

A  
DOZEN  
WAYS

# SWEET OPPORTUNITY

Twelve pathways to on-trend, signature desserts

BY AMELIA LEVIN

The dessert category is often slow-moving when it comes to trend adoption—most diners seem to want comfort, nostalgia and familiarity by the time they get to the end of a meal. But there are trending flavors and forms that can help boost interest and differentiation in this category. Some draw from far-flung places, reflecting an overall fascination with global flavors. Others pull on the heartstrings, relying on that emotional connection to capture the sale. We've pulled together 12 trending themes that reflect a collective modern sensibility, promising a sweet-tooth satisfaction while serving up both intrigue and fun.

At Quaintrelle in Portland, Ore., the Chocolate-Hazelnut Panna Cotta features marshmallow smoked with hazelnut shells.

## 1 SMOKED SWEETS

Once reserved for inventive appetizers and cocktails, the smoking gun is getting more play at the end of the meal as pastry chefs look to add depth of flavor that also has entertainment appeal. Smoke can be used to introduce complexity to sugars and other ingredients, or get trapped in a dish via a wrapping or enclosure, with the final reveal at the table.

- ▶ Chocolate-Hazelnut Panna Cotta with hazelnut shell-smoked marshmallows—*Quaintrelle, Portland, Ore.*
- ▶ Smoked Pork and Toffee-Crunch Shake with pork-fat ice cream, house toffee and chocolate crumbles—*Little Goat Diner, Chicago*
- ▶ Sticky Toffee Pudding with smoked cedar ice cream and hazelnut tuile—*Vedge, Philadelphia*

## 2 CULINARY COOKIES

Cookies have grown in every segment over the past decade, Datassential reports, but their strongest growth has actually been in fine dining, with an increase in menu mentions of 64 percent. Take Chicago's Next, for one, where Grant Achatz, founding chef, presented an entire dessert inside a giant fortune cookie. Macaroons, in particular, are the fastest-growing cookie variety on menus these days, according to Datassential, but the possibilities are endless when it comes to one of America's favorite treats.

- ▶ Cornflake-Marshmallow Cookie and Compost cookies with pretzels, potato chips, coffee, oats, graham cracker, butterscotch and chocolate chips—*Milk Bar, based in New York*
- ▶ Mexican Ice Cream Sandwich made with Mexican chocolate cookies—*Taco John's, based in Cheyenne, Wyo.*

## 3

## IN WITH THE OLD

From Ho Hos to Eskimo Pies, blasts from the past are claiming spots on dessert menus as playful pastry chefs go for a retro-meets-whimsical approach. Thanks to their nostalgic charm, they also work in over-the-top milkshakes. At Zu Zu in Scottsdale, Ariz., the State Fair “Show Stopper” Shake is a vanilla Twinkie milkshake starring a deep-fried cheesecake ball, popcorn ball, white-chocolate-covered Twinkie and cotton candy.

- Crafty Ho Ho Chocolate Sponge Cake with marshmallow whip, coffee ice cream, fudge and cacao—*Leroy’s Kitchen + Lounge, Coronado, Calif.*
- Pop-Tarts (Ted’s Tarts) filled with strawberry jam, brown sugar and cinnamon, s’mores and blueberry cheesecake—*Ted’s Bulletin, five locations in the Washington, D.C., area*

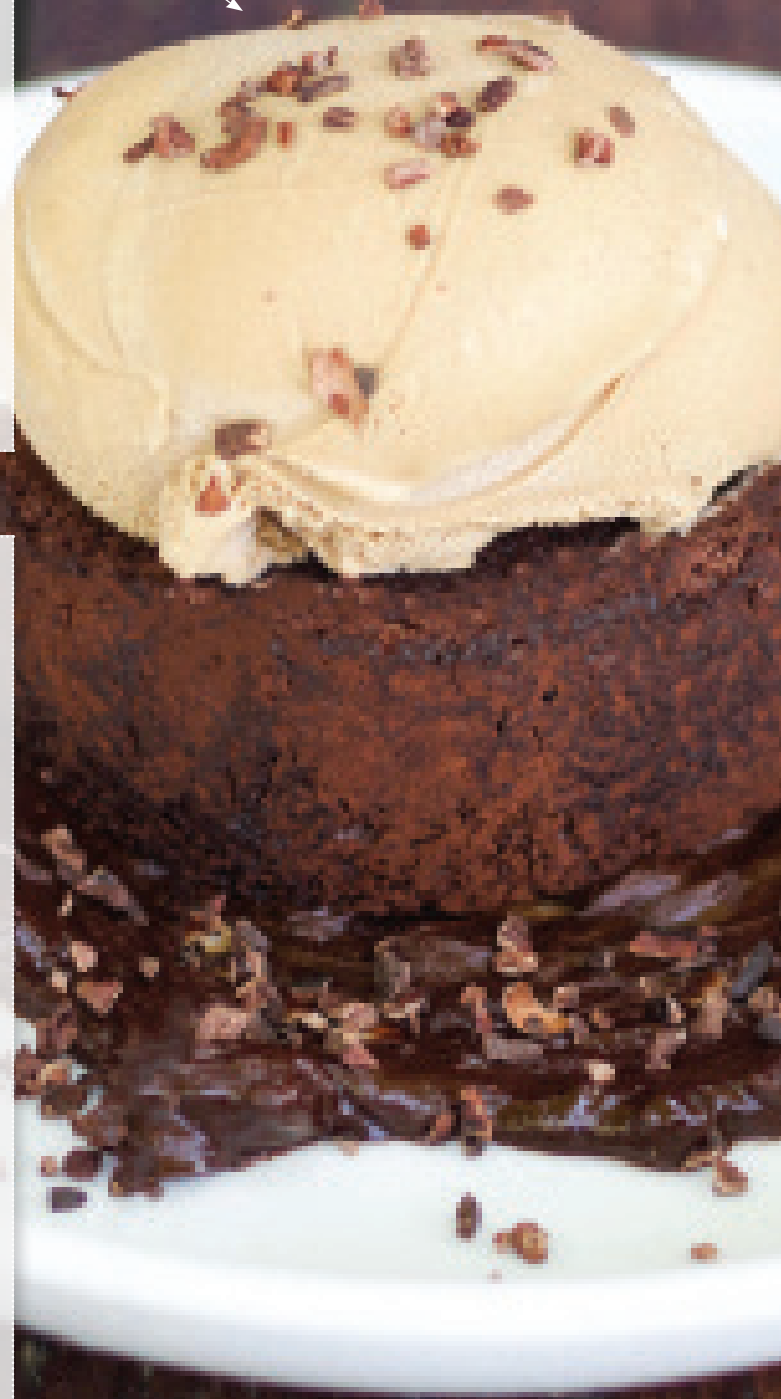
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## GLOBAL ICE CREAM

While plain-old vanilla ice cream still has its place on menus and plated desserts, restaurants and shops are pushing the envelope further in terms of form and flavor. Thai rolled ice cream, the unique, interactive and customizable treat, continues to show up in shop form around the country. Filipino ube ice cream also fits into this category. Datassential called out the growing popularity overseas of Korean bingsu—shaved ice with condensed milk, various fruits, syrups and nuts—which has found its way to menus in the United States. As Middle Eastern cuisine makes its way onto more menus nationwide, we’re seeing dondurma—a concrete-thick, Turkish ice cream (called booza in Syria) that has an almost chewy or stretchy appeal, thanks to the addition of plant-based mastic or salep gum—come into consumer view.

- Fifty Shades of Grey Rolled Ice Cream with Nutella and Oreo—*Snow Factory, Bollingbrook, Ill.*
- Stretchy Booza Ice Cream in classic and international flavors like masala chai and panettone—*Republic of Booza, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

COFFEE ICE CREAM ADDS  
A GROWN-UP FEEL



At Leroy’s Kitchen + Lounge in Coronado, Calif, the Crafty Ho Ho sponge cake reimagines a childhood snack.

## 5

## CHURRO LOVE

Fried dough never fails. Today, more operators are experimenting with churros, and they’re also integrating the churro flavor into other desserts like ice cream and cake. The cinnamon-and-sugar-dusted Mexican fried treat continues to gain traction on menus nationwide, with Datassential reporting a 43 percent increase in U.S. menu mentions.

- Churro with Aleppo chile-peanut butter and white chocolate ganache, rum-infused banana “schmear,” piloncillo (Mexican cane sugar) ice cream and peanut-toffee garnish—*Quiote, Chicago*
- Cinnamon-Sugar-Dusted Churros with cajeta and chocolate fudge sauces—*Burlock Coast at The Ritz-Carlton, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.*
- Churro-style Doughnuts with Abuelo’s hot chocolate for dunking—*Ariete, Coconut Grove, Fla.*

Caramel and chocolate fudge sauces complement the crunchy churros at Burlock Coast in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.



## 6

## CONFECTION SWEETS

Butterscotch—that irresistible combination of brown sugar and butter cooked together to the “soft crack” candy stage—seems to be leading the pack when it comes to candy-centric trends. Chefs are also experimenting with other confections such as halva, the crumbly, sweet and savory confection typically made with tahini and sugar.

- Butterscotch Doughnut made with Dewar’s scotch—*Sidecar Doughnuts, based in Santa Monica, Calif.*
- Chocolate Babka, pistachio halva, coffee-cardamom gelato—*Benno, New York*

## 7 SAVORY STARS

More pastry chefs are pulling savory items into their creations, from colorful vegetables to herbs. Chef Monica Glass of Constellation Culinary Group adds grated parsnips to her cake with walnuts, lavender and blackberries. At Trust in San Diego, pastry chef Jeremy Harville reaches for savory ingredients for his lime and watermelon pie, from cucumber to goat milk, chamoy (a fruit-based, Mexican chile sauce) and duros (made from puffed wheat that's fried and often chile-lime flavored).

- ▶ Golden Beet Root Cake with coconut "crèmeux," beets, coconut crumbs, white coffee ice cream and chervil garnish—*Blackbird, Chicago*
- ▶ Coriander Cake with blueberry gelée, white chocolate, blueberry-lime sorbet, coriander oil and fresh coriander—*Longoven, Richmond, Va.*

## 8 CHILE-INFUSED

From chipotles to guajillos, Aleppo to Thai peppers, chiles of all shapes and heat levels are finding their way into desserts as pastry chefs respond to consumers' growing interest in bolder and authentic global flavors. Chocolate is still the flavor base which lends itself well to this pairing, providing inspiration for expansion into other spicy-sweet profiles.

- ▶ Guajillo Chile Chocolate Cake with dulce de leche, candied sesame and Mexican vanilla ice cream—*El Roy's Tequila Bar + Kitchen, Coronado, Calif.*
- ▶ Ancho Fudge Pie with chocolate, walnuts, pecans, ancho chiles and whipped cream—*Z'Tejas, Chandler, Ariz.*
- ▶ Chipotle-Walnut Tart—*Bacchanalia, Atlanta*



( Grated parsnips add a savory counterpoint to this moist cake with walnuts, blackberries and lavender. )

( At Ariete in Coconut Grove, Fla., the flan is infused with mushroom and topped with cream and coffee crumble. )

COFFEE CRUMBLE  
ADDS TEXTURE

## 9 FLAN AS A CANVAS

A staple sweet treat in Latin cuisine, the simple yet elegant flan takes shape in many variations depending on its region of origin. Mexican- and Spanish-style flan typically has a caramelized top, while Venezuelan "flan," or quesillo, features more of a caramel infusion. We're also seeing a rise in cajeta, a Mexican caramel made by reducing goat's milk that's often incorporated into flan. The custard-based dessert also offers the perfect canvas for experimenting with an endless variety of other flavor infusions, toppings and pairings. As such, we're seeing more chefs pick up on the customizability of this classic dessert with add-ins like Nutella and even savory ingredients like butternut squash and fresh cheese.

- ▶ Jerk-Spiced Nutella Flan with crystalized hazelnuts and lime zest—*Bywater American Bistro, New Orleans*
- ▶ Dehydrated Candy Cap Mushroom-Infused Flan with Sambuca crema and coffee crumble—*Ariete, Coconut Grove, Fla.*
- ▶ Caramel-Infused Quesillo, or Venezuelan flan, with fresh berries—*La Cocinita at Pythian Market, New Orleans*

( The brighter the better: Rainbow Cookie Cake at All-Purpose in Washington, D.C., lights up the plate. )

## 10 INSTA-FRIENDLY COLOR

Few restaurant dishes can escape the onslaught of smartphone cameras and Instagram posts these days, and dessert is no exception. Pastry chefs are very aware that consumers are capturing and sharing their creations, so it's no surprise that more colorful ingredients are getting more menu play.

- ▶ Rainbow Cookie Cake with green, red and yellow layers of almond cake, raspberry and apricot jelly coated in chocolate—*All-Purpose, Washington, D.C.*
- ▶ Raspberry "Cuatro" Leches Cake topped with caramelized Swiss meringue and dotted with arequipe reduction—*La Duni Restaurant, Dallas*

## 11 BEAUTIFUL BUDINO

Puddings of all types are having a heyday these days, with non-dairy chia-seed pudding hitting healthy menus nationwide and chefs putting their own spins on traditional classics like rice and silky chocolate pudding. According to Datassential, budino has seen a 39 percent increase on menus over the last four years. This light and sweet, custard-based Italian dessert is made by whisking egg yolks with a warmed milk and cornstarch mixture and simmered until thickened. Any number of flavors can be added, from simple vanilla bean to butterscotch, chocolate, caramel and more.

- ▶ Blueberry-lavender-infused Budino with blueberry compote, biscotti crumble, candied lemon and chantilly cream—*Blu Pointe, Newburgh, N.Y.*
- ▶ Smoked Chocolate Budino with crème fraîche gelato—*Il Palio, Chapel Hill, N.C.*

(The rich Smoked Chocolate Budino at Il Palio in Chapel Hill, N.C., is served with crème fraîche gelato.)



SMOKED CHOCOLATE DEEPENS THE FLAVOR

## 12 PURPLE REIGN

The popular (and highly Instagrammable) Filipino dessert halo halo, with its purple ube ice cream and smattering of toppings, was one of the first to showcase the bright and mysterious color. Although only 6 percent of consumers have tried ube, according to Datassential, 38 percent are interested in trying it, which indicates growth opportunity. Even dragon fruit has found its way into drinks, dishes and desserts, with the deep purple-hued fruit having grown on menus a whopping 136 percent over the past four years as a favorite primarily of Gen Z-ers. Even the simple beet remains a go-to for color and richness when, say, puréed and added to walnut cookie sandwiches.

- ▶ Ube Milk Bars made with ube and condensed milk jam and crunchy coconut streusel—*The Bakery at Fat Rice, Chicago*
- ▶ Fried Bun filled with housemade Filipino ice cream and young coconut strings, drizzled in a coconut-caramel sauce and sprinkled with Fruity Pebbles—*Bonifacio, Columbus, Ohio*

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