

## The Sweet Sell

Desserts entice, beckon and enthrall. But they don't always sell. Here's how to change that.

By *Katie Ayoub*

What drives dessert sales? Flavor, price and opportunity are three clear motivators, but it's really emotion that rules here. Consumers look to dessert as a sweet reward, comforting salve or earned indulgence. The challenge for operators is in making the desserts so enticing that emotion triumphs over reason and practicality. Craveability is king here. The questions, then, are - what dessert flavors and forms are craveable today? And how do we sell them? Smart marketing, creative menu positioning, suggestive menu language and well-trained front-of-house staff all affect the sale, moving the consumer from a polite shake of the head to a confident licking of the lips.

### **MENU POSITIONING MATTERS**

Although gorgeous dessert photos on the menu, enticing table tents and eye-popping dessert trays sometimes help make the sale, they may not be enough for today's three-meals-out-a-week diner. Your dessert message has to cut through the clutter and not be relegated to an afterthought.

"A good strategy is positioning specific desserts by specific entrées," says Sharon Olson, executive director of Chicago-based Culinary Visions Panel, a culinary-focused consumer research firm. "Make them think of dessert in the context of a whole meal rather than as a big 'maybe' at the end of the meal." Smart positioning helps the diner consider the dessert as an accompaniment to the entrée rather than as a guilt-inducing add-on.

"Desserts are in the same realm as kids' menus," says Rob Corliss, chef-consultant with ATE (All Things Epicurean), a culinary consultancy based in Nixa, Mo. "Why do operators need separate menus for these categories?" Instead, he says the answer may lie with bundling. "This works especially well with drinkable desserts and mini desserts," says Corliss. "Set it as a prix fixe or pair desserts with entrées in a suggestive selling pitch." And going back to emotions ruling dessert purchases, he thinks persuasive bundling gives diners permission to order



Familiar flavors reconstructed with pizzazz will entice diners to order desserts like this dramatic strawberry-almond ice cream "sandwich."  
PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRY COMMISSION.

dessert. “They’ll give in and allow the indulgence if they see it as part of the value proposition, as part of what they ordered.”

Bundling ties into diner experience beautifully. “Craft an indelible experience targeted at your core consumer group,” adds Corliss. Customize the culinary adventure for menu distinction and interest. “Consider tableside tasting parties or on-the-go incentives, like taking desserts with you or coming back another time to have that sweet,” he says. And for LTOs, perhaps add a dessert as part of the special. “Pair a mini dessert with an LTO as a promotion,” he says. “But give it six months or more to register success. It’s an easy point of entry. Choose a dessert that’s selling well and bundle it with an entrée. See how that goes and then build from there.”

### **BRANDING AND COLLABORATING**

Branding partnerships can prove to be successful, as evidenced by McDonald’s McFlurry, boosted by M&M’s and Oreo Cookies add-ins. But as premiumization continues to hold the spotlight in all levels of foodservice, look to premium branding.

“Branding can boost dessert sales,” says Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Technomic Inc. “It helps with craveability because it’s familiar and well-loved,” he says. “And operators looking for premium positioning can move branding initiatives from familiar snack brands to higher-end ones, like Vosges or Ghirardelli.”

Branding can also represent an opportunity to express local and/or sustainable values. “Sometimes you forget to look in your own backyard,” says Corliss. “Find an artisan chocolate maker or a local candy store and brand your mix-ins, for example, with those names.” He also suggests building on branding by calling out fair-trade chocolate or a finish of local honey, herbs or berries. “Take a small step, but make it big.”

A step beyond branding is collaboration. One of the toughest challenges for multi units is creating one-of-a-kind desserts. High-volume operations need to counter the perception that if you’ve seen one giant slice of chocolate cake, you’ve seen them all.

“Not everyone can have an on-premise pastry chef who creates unique desserts,” Olson notes. In addition to relationships with trusted dessert suppliers, she suggests forging a partnership with a local bakery for an item or two. “That endorsement adds enticement, which might be all



Macarons have surged in popularity, particularly when presented in bite-sized portions and playful flavors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SWEET STREET DESSERTS.

it takes to change a consumer from indifferent to delighted.”

Corliss agrees. “Cultivate a unique partnership that benefits both brands and can drive traffic,” he says. “If Chipotle can figure out how to procure local cilantro for their different units, it can be done.”

### IT’S THE FLAVOR, STUPID

Like with all other menu offerings in today’s market, you have to step up your flavor game on your dessert menu if you want to beat the competition. Razzle dazzle all the time. Rev them up, so the desserts can stir the emotional drivers, ignite the cravings and cross that dessert-purchase finish line. But unlike with small plates or sides, or even entrées, the dessert menu is still a safe room for your diners.

“American consumers crave familiar, comforting desserts,” says Kara Nielsen, trendologist at San Francisco-based CCD Innovation. “They gravitate toward their favorite dessert flavors and want to indulge in what they know and are comfortable with, especially if they’ve been a little bit bold with the rest of their meal.” Think of your dessert menu as the accepting arms of a long-time lover, who offers refuge from a hectic, harried, sometimes hostile world.

But even lovers have to try out new moves once in a while to keep things interesting. Same goes for dessert classics. “Reinvent a classic,” says Olson. “Deconstruct almost anything and put it back together in a new and exciting way. Turn that last slice of cake into a milkshake, spoon pies into mason jars. Skewer it, smash it and layer it.” And look toward adding unexpected but welcome flavors in American classics. That might just be enough to transform temptation into the decision to order. Curiosity plus craving equals transaction.

“Take strawberry shortcake, or any fruit shortcake,” says Nielsen. “Change the neutral flavor in the biscuit to something exotic or intriguing.” At home here? Try cinnamon, ginger, ground nuts, savory spices like black pepper and fresh herbs like basil, she says. “And take a look at pies. Everyone loves them — hand pies, fried pies, rustic pies,” adds Nielsen. “Simply change the accompaniments or the fillings for that signature difference.” Menuing desserts that feature just a slight, but appealing variation can open the door to interest. So can combining favorite flavors to form a unique, but approachable item. “Entice with mash-ups,” says Corliss, who cites fun possibilities like brownie waffles, red velvet pancakes and pumpkin pie frozen custard.



Start with classic and comfortable themes, then call out those quality, unique or nostalgic cues that trigger an emotional response, as with this Peanut Butter S’more Parfait with marshmallow topping.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SWEET STREET DESSERTS.

Use seasonal flavors as a cue for freshness and local in your desserts. “Chocolate cake is still incredibly popular and great for year-round menus,” says Tristano. “But diners today want something more. Add seasonal berries or fruit sauce to the cake, for instance.” And then toot that horn. Take credit for efforts to source seasonal and local. “Be vocal with this and call these out in-store, online and in social media,” says Corliss. “Tout local berries, honey, dairy products — any ingredients you use in the desserts.”

And look to diverse flavors for the more adventurous diners. “Comfort food continues to sell, but the Millennial consumer — who’s moving into primary consumer and family consumer pretty soon — is looking for something special,” says Nielsen. “Look at global flavors, like mango, coconut, chiles. Add a layer of interest into your main dessert category.” Integrating small but focused strategies like incorporating intriguing flavors, highlighting distinctive attributes, and creatively collaborating with dessert partners will help see diners through the final course.