

Sweet SIPS

With or without alcohol, drinkable desserts deliver decadent flavor with a light touch

With flecks of chocolate and ultra-creamy texture, this chocolate martini brings a sip of sweetness to the dessert menu.

BY SALLY NOBLE

James Bond would be amazed at what's showing up in martini glasses these days. As the line between the bar and the kitchen continues to blur, many new desserts are served straight up, in elegant stemware and sporting culinary influences and pastry flourishes. Diners are drinking in these sweet, creative options to cap off dinner.

A few years ago, Michael Waterhouse, owner of several restaurants, including Dylan Prime, a busy, high-end steakhouse in Tribeca, noticed that, after the main course, his guests seemed too full to order dessert.

"Large groups were ordering one or two desserts and sharing bites," observed Waterhouse. So he began looking for liquid desserts that "satisfy the sweet tooth but aren't filling."

After great trial and error and considerable traveling between the bar and the kitchen, he came up with a profitable solution that inspired more diners to order their own dessert at \$12 a glass, compared to the standard shared desserts at \$8 to \$10 apiece. While in the inspiration and experimentation stage, recalls Waterhouse, "these funny nicknames of Pie-tini and Cake-tail came up, and they kind of grew on me and my partner, John Mautone."

So they trademarked them.

The most popular Pie-tini variation is Key Lime Pie, made with Malibu Rum, Triple Sec and fresh lime juice, served in a graham-cracker-crumb-rimmed glass. The Cake-tail favorite, says Waterhouse, is German Chocolate Cake, a carefully crafted blend of Godiva Dark Chocolate Liqueur, Malibu Rum, a splash of Frangelico and caramel sauce, all floated with chocolate cream and sprinkled with toasted coconut flakes.

INGREDIENT RETHINK

Rethinking ingredients is an essential element to the success of these new desserts. At Yard House Restaurants, known for its vast beer selection, two varieties of Draft Beer Floats sit

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ How creative concoctions from the bar are satisfying the sweet tooth
- ▶ "Shooters" — those little munchable extras that add value and interest to dessert drinks
- ▶ Alcohol-free, antioxidant-packed options for health-conscious diners who want to join in the after-dinner fun



P'ING



DYLAN PRIME

A panna cotta island (above) and a Pie-tini (inset) are just two ways that cocktails are beginning to look a lot like desserts — and vice versa.

alongside the cheesecake, brownie and sundae offerings on the dessert menu. Here, vanilla ice cream tops a base of either Young's Chocolate Stout or Lindemans Framboise.

Beer also makes a showing at David Burke & Donatella on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where a winter milkshake features a pricey Samuel Adams brew, at \$140 per 24-ounce bottle.

"Samuel Adams' Utopia beer tastes like a fine cordial. I pour it cold on the bottom of the glass, and then mix it with chocolate pudding and vanilla ice cream," explains chef/owner David Burke, who discovered over a year ago that drinkables were definitely in demand among his clientele.

"The concept appeals to people who want a lighter, fresher dessert — one that is both sweet and includes alcohol," says Burke. "It quenches the thirst at the end of a meal and refreshes the palate."

Tony Abou-Ganim, a mixologist who describes himself as a purist, noticed the

demand for fresh, handcrafted dessert drinks in the late '90s when he was making his reputation with cocktails at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel's elegant Starlight Room in San Francisco. He headed to Las Vegas in 1998 to create the cocktail program at the Bellagio Hotel for Steve Wynn. There he realized the potential of drinkable desserts on the menu.

"In lieu of a traditional dessert, a drinkable offers the perception that it's also lighter in calories than a large piece of cheesecake," Abou-Ganim explains.

"And, as we see more synergy between bar and kitchen, we'll see more fresh, seasonal ingredients finding their way into the cocktail shaker. Now, any bar chef who is not working with a pastry chef is missing a great opportunity" to develop signature, drinkable desserts that showcase the bartender's skill and

ingredients from the kitchen.

Abou-Ganim's nods to seasonality also can incorporate holiday themes. For Valentine's Day, he suggests Cupid's Flip, a decadent blend of Baileys Irish Cream, Amaretto and Crème de Cacao, kissed with grenadine, covered with a cloud of whipped cream and served with a chocolate heart. His holiday nog gets extra merriment from pumpkin purée (the same used for pumpkin pie) and a froth of egg white touched with ground nutmeg.

BUILDING BRIDGES

At Rockland, Maine-based Primo, which also has locations in Orlando, Fla., and Tucson, Ariz., co-owner Price Kushner blends his extensive experience as pastry chef and bartender to create innovative liquid desserts like Godiva Chocolate Egg Cream. Featuring Godiva vodka and house-made syrup from premium dark chocolate, it is served with a pork-crackling cookie and candied ginger. In keeping with Primo's artisanal approach, Kushner takes time to turn premium dark chocolate into the homemade syrup in this popular menu item.

Kushner also sees another value in offering a dazzling line-up of delicious coffee drinks, particularly popular in his restaurant's remote location.

"Rockland isn't Aspen or Manhattan, and my patrons typically must travel a distance to get home," explains Kushner, who increases his profit and delights his guests by elaborating on "hot and spicy" versions of caffeinated standards that are relatively low in alcohol yet high in flavorful impact. The most popular is Coffee Nudge, which includes Kahlua, brandy, Crème de Cacao, whipped cream and chocolate shavings.

"These drinks bridge the gap between either coffee and dessert or dessert and the after-dinner cordial," says Kushner. "Everybody wants a little sweetness, but not everyone wants a whole dessert."

If fancy after-dinner drinks are trendy in Maine, just imagine how well they go over at 39 Degrees in Aspen, where Denis Cote's clientele is a 20-something crowd of après skiers staying in hotel rooms within walking distance of his door.

His most popular signature drink is the Ménage a Trios martini. Cote pours vodka, Kahlua and Baileys Irish Cream into a shaker with ice, tumbles it vigorously for five seconds and serves it in a generous martini glass.

With its saucy name, this smooth, near-lethal liquid dessert delivers "something very sweet and flavorful, with a velvety texture," says Cote. "Sometimes it's good to break the monotony and offer guests something different."

POURING ON THE INDULGENCE

Other dessert drinks have less to do with coffee and martini tie-ins and more to do with delivering deliciously creamy milkshake quaffs with a splash or two of something powerful. Chef Dave Samber of the Polo Café in Chicago vigorously shakes Dooley's Original Toffee Cream Liqueur, Kleiner Feigling vodka and heavy whipping cream with ice for a full 20 seconds.

"My signature drink is soothing, with all the right things you want from a milkshake, but lighter, because I'm using Dooley's Original Toffee Cream Liqueur, not ice cream," explains Samber.

And speaking of milkshakes, not every patron wants a drinkable dessert to include alcohol. Acclaimed mixologist Adam Seger pours award-winning cocktails, as well as "spirit-free" versions at Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises' Nacional 27 in Chicago.

"Spirit-free cocktails combine herbs, spices and fruits, without the liquor. A decadent way to finish the meal is with our Passion Colada Mojito," says Seger. "We use The Perfect Purée of Napa Valley coconut purée and passion-fruit concentrate, lime juice, fresh pineapple, mint, simple syrup and soda."

With non-alcoholic drinkable desserts, creativity often involves taking existing drinks in new directions rather than inventing whole new forms, notes Bill Lombardo, CEO of Monin Gourmet Flavorings.

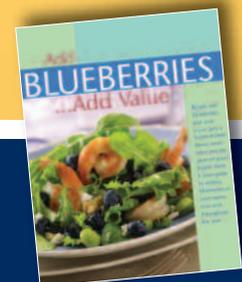
"There's a renewed interest in milkshakes and floats, but the real news is the new direction the flavors are taking," he says. "People want a multidimensional treat, like a shake with clove and cinnamon flavors layered on top of ginger ice cream, or two shakes that are swirled side by side at the table and topped with a cookie or some other edible garnish for a total treat."

Steak 'n Shake takes a multidimensional approach with its Side-By-Side Milkshakes, offering customers two flavors combined alongside in one glass. And the chain's Sippable Sundaes are actually "hand-dipped" milkshakes, with a variety of dessert toppings.

At Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, a Chillin' Concoctions menu offers flavorful creations like a Blueberry Vanilla Shake — a vanilla milkshake with a "bushel

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load” of blueberries — as well as a Groovy Smoothie, with strawberries, peaches, bananas, berries and grenadine, blended with apple juice and vanilla cream.

BETTER-FOR-YOU SWEETNESS

Repositioning smoothies as a nutritious dessert rather than as a snack or meal replacement can appeal to health-conscious diners who like to end their meal on a sweet note.

“For dessert, pair cherries and blueberries or other berries for a Cherry Berry Smoothie that wins on taste and nutrition,” advises Dr. Wendy Bazilian, author of “The SuperFoodsRx” series. Both fruits pack a powerful nutritional punch and are loaded with antioxidants, she says.

Cathy Jorin, vice president of The Perfect Purée of Napa Valley, suggests combining equal parts blueberry purée and unsweetened apple juice with half as much non-fat milk for another better-for-you drinkable dessert option.

“Mix it in a cocktail shaker with ice until well chilled and then strain into your favorite martini glass,” says Jorin. “The fancy glass makes a non-alcoholic, healthy drink glamorously appealing — not to mention fun and delicious to sip as a dessert.”

JUST ADD FIZZ

Of course, certain soda-fountain dessert drinks will always remain popular. An unpretentious, old-fashioned float can charm even the most sophisticated diner.

Coke is a prevalent beverage in desserts, notes Phil Mooney, director of the archives department at The Coca-Cola Company. “Several restaurants offer the Coke float, and a few even offer a Coca-Cola cake. Carver’s Country Kitchen in Atlanta has one of the best I’ve ever tasted.”

Linton Hopkins, executive chef of Restaurant Eugene, also in Atlanta, is guided by this philosophy: “When you are able to cook with people’s memories in mind, you can bring out the child in them. As an Atlanta native, I know that Coke reminds people of being a kid and taking a trip to the soda fountain, where Coke floats were a big thing.

“At my restaurant, I serve the Coke float with other items on a plate, such as a cake that includes Coke as an ingredient, or a Coke

peanut brittle,” says Hopkins. “I strive to offer diverse taste and flavors so that customers can get two desserts for the price of one.”

The Waldorf-Astoria in New York highlights another classic American soda-based drinkable: the root beer float. This frothy number claims a place on the dessert menu alongside fancy variations on the martini.

“We provide our guests both culinary innovations and more traditional options, such as Oscar’s Root Beer Float, which allows them to relive cherished memories of childhood,” explains Executive Chef John Doherty.

SOLID SHOOTERS

This childhood memory is enhanced with a side of cherry-double-chocolate-chip cookies, supporting another element of the drinkable-dessert trend. These little munchable, dunkable extras have been dubbed “shooters,” a term borrowed from the bar by pastry chef Pichet Ong of P*ONG in New York City.

His drinkable desserts are often multi-textural — panna cotta surrounded by fruit syrups and garnished with fresh lychee or a smooth blend of vodka and three chocolates topped with frozen whipped cream “snow.”

In some cases, the shooter is a little liquid element of a plated dessert that includes an array of pastries. But when the main dessert is in liquid form, the shooter is the pastry element.

The pork-crackling cookie served on the side of Kushner’s egg cream creation is another example, as are the petit fours, mini-doughnuts or cookies served at David Burke & Donatella.

Whatever you call it — shooters or nibbles — that solid little something on the side enhances drinkable desserts’ appeal and serves as a crunchy or chewy contrast to this new breed of liquid pleasures.

Straight up or any other way, drinkable desserts are hot new light-and-liquid sweets appealing to diners wanting an alternative to that traditional dessert. ☺

SALLY NOBLE, a Maine-based freelance journalist, copywriter and public relations consultant, covers culinary topics from oysters to cherry air.

► MEMORY LANE:

Tap into customers’ nostalgia with simple Coke or root-beer floats on the dessert menu

► SHAKEN, NOT WHIRRED:

For added drama, use a shaker to make chilled and frothy dessert drinks tableside