

RestaurantNews

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Sweet treats at the table; small is getting big now

Sweet things come in small packages when it comes to dessert. Portion sizes are slimming down while margins are expanding.

After several years of growth, the frequency of dessert purchases has

flattened in restaurants but the profit margin may be going up. Consumers who will pay \$4 for a coffee are increasingly willing to pay more for an occasional

Special report on desserts by Ellen Schrutt

sweet indulgence, but if they are going to sin, they want decadence.

"People are indulging in premium cakes, with a switch to a higher price point," says Jane Graham of the research firm that measures consumer behaviour in restaurants, NPD Canada.

Flavour preferences remain traditional. Chocolate, seasonal fruits, crème brûlée and traditional holiday offerings continue to dominate. However, the popularity of lattes has transferred from the cup to the dessert plate. And mango is increasingly popular, particularly with Asian customers.

The trend towards smaller portions of more luxurious desserts allows diners to rationalize ordering a high calorie treat with less guilt. Downsized servings are increasingly taking the form of individually created portions. This also helps control costs.

"The big trend is the small items in individual servings. That's what people want. There's no waste. There's no cutting. The era of the big, giant, over-sized cake slice is gone," says Dufflet Rosenberg, owner of

Dufflet Rosenberg, with a chocolate truffle cake. The owner of Dufflet Pastries says small items are big now.

Dufflet Pastries in Toronto, which supplies the Second Cup coffee chain and numerous sit-down restaurants.

Angelo Tambasco, owner/manager of Toronto-based dessert distributor Calories, agrees. He notes that the demand for mile-high cakes has dropped off. However, he advises caution in selecting dessert products that are appropriate for an individual serving. A distributor for the Montreal-based restaurant of the same name, Calories has chosen to focus on a molten lava brownie for

single servings.

"What makes it easy for the restaurant is that they take the single serving frozen and heat it up. The chocolate both on the inside and outside melts. All they need to do is add garnish," noted Tambasco. "That's a product that is suitable as a single serving and the consumer gets a very good quality product. The restaurant is happy that there is no wastage."

Continued on page 22



Types of desserts that wind up the meal with 'wow'

McCain Foodservice Canada is launching its new Mini-sweets line in two flavours: double chocolate brownie bites and New York cheesecake bites. "The customer is looking for a lot of flavour in small portions. The beauty of these is that the serving sizes and the unit weight is small, while the versatility is incredible," says Larry Flemming, product manager with McCain Foodservice. "In terms of a foodservice operator, there are good profits to be made with very little preparation required."

Increasingly, even white tablecloth restaurants are buying some of their pas-

tries and searching for versatile single-serving solutions that will help them control costs. Crepe Innovations, a manufacturer of frozen crepes based in Halifax, NS, lists among its clients Halifax's 5 Fishermen and some of the establishments belonging to the quality restaurant company in Ontario, Oliver Bonacini Restaurants.

"We put it together so that the chef has got the versatility with our traditional crepe, which is a very neutral flavour," says owner David Smith, noting that the plain crepe can be used in either sweet or savoury applications. "Not a lot of people can produce their own crepes in volume so we're trying to fill some of those gaps. They're extremely cost effective and that certainly shows in some of the price points that are out there in the establishments."

Ted Hara, executive pastry chef at Vancouver's Pan Pacific Hotel is strongly resisting the trend towards bringing in pastries from outside suppliers. Nevertheless, he agrees that all signs point towards smaller, simpler and better. Hara works closely with the executive chef to pair dessert offerings that create an integrated meal. "I always go for the 'Wow!' factor," notes Hara. "Dessert is very important, because it's the last course. Dessert is the key thing to send them out happy."

For Hara, a veteran of international pastry competitions, this means remembering to appeal to all five senses. In particular, he warns against sacrificing taste to appearance with inappropriate garnishes.

Hara also works with the hotel's food and beverage director to come up with the best wording for the menu. "Nowadays, it's very important. More than just explaining chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce, we have to come up with different names. Of course, the name isn't the only reason for achieving good sales, but naming is very important."

He points to the Pan Pacific's high-selling Oooh-la-la dessert as an example, a cylindrical chocolate mousse featuring BC wine and warm crème anglaise. Hara believes the name is at least part of the dish's success.

Mixed dessert platters featuring a selection of bite-sized items are another angle on small, individual portions. Dufflet's petits fours selections have risen in popularity. "We did a selection a while ago, and it's great for hotels and caterers. They say, 'Send me a box.' They don't even care what's in it as long as it's a little bite-sized piece," says Rosenberg.

Single serving portions take on heightened importance in institutions with extreme cost control pressures, such as schools and hospitals. In these settings, portion size must be monitored from both a health and cost perspective. Chapman's Ice Cream and McCain produce desserts suitable for these foodservice environments, with features such as snap-off lids on individual serving sized containers suitable for trays.

Ten tips for dessert success

Since dessert leaves the final impression on a diner, make it a good one. Here are the top ten tips from chefs and suppliers on making the most of your dessert offerings:

- Appeal to all five senses. Make sure not to sacrifice taste to appearance.
- Coordinate dessert choices with the executive chef for continuity between savoury and dessert offerings.
- Give the dessert a catchy name. Avoid over-describing ingredients on the menu.
- Take advantage of marketing kits offered by suppliers.
- Promotional combo packages such as a sandwich with cookie can raise the total margin per check. Suppliers may bundle desserts in with mains when

the volume is there.

- Consider the audience participation factor: chocolate fountains are a popular current fad.
- Serve desserts at the correct temperature. Chocolate, cheese and iced cakes should be served at room temperature.
- Consider a fixed price menu. This can intensify the check value by encouraging people to select higher margin items.
- Avoid over-garnishing. Do not sprinkle cocoa or other staining garnish to the edges of the plate in a manner that may soil diners' sleeves. There should be a culinary reason for everything on the plate.
- Offering a combination platter of small items can provide a higher margin than serving one slice with multiple forks where the diners wish to share.