



PONG

Sleek New FINISHES

From dehydrated fruit to wasabi crystals, on-trend garnishing delivers exciting dessert flavors and visual impact

BY SALLY NOBLE

A decorative orchid plopped atop a pastry and squiggly dribbles of colored sauces on the plate are dessert trends whose drama has faded. For cutting-edge chefs, dessert garnish is all about quirky twists of surprising flavors that support every elaborate ingredient and technique lavished on the dessert course.

INGREDIENTS INTENSIFIED

"Orchid weirdness is out, along with big zigzags of junk drizzled all over the plate," notes Krista Kern, chef/owner

of Bresca in Portland, Maine. "My preference is to use things that intensify the taste and texture of the dessert."

Kern occasionally uses some of the ingredients in her desserts as the base for an inventive garnish. While preparing a dessert of pears and raspberries cooked with red wine, for example, she might chop, puree and slow-dry some of the fruit in the dehydrator, adding honey and rosemary. She'll puree this fruit again, spreading the results onto a Silpat.

"Then I peel off abstract shapes that look pretty [and that also harmonize with] the flavor," she explains. "I



FINALE DESERTERIE & BAKERY

Flowers and architectural elements are so passé. Today's desserts are more likely to employ unusual, enhancing flourishes like the micro-green garnish at left or the crunchy pastry nest adorning the plate above.

don't believe in pretty sugar decorations that have no intrinsic value in the dessert's flavor."

Jehangir Mehta, owner and acclaimed chef of Graffiti Food and Wine Bar in Manhattan, concurs: "A pastry chef now must serve edible garnishes."

A glimpse at his menu reveals Mehta looks far beyond a twisted orange slice when thinking in terms of edibility. Unexpected ingredients prepared uniquely have made Mehta extremely popular. This chef knows a million ways to transform the unexpected into the perfect final flourish

for a dessert. His inventive garnishes include grilled bitter greens sprinkled on pears cooked in port; in fact, he applies micro greens the way some cooks drizzle hot sugar.

For a beet salad with cucumber sorbet, Mehta uses a garnish of watermelon pickle. "Tartness brings out the sweetness," he explains.

And New Yorkers are diving into Mehta's exotic offerings with gusto. Typical of his inventive finishes, Mehta loves to cut the flavor of dark chocolate with sweet kumquat chutney, and one of his most popular cocktail

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ How inventive chefs fashion final touches to amplify a dessert's flavor and texture
- ▶ From chestnut paper to sparkling wine — some of the innovative garnishes gracing dessert plates
- ▶ Fancy and flavorful touches that transform old standards like cupcakes into dynamite desserts



TORAN/R. TORRE & COMPANY



Sweets are seeing a rebirth of old-fashioned finishing touches, like the brûléed meringue gracing one of Sweet Street Desserts' new cupcake offerings.

desserts employs pineapple-grape-tarragon salsa over peach-and-tequila sorbet.

He's also devised an ironic twist on the orchid embellishment, a trend he estimates died about four years ago:

"I love to make rose-petal jam and use a hibiscus reduction to garnish gulab jamun, a very traditional Indian dessert."

SLOW HARMONY

At ChikaLicious, a trendy dessert bar in Manhattan, chef and owner Chika Tillman won't serve anything that fails to delight her patrons' taste buds.

"We don't do garnishes," she declares emphatically.

Tillman does, however, add some final flourishes to bring harmony to her dessert ingredients. Her desserts are offered in a prix fixe arrangement that includes an amuse, choice of full dessert, and petit fours; each is arranged and plated so beautifully, that only the simplest flourishes — a toasted nut here or a red wine sauce there — are needed.

For example, one dessert combines Granny Smith apple sorbet, brown-sugar panna cotta and a clear cube of gelled Calvados, with a dash of Prosecco as garnish. The Italian sparkling wine "ties everything together by cutting the fat texture of the two creamy elements," Tillman explains.

A DOLLOP OF COMPLEXITY

"Garnishes used to be simply for decoration, especially when the whole architectural food movement took place," explains Nicole Coady, executive pastry chef for Boston's Finale Desserterie & Bakery, with four locations where haute dessert takes center stage. "But I see garnishes as much more than presentation. They provide texture and a flavor profile that can really complement the entire dessert."

"For me, they are a prerequisite for an upscale dessert presentation; they turn a simple dessert into a more complex experience."

Rather than incorporate the garnish into the flavor of the dessert, Coady uses it to create a delicious and completely unexpected flourish. A case in point is the sea salt tuile on warm pineapple upside-down cake; the saltiness and crunch balance the sweetness of the caramelized pineapple and the cake.

PIAZZ WITHIN REACH

A chef need not stray far from the restaurant patron's palate to be au courant with this new dessert trend. In-house, common ingredients can be thrown together to finish a predictable dessert with innovative panache. Torani syrups, for example, often lined up at the front of the house to flavor hot and cold drinks or cocktails, can alternatively be used to flavor many dessert extras.

For instance, ginger whipped cream can top old-fashioned, homemade vanilla ice cream, and caramel syrup, butter and sugar can be tossed together to create candied mixed nuts that deliver a surprise crunch when sprinkled atop a simple cheesecake.

"Candied nuts add texture through crunch, sweetness and saltiness, providing a great contrast to creamy or soft desserts," suggests Andrea Ramirez, business-development marketing liaison for Torani/R. Torre & Company.



Edible dessert garnishes are more than just fancy flourishes; they turn a simple dessert into a more complex experience, notes Executive Pastry Chef Nicole Coady of Boston's Finale.

LEAD WITH THE FINISH

In New York, dessert-only restaurants have become a hot new trend, and pastry chefs now call the shots, tempting patrons to skip the main course and head straight for drinks and desserts. On West 10th, at Pichet Ong's enormously popular P*ONG, patrons are charmed by such extraordinary fare as strawberries coated with crystallized wasabi.

"The pale-green nuggets on top of the strawberries provide a little bit of spice to the fruit," explains Ong.

His flourishes also can be whimsical — like the sprinkles of chocolate-covered Rice Krispies he calls "pearls." And "cherry air," used to accent chestnut and chocolate mousse, also piques curiosity.

"Cherry air is cherry sangria — red wine, Cointreau, cinnamon, vanilla, black pepper, orange rind and cherry juice, with xanthan gum added — whipped up so air is incorporated into the mixture," says Ong. He notes that "air" offers a light accent and an ideal replacement for sauce.

Ong also makes chestnut paper, using a process similar to Kern's approach to making dehydrated-fruit garnishes.

"The chestnut paper provides a bit of crunch and texture to the dish," he explains. "Think of it as a chocolate chestnut tart, but



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Sparkling wine adds a fizzy finish at the popular ChikaLicious in New York.

deconstructed with the tart shell being turned into a delicate chestnut-flavored paper."

CUPCAKES GET CUTER

The cupcake, that diminutive dessert with extraordinary staying power, also offers plenty of surface area for fancy finishes. Sweet Street Desserts, a Reading, Pa.-based innovator in the frozen gourmet-dessert industry, is launching a new line of cupcakes; two years in the making, these desserts boast innovative toppings that taste as good as they look.

"Each one has its own festively colored wrapper and its own decoration, designed to enhance the visual appeal and flavor of the cupcake," says Sandy Solmon, founder, president and CEO of Sweet Street Desserts.

"For example, the chocolate/peanut butter is a moist chocolate cake that's injected with a chocolate-peanut-butter-truffle filling, topped with a peanut-butter icing and finished with a cute-as-a-button, chocolate-covered pretzel-ball popper. The garnish of this new cupcake accents the salty-sugary goodness of peanut-butter desserts," Solmon points out.

Sweet Street has another cupcake ready to launch.

"Our lemon-meringue cupcake will be a buttery white cake filled with tangy lemon curd," says Solmon. "And then a rosette of meringue gets piped on top and hand brûlée-fired for a caramelized flavor and appearance."

Another dessert manufacturer capitalizing on fancy new finishes is cookie producer Otis Spunkmeyer. Its new O-iginals cookie-customization program allows foodservice operators to mix and match ready-bake dough with frostings and finishes like large-grained sugar crystals and seasonally themed sprinkles, turning a typical treat into a glistening, gilded lily.

Decorative elements that make no edible contribution to dessert are clearly passé. Today's chic dessert finishes contribute creative and complementary accents to the taste and texture of the dish. The fancy orchid is now off the table, replaced by beautiful baubles that blossom with flavor and finesse. ☺

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► OPPOSITES ATTRACT:

To enhance a dessert's sweetness, garnish with a tart taste

► ELEMENT OF SURPRISE:

Candied or spiced nuts lend an unexpected crunch atop a rich and creamy cheesecake