



A decadent dessert sampling at Jean-Georges in New York includes: chocolate cake, candy bar, doughnuts with chile jam and Mexican chocolate, and Meyer lemon ice with white-chocolate meringue.





SWEETS IN SESSION

Shareable dessert trios, selections and flights offer mini adventures at the end of a meal

BY AMANDA M. WESTBROOKS



Today's trend in sociable, shareable dining experiences continues, and it's making its way to dessert. Dessert flights and samplers are stepping up to fill consumer demand. Technomic finds that 42 percent of consumers say dessert flights are appealing to them. And anything that encourages the dessert transaction is worth a deeper look.

While dessert flights have been prevalent in the fine-dining arena for many years, the acceleration of the mini dessert among casual and fast-casual restaurants has hastened the trickle-down effect. "We've become more educated, and savvy concepts and chefs see the value of incorporating more sophisticated dessert options to attract more customers," says chef Ken Darling, founder and chief innovation officer of ThinkCake!, a San Francisco Bay Area dessert consultancy.

Although flavor trends certainly drive innovation here, so does the whimsy of the chef. "I think dessert flights and samplers have gained such popularity not only because they're in demand, but because they're fun for chefs to play with," says Katie Sutton, senior product development chef with Food & Drink Resources, a research and consulting firm based in Centennial, Colo. "It means more tastes, more textures, and more appeal to the adventurous crowd."

TAKING FLIGHT

According to Datassential, 11.4 percent of all dessert menus feature a mini, trio or flight. In the last four years, all three descriptions have seen double-digit growth, with mini desserts now present on 16 percent of fast-casual menus.

Traditionally, a flight builds flavors from the mildest to the boldest, and incorporates a variety of traditional dessert elements and textures. There may be a fruit element, something cheese-inspired, a piece of chocolate and some kind of crunch, for instance.

“A dessert flight gives you more room to specialize in something unique to your establishment,” says Darling. “They’re more intimate, more personal.” He likes to innovate around texture as well as flavor in dessert flights. “Texture is great for a deconstructed dessert flight, like a Boston cream pie. Break out the main components and build them into individual dishes, so you have a separate cake, custard and chocolate item in your flight. Creamy, chewy, crunchy.”

While dessert flights are still more commonly found in fine-dining restaurants, they are perfect for seasonal or promotional LTOs across all segments. “It minimizes potential loss—you’re not locked into having five to seven items on the dessert menu, and your repeat customers

have a new dessert experience to look forward to,” notes Darling.

Dessert suppliers have caught on to the trend and have adapted their products to bolster the market, making dessert flights easier to execute. According to Sutton, even the traditionally larger format desserts, such as tiramisu and decadent mousse cakes, are being portioned into smaller servings specifically for foodservice use in trios or flights.

The trio or sampler can be easily adapted from existing dessert menu items, just in smaller portions—though they don’t have to be.

“With trios, you’re taking your most interesting, most craveable desserts and putting them in a format where you have two or three bites,” says Stephen Lyons, Matchbox Food Group’s vice president of culinary operations.

It’s a strategy that prevents flavor fatigue at the end of the meal and creates incentive for a return visit. Lyons stresses that today’s savvy diner is more conscious of what and how they eat, and will jump at a selection of exquisite morsels over a “9-pound brownie.”

The dessert trio at Matchbox American Kitchen + Spirit includes a small version of Mo’s Magic Brownie with a scoop of ice cream and caramel drizzle—the restaurant’s top-selling dessert. It also

Tony Roma’s dessert trio features Raspberry Brownie Royale, Red Velvet Cake and Strawberry Cheesecake.



includes the cinnamon-sugar-dusted churro with blackberry-Riesling dipping sauce, their No. 2 seller, and a choice of lemon or raspberry sorbet.

“It fits the whole table,” says Lyons. “There’s always something in the trio that someone will eat, and you don’t feel like you’re the only one eating dessert.”

Three Degrees, a Kimpton restaurant in Portland, Ore., that features seasonal, share-worthy plates and fresh Pacific seafood, rolled out a trio of flourless desserts last year. It had the double impact of providing a gluten-free option while also presenting a trio that could be shared among a table or enjoyed progressively. The seasonal flavors all play off each other but still work alone, with a rich, flourless brownie, seasonal pistachio-anise panna cotta and crunchy chia seed cookie. Executive Chef Thomas Dunklin sees it as an opportunity for the guest to experience a wider variety of flavors and textures as one cohesive dish.

SIZE MATTERS

“Dessert sales have declined for years, but now we’re seeing an uptick,” says Sutton of Food & Drink Resources. “I work with a restaurant group, and anytime we’ve introduced a mini dessert, the sales have gone way up. You can entice people when you have more tastes. They might not want to commit to a huge slice of banana-cream cheesecake, but if there’s a bite of that and a bite of a lemon tart, that’s easier for the servers to sell.”

Seasons 52, a Darden concept with 43 locations nationwide, is renowned for its “mini indulgence” dessert sampler, a

staple on the menu since the concept’s inception. The selection of nine desserts has a smart presentation tableside in a rack of tall, square shot glasses. While pecan pie is its top seller, the chain introduces new flavors every six weeks to keep the dessert sales coming.

“People love the individual, eat-out-of-the-glass compositions,” says Darling. “You can offer all kinds of basic creams, mousses, fruit and inverted cupcakes. Flights are less likely to be locked in to containers, but using mini crocks, cappuccino mugs and martini glasses is a lot of fun for the guest.”

While some restaurants have trios with full-sized portions, many are downsizing. Outback Steakhouse’s Sweet Adventure Sampler Trio used to include individual portions each of a chocolate-pecan brownie, New York-style cheesecake and a slice of triple-layer carrot cake. Now, new mini parfaits in Key lime and double chocolate have stepped in.

EASE OF OPERATIONS

Flights and trios require plating multiple desserts, so time is not on the kitchen’s side. But some desserts are more painless than others—and still a hit with guests.

Crème brûlée is always a safe bet, says Darling. “If you’ve got an excellent formula, you can’t go wrong. There are so many ways to prepare it, and it’s still one of the most popular high-end desserts.” He recommends adding any kind of cake—tres leches, carrot, chocolate—to the bottom of the dish for customization.

Sutton likes to change up the crunch atop crème brûlée. Consider flavoring the



Seasons 52 was a pioneer in the mini dessert boom, proving the value of flavorful indulgence in small sizes.

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT

Boost the profit margin on dessert flights by pairing beverages. Outside-the-box sips work well here, from craft stouts to sherries to boutique whiskeys, as well as single-origin teas and coffees. Some recent examples:

- **First Crush dessert pairing:** Lavender Crème Brûlée, Strawberry Shortcake, Chocolate Decadence, paired with a tasting flight of Quady Electra Moscato (Asti style), Quady “Elysium” Black Muscat, and Quady Batch 88 Starboard Ruby Port—*First Crush, San Francisco*
- **New Holland Brewing reserve beers flight with paired desserts:** Dragon’s Milk Triple Mashed Stout with bourbon-caramel bread pudding; Dragon’s Milk with Toasted Chiles Imperial Stout with chocolate mousse and chile-sugar shards; Dragon’s Milk Reserve with Raspberries with raspberry crème brûlée; Dragon’s Milk Reserve with Coffee & Chocolate with tiramisu—*Stacks Bar & Grill, Valparaiso, Ind.*
- **Valentine’s Day beer and dessert pairing flight with Kilowatt Brewing:** Kilowatt’s Red Ale with dulce de leche cake; Cinnamon Hazelnut Brown with Mexican hot chocolate cookie; Chocolate-Covered Strawberry Stout with red velvet mini cupcake topped with strawberries; White Chocolate Blueberry Green Tea Ale with blueberry cheesecake—*Abu Kitchen, San Diego, Calif.*



dessert with Asian elements like ginger or lemongrass and topping with sesame brittle.

Isaac Stewart, corporate executive chef of CinéBistro, a chain of luxury dinner-and-a-movie theaters, has a selection of three crèmes brûlées on the dessert menu. “We do high-end food, and there’s a pressure from our guests for seasonal, creative options,” says Stewart. “The base recipe for the crème brûlée is a template set in stone, so the chefs at each location can come up with enhancements on their own.” Vanilla and rum-cherry chocolate are fixtures, but the third is chef’s choice.

“Guests in a group feel less guilt splitting a shareable, multi-format option.”

They can simply highlight seasonal produce, such as raspberries and citrus, or experiment with globally inspired combos, like ginger and honey.

“Anything you can simplify recipe-wise, do it,” urges Sutton. “Two scoops of this, three squirts of that and a topping.” Think of custards, trifles or puddings—like the retro American butterscotch and banana puddings that are making a comeback—desserts that can be pre-made, then layered and topped for service.

In addition to smaller portions, dessert suppliers are offering high-quality custards and mousses in piping bags for quick service. It also works for housemade batter. At Matchbox, Lyons always has a fried dough element in his trio. It used to be a yeast doughnut but has recently changed to the lighter churro.

“It’s a beautiful pâte à choux batter, and we think it’s a better product,” he says. The staff makes a two-day supply and holds it in the piping bags. “We pipe and cut off

churros as needed, then fry at 375 degrees for five minutes,” he explains. “They arrive hot at the table with the double chocolate brownie and crisp sorbet.”

Flights and samplers have many things going for them. For one, guests in a group who want a dessert feel less guilt splitting a shareable, multi-format option. It also gives the server a great equalizer to drop on a table struggling to make a decision. If it’s priced accordingly, it’s good for the server, the restaurant and the guests.

“Dessert samplers give you options, and that’s what people want,” says Lyons. “You just can’t watch someone eat a warm brownie and not join in. Another spoon will wander into the sorbet, and the churro will get broken up into shareable bites. It’s got so many things going on, it becomes fun again to order dessert.” ☺

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The gluten-free trio at Three Degrees in Portland, Ore., is positioned as both a progression and a shareable option, with a decadent brownie, seasonal panna cotta (this one is pistachio-anise) and a chia seed cookie.