

Treats like Almond Meringue Clouds, created by Joanne Chang at Boston's Flour Bakery + Cafe, offer the right balance of fun and flair.





DESSERTS

At Play

Fun-focused sweet treats offer more whimsy and nostalgia, and less guilt

If there is one place pure playfulness thrives, it's on the dessert menu. There are pie-in-a-jar portables, build-your-own s'mores, lemon-meringue pops and all sorts of doughnut do-ups. References to gleeful childhood memories of fun flavors and experiences in top-trending pop-culture-influenced desserts are lightheartedly mischievous, not confining. Many of today's desserts are smaller in size to make them easier to share and sample; customizable and interactive; and more portable for playful, anytime eating. And blessed with the freedom that comes with portion control, guests feel less guilty about joining in the fun.

"There's a guiltless sense of play around this trend that's very fresh," says Melissa Abbott, director of culinary insights for The Hartman Group.

Looking at the multiple drivers behind the trend in playful desserts, analysts say the same casualization of upscale dining has brought a less-serious, more-accessible note to the dessert course. Just as we've seen high-end chefs reinvent everyday street foods with great ingredients and expertise, we're seeing the "democratization" of desserts. "Desserts belong to the masses and seem to be drawn from mass culture," says Kara Nielsen of the Center for Culinary Development.



Doughnuts of all flavors and forms are a leading dessert inspiration today. Fonuts in Los Angeles offers baked varieties with a range of inventive flavors and finishes.

Tied to this, pastry chefs today are often members of Gen Y who came of age in an era when classic French desserts and forms were waning. An earlier generation of pastry chefs took those French forms — soufflé, crème caramel, tarte Tatin — and updated them with American ingredients and sensibilities. But today, even those updates seem outdated. Instead, says Nielsen, “Younger pastry professionals are either playing in the modernist-cuisine camps or they are playing in pop-culture forms.” This popular culture play is informed by the packaged products of youth — candy bars, breakfast cereals — or the sweets enjoyed during leisure activities like summer camp (s’mores) and state fairs (indulgence on a stick).

“The trend is to have desserts with a youthful, playful quality with riffs on nostalgia that introduce ingredients in new forms,”

notes Nielsen, adding that this includes the continued evolution of the breakfast-as-dessert trend that puts sticky buns, doughnuts, and beignets on dessert plates.

Menu examples range from desserts guests can play with, such as Create-Your-Own Cupcakes at Grand Lux Café (four chocolate cupcakes with assorted frostings and toppings), to those chefs have played with by putting a better-ingredient spin on familiar pop-culture items like ice-cream novelties. They’re also adding savory notes to traditionally sweet desserts and presenting classics in unexpected forms.

FUN-LOVING NOSTALGIA

“People just don’t want frou-frou desserts — they’re too pretentious and fussed with,” says Pastry Chef Matt Danko at The Greenhouse Tavern in Cleveland. Fun certainly factors into desserts like Danko’s Buttered-Popcorn Pot de Crème with caramel and sea salt, as well as his latest craveable creation, the “Stoner Doughnut” — a mini Bavarian-cream-filled, glazed donut ball topped with Fruity Pebbles breakfast cereal “sprinkles.”

“Customers like the humor that comes with finding something they remember from their childhood pantry done up in a restaurant dessert.”

At Baker & Banker in San Francisco, Pastry Chef Lori Baker took a chef’s approach to reimagining popular branded strawberry-and-shortcake

WHY Now

The economy has definitely spurred this trend to fun desserts and treats. It can be an inexpensive way to splurge and have a treat that makes you feel good.

KATHY CASEY

Fun replaces frou-frou in treats like Matt Danko’s cream-filled mini doughnut topped with Fruity Pebbles at The Greenhouse Tavern in Cleveland.



THE GREENHOUSE TAVERN

This trend works well with mini desserts, flights and shareables — sweet tastes of ice-cream sandwiches and scoops, cookies, puddings, hand pies — good, old-fashioned flavors presented in fun ways.

ROBIN SCHEMPP

At Veritas in New York City, Pasty Chef Emily Wallendjack's playful version of a peanut-butter candy bar is a chilled devil's food chocolate cake with peanut-butter ice cream, coated in chocolate ganache.



NATIONAL PEANUT BOARD

ice cream bars, adding more grown-up, savory flavors to the item. The resulting strawberry-shortcake ice cream bar — a summer specialty at Baker & Banker — is coated with pink-peppercorn-spiked shortbread and plated with vanilla ice cream and a strawberry caramel.

Pop-culture and regional references also inform fun desserts at the Nightwood restaurant in Chicago, where Mathew Rice's signature Plate of Cookies includes his housemade version of Nutter Butter peanut-butter cookies, chocolate crinkles, cranberry snickerdoodles and gooey-butter cookies, a recipe Rice perfected based on St. Louis' famed gooey-butter cake.

And the shoo-fly pie chef Andrew Little does at Sheppard Mansion in Hanover, Pa., is really a mini fried-ice-cream ball. The molasses flavor traditionally included in the pie filling is included in the ice cream, and the shoo-fly crumb topping appears as the coating. Little's inspiration for deep frying the dessert harkens back to his own childhood memories of deep-fried ice cream at the erstwhile Chi-Chi's restaurant chain in the '70s.

Decadent, deep-fried treats found on fair midways are also serving as inspiration to many dessert developers, including Dallas-based Chili's. "As far as future menu development, we've been experimenting with dessert empanadas and other fried-dessert options," says Darryl Mickler, the Brinker chain's senior director of culinary innovation. "Our brand is fortunate that we have the State Fair of Texas in our backyard — it's a great place to go for fried-dessert inspiration." Chili's is also tapping childhood nostalgia with its new Oreo-inspired molten dessert.

PLAYFUL PASTRIES

In keeping with the more-accessible democratization of desserts, analysts also point to the continued evolution of the breakfast-as-dessert trend, with operators offering playful versions of beignets, doughnuts, sticky buns and even toaster pastries.

Giving doughnuts a fresh, Italian-street-food appeal that also fits with America's desire for smaller, anytime sweets, chef David Ruggiero launched Bomboloni Café last year. For his concept, Ruggiero tweaked the Italian classic bomboloni — a small, vanilla- or raspberry-filled and frosted doughnut ball traditionally sold by street vendors in Italy. "We've tailored the flavors to make them more fun for American customers," he says. Peanut butter, s'mores and toasted marshmallow are Ruggiero's most popular flavors, but honey, pistachio and Nutella do well, too. He sells about 200 of the sweets daily, though that spiked to 1,000 during the holiday season.

Proof that customers are ready for more grown-up-fun doughnut flavors, best-selling varieties at Whoo's Donuts in Santa Fe, N.M.,

include pistachio with white-chocolate-lemon ganache and maple-bacon with dark-chocolate glaze and chile-brown sugar.

Also entering the thriving doughnuts-but-different dessert niche last year, Waylynn Lucas and Nancy Truman launched their baked-not-fried Fonuts shop in Los Angeles. Because Truman is gluten-intolerant, about half of the Fonut varieties are gluten free, made with a blend of rice flour and almond meal. The doughnuts come in a range of unexpected flavors like salted caramel, rosemary-olive oil and strawberry-buttermilk. "I think what we're doing — a little healthier with a more-savory aspect — is what people want," says Lucas. "It's definitely a trend to shy away from being overindulgent with desserts."

Likewise, beignets — the French fried-dough squares best linked to New Orleans — are now showing up on more dessert menus across the country, often in mini forms and accompanied by dipping sauces. Erin Silva Winston, pastry chef at the new Hota restaurant in Evanston, Ill., emulates the flavor of sweet-tart candies for her Lemon-Sugar Beignets and also does caramelized beignets filled with crème-brûlée custard. And at Markerhouse in Chicago, chef Scott Walton offers a full gamut of beignet baskets (five per serving). Among the varieties are Smoked-Pumpkin Beignets with chocolate-mole dipping sauce and Meyer-Lemon Ricotta Beignets paired with salted butterscotch and Honeycrisp apples.

Back at Baker & Banker, Baker is doing baskets of mini-doughnuts — six per serving — in pie-inspired flavors that she changes seasonally. During the holidays, she offers pumpkin-pie-custard-filled doughnut holes, fried to order and rolled in cinnamon sugar. In late winter, she changes the filling to Meyer-lemon meringue.

Giving toaster pastries their dessertly due, Baker also creates a playful buzz with her Rhubarb-Marzipan Pop-Tarts with toasted-almond ice cream and espresso caramel.

SHOTS, SIPS & STICKS

Pioneering pastry chefs have also been taking the mini-portioned, spoonable dessert shots

Finish With FUN

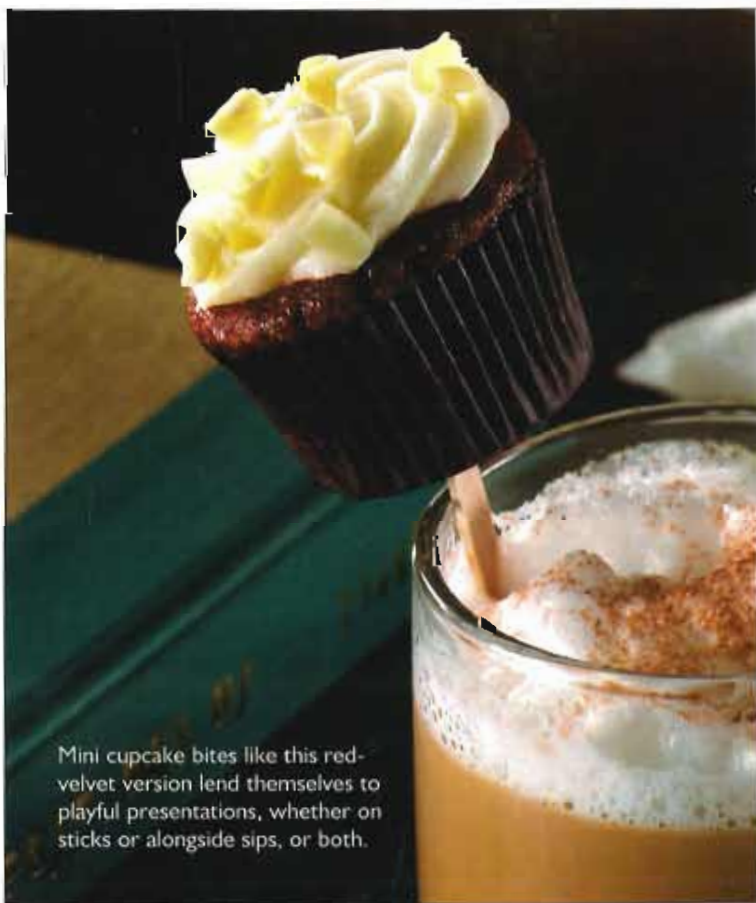
Consumers are not just looking for a meal; they're looking for an experience. Desserts offer indulgence, but it's even better with a hint of whimsy or interaction. Fun takes the place of guilt.

Look to the trends for inspiration: Jell-O or chocolate sculptures, build-your-own s'mores, dessert fondue, adding spice to chocolate, Pop Rocks to the icing or alternative flours to the batter.

Fun in desserts is displayed in visual appeal and presentation. Deconstruct something familiar to give it a new look, or reinvent a familiar form from the past, as we've seen done with items like Pop-Tarts and Kit Kats. Focus particularly on texture and interaction.

Candy is an excellent inspiration; think of the disappearing layers of a jaw breaker, multi-textural and colorful Nerds Rope, the intense sourness of Sour Patch Kids — all can be used to spur ideas. Desserts open the door to creativity and the options are limitless.

CARI PRICE



Mini cupcake bites like this red-velvet version lend themselves to playful presentations, whether on sticks or alongside sips, or both.

THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY BAKERY BREWERY



In San Francisco, Baker & Banker's Strawberry Shortcake is a play on the beloved ice-cream novelty, but with strawberry caramel and pink-peppercorn-spiked shortbread.

Feature one type of fun dessert and expand upon it; for example, little bags of mini doughnuts, but with different sugars to shake them in, and with different dippers. Have two variations on offer all the time plus one seasonal option to keep it interesting.

KATHY CASEY

into new territory. One example is Pastry Chef Sally Bowers' zany spirit-spiked pudding cups, her specialty at The Original, an "evolved Americana" restaurant in Portland, Ore. "We like to poke fun at the Jell-O era with our Cosby Shots," she says. Examples include Butterscotch Pudding, with rum and butterscotch schnapps topped with whipped cream and toffee and the holiday-special Pink and White Candy Cane Pudding shots with Absolut vanilla vodka in the mix. "Diners these days really dig this stuff," says Bowers. "It's a throwback, but with good ingredients." The Original also whips up floats and shakes, in nostalgic and modern flavors, like maple-bacon.

And applying chef skills to the carnival-esque food-on-a-stick phenomena, Pastry Chef Eric Dale at Denver's Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen says hand-held, individually-portioned "two-biter" desserts show a lot of

potential. Building on last year's success with funnel-cake banana-fritter skewers he served with powdered sugar and peanut-butter caramel, Dale is adding more creative desserts on a stick with the launch of Truffle Pops. The pops come in three varieties. A white-chocolate shell, filled with lemon curd, covered in torched meringue and rolled in graham-cracker crumbs is being billed as Lemon-Meringue Pie on a Stick. There's also the Frozen Banana on a Stick: a hollowed-out banana filled with sesame butter, dipped in dark chocolate and rolled in toasted sesame seeds. And the Peanut-Butter-Caramel Ball is coated in a chocolate-truffle shell and rolled in caramel corn.

Priced \$2 a pop and \$6 for a trio, the Truffle Pops "work really well for large parties, where guests order a platter-full and everybody gets their own pop," says Dale.

ALL IN FOR FUN

Presentation is key to the playful nature of desserts today, whether in clever individual portions on sticks or in sips, or in creative, interactive items.

Watching his guests' eating habits, Bill Heckler, corporate executive chef at CraftWorks Restaurants & Breweries, says the anytime-eating trend has meant the need for more-creative shareable desserts. "We get guests wanting to share desserts during all hours," he notes, "but it has to be something fun, easy to handle and not fussy." To hit on all of those points, Heckler is working on a shareable, monkey-bread-like dessert called Land of Nod Cake. The cinnamon-glazed pull-apart loaf "will encourage guests to join in and share. It's fun, not too messy and it tastes delicious."

At 84-unit Houlihan's, the runaway hit on new test menus is the Carrot Cake in a Jar, layered with pecan-cream-cheese icing and



Fun takes the focus off of desserts that are perceived as bad for you and gives operators a chance to make the experience more memorable. Fun and flavor drive desirability at all ages.

CHARLIE BAGGS

HOW to Work It

Gen Y wants interactive, shareable foods. This can be as simple as cinnamon-coated tortilla chips, drizzled with white chocolate and served with a spicy strawberry-fruit salsa or a build-your-own dessert taco with Saigon cinnamon, candied pecans, diced Granny Smith apples and caramel drizzle.

RICK PEREZ

For grown-up fun, s'mores get a sophisticated treatment at Zimzala in Huntington Beach, Calif., with smoked chocolate truffles, graham crackers, marshmallow fluff and a shot of gourmet hot chocolate.

coconut. "Guests love the cute Mason-jar presentation," says Jen Gulvik, vice president of marketing. Customers can take the dessert to go with a \$1 deposit, refundable upon return.

Many operators are building on the cupcake mania of recent years and transforming this ubiquitous-but-beloved treat into signature and shareable forms. The RAM restaurant group's clever creation is a mash-up of two favorite desserts — cake and ice cream — but in a cupcake format. The Lakewood, Wash.-based casual-dining restaurant offers three varieties of its Ice Cream Cupcakes, available individually or in a serving of three.

Options include strawberry ice cream layered with white cake in a white-chocolate cupcake shell, peanut-butter ice cream with chocolate cake in a dark-chocolate cupcake shell and a cupcake of mint ice cream, chocolate chips and fudge-brownie cake.

"These have been hugely popular, taking the trend of traditional, baked cupcakes and moving them into a new arena of fun, cool flavor," says Corporate Chef James Cassidy. "They bring a sense of fun, but without overindulgence."

Looking ahead, analysts say they expect the fun-dessert trend to continue to morph into more-creative explorations as consumer interest in newer forms and flavors intensifies.

"The more-adventurous consumer behavior now impacting other parts of the menu will reach desserts soon," says Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. "Consumers are not going to stay with retro-classic desserts that feel too familiar and boring. So you want to come down on the more-creative edge of this spectrum. Play with the theme, making it lighter, more whimsical."

"What's not fun about a play on s'mores or a Twix bar or a peanut-butter cup?!" sums up Adam Siegel, corporate chef of Milwaukee-based Bartolotta Restaurants group. "Desserts should be fun; they should remind you of being a kid and craving all of the sweets of your youth. Plus, they're a great way to entice someone to order dessert and a memorable way to end a meal." ☺