF REEL CLUB.

Quick-serves have done well here, which isn't a surprise, as they have typically owned that impulse purchase. But even they're continually innovating to capture market share. Taco Bell

is testing an all-day option called the Very Berry Waffle Taco, which sports whipped cream, blueberries and strawberries, all folded into a waffle taco shell. Other foodservice segments have responded with innovations in menu engineering, designing bar bites, snacks, noshes, tapas and their ilk.

## POSITIONING DESSERTS

Successfully capturing business from the all-day dessert trend hinges on menu positioning. We've seen the rigid three-course structure shattered over the last few years—mostly in the first course and entrée categories. In response to the cultural change in how and when consumers want desserts, it's time to re-jigger their positioning, too.

“Think a little outside the box with your menu verbiage,” suggests consulting chef Rob Corliss. “Shift away from ‘Desserts’ and perhaps call them ‘Indulgences.’ ‘Dessert’ carries a stigma, and the word even states where it belongs in the pecking order of a meal—at the end. This could not be further from the truth, as indulgences are enjoyed at any moment of the day rather than at a specific time. Put dessert at the forefront of the consumer’s mind and not as a secondary afterthought.”

And although they're not new, mini desserts play into the all-day dessert trend beautifully, offering a sweet reward rather than a “death-by-chocolate” indulgence. “Incorporating mini desserts and handheld desserts, such as sweets served on a stick, is one way to make dessert options stand out on the menu—regardless of the time of day,” says Tristano. Yard House, with more than 50 units, offers four minis on its dessert menu, including a Mini Chocolate Soufflé. P.F. Chang’s incorporates \$2.95 Sweet Treats among its offerings, with options like Salted Caramel Cake, Mandarin Key Lime and Tiramisu. Reel Club, Lettuce Entertain You’s seafood outpost in Oak Brook, Ill., offers an addendum to its sweets menu: Bite of the Night is a mini offering à la chef’s choice. Only \$2 for just a little taste of something wicked and wonderful.

Don't forget the portable dessert—it might take a different form at full-service, but it still holds great opportunity to tap into the maybe-later potential. Grand Lux Café deftly answers this with a dessert offering of a box of warm homemade chocolate chip-pecan cookies.

## BEVERAGE BUNDLING

Another way into all-day dessert positioning is through packaging. Maybe it's an LTO that bundles a special burger with a drinkable dessert. Or maybe it's installing an afternoon coffee program to accompany your bar bites.



Operators can boost dessert interest by featuring sweets with better-for-you cues, like these pomegranate-fig tarts, alongside traditional desserts. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARKON COOPERATIVE.

“With more artisanal coffees and teas, and craft cocktails available, beverage pairings come into play,” says chef Rick Perez. “A piece of rosewater-scented baklava becomes more than a snack when paired with a nice Turkish coffee. One is then selling a full experience as well as raising the check average.”

Menu trends analysts and dessert experts alike view the bar as key to boosting dessert opportunities and creativity. “The daypart that remains the most challenging for most operators is the time after lunch and before dinner. By offering bar and dessert concepts such as craft beer pairings with desserts make sense,” says ThinkCake! dessert consultant Ken Darling.

He suggests capitalizing on the craft beer trend with innovative beer/dessert pairings for increased interest and check averages. Such concepts appeal to Millennials, a group especially embracing of new ideas and flavors, even more so if it offers an opportunity for a social/sharing setting. Darling sees opportunities in a host of creative, shareable pairings, including beer and donut pairings, traditional crisps and cobblers with citrus-flavored beers, beer-flavored ice cream and liquor-infused adult milkshakes paired with small portions of complementary dessert flights.

“Milkshake and dessert samplers; interactive desserts like hot mini donuts and dipping sauces with ice cream are emerging alongside traditional sundaes; make-your-own s’mores are still a hot dessert idea, as well as the new crêpe cakes,” adds Darling. “Pairing chocolate desserts with dark stout beer or spirits like limited-run whiskey and new rum flavors is a good idea, and adult drinks and dessert pairings are a great way to bring dessert dollars to the more sophisticated late-afternoon crowd, with creative assists from the beverage side.”

### **FLAVOR BRIDGES THE GAP**

Desserts as snacks or meal replacements need to consider flavor pretty deeply. Indeed, consumers’ purchase interest in dessert increased by 81 percent if the server offered them one with an interesting or new flavor profile, according to Culinary Visions’ consumer research.

“Successful suggestive selling is about more than recommending the featured product of the day,” says Sharon Olson of Culinary Visions. “It’s about understanding that different consumers are likely to be motivated by different offerings—special flavors, minis, shareables, indulgence; everything from comfort to culinary adventure.”

Because the timeline in all-day desserts is muddled and is straddling different dayparts, flavors need to bridge the gap. Bakeries that are thriving typically carry unique offerings, says Perez. “These pastry chefs are creating many desserts with new flavor profiles that help differentiate themselves, as well as products that lend themselves to all-day snacking.” Consider, then, carrot and ginger cupcakes, maple and bacon donuts, strawberry-basil danishes. “More traditional culinary ingredients and flavorings are making their way into handheld pastries,” he adds. “Chocolate zucchini bread, caraway and carrot cupcakes and chipotle-chocolate brownies help consumers bridge the mental gap that desserts are not just for dessert.”

Blurred lines clearly mark the desserts-all-day trend. “The point is, dessert is truly a 24/7 indulgence,” sums up Corliss. “Figuring out their strategic place on your menu can help tap into new sales avenues.” To elicit impulse purchases, he suggests positioning sweets as you would appetizers, perhaps by portion size or flavor profile, listing shareable and even portable, to-go offerings.

“Sweets provide comfort in a consumer’s hectic day/life,” he adds. “Operators can capture this opportunity with a little creativity and marketing.”



Grown-up sweets on a stick like these almond-milk kulfi popsicles have versatile daypart appeal.  
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