

Life's Too Short to Skip Dessert

By Joey Porcelli

Baked, torched, iced or dipped, dessert still makes the meal. In Colorado, pastry chefs, caterers, and bakers take the cake - or tart, or pie and mold, sculpt and decorate it with creative flair. No frozen cheesecake allowed!

From an elaborate torte to a simple sorbet, dessert captures diners' attention. For the fortunate guests who attended a recent Denver Botanic Garden fete, dessert became a garden of edible delights. The Grand Hyatt Hotel's pastry chef Sandra Adams prepared white chocolate calalilies overflowing with peach mousse and Marsala flavored strawberries. As if that wasn't enough to make a botanist bloom, she added a second dessert choice to the banquet menu; chocolate flower pots filled with chocolate cake, edible orchids, chocolate stones and crumbled Oreo cookie "dirt."

Since, as Sandra says, "people eat with their eyes first," dessert presentation is key to a successful event. Flaming baked Alaska paraded into the banquet room by an army of servers brings exclamations of delight from those on the receiving end. Sparklers and fireworks atop a spectacular cake create an eye-pleasing display. Adriane Hodder of Aramark Caterers at Coors Field agrees that dessert must pass the visual as well as the taste test. "I like to use dessert as a centerpiece at my tables. It looks pretty and is so tempting. Guests often cheat and eat. That's the fun of it."

One of Adriane's centerpieces, a cheesecake with blueberry/raspberry glaze and chocolate sauce on the side, hit the spot at a recent charity event. "We come up with dessert ideas for groups like the Roy Foundation who reaches out to youth." And what better dessert for children of all ages than space age ice cream? Aramark's signature ballpark dessert, a cup of dip and dots, is always popular at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. For the younger crowd, Aramark also offers full dessert stations with multiple choices of ice cream, licorice, cotton candy and Cracker Jack.

For her younger clients, Megan Shoflick, owner of Planit, a full service caterer and event planning company, designs "candy shops" with bins of treats. For one Bat Mitzvah, she made take-home party favor boxes entirely of candy. For desserts that evoke childhood memories, Doug and Linda Whittaker of Sir Chocolate take chocolate fondue out of the '70s and transform it for today's partygoers. Their chocolate fountains, flavored in white, milk or semi-sweet, flowed at over 550 events in 2005.

"For me to watch an adult dip into that fountain is like seeing them revert back to childhood," says Doug. His company Sir Chocolate provides the fountains, the decorations and the dipping treats, an array of goodies such as pretzels, marshmallows, cream puffs, shortcake, cookies, kiwi, strawberries and bananas. Sir Chocolate offers flavored chocolate in mint, butterscotch, Grand Marnier or Bailey's Irish Cream.

Colored chocolate is also a fountain hit. For a recent Broncos event, Doug provided an orange chocolate fountain. Some of his clients request green chocolate for St. Patrick's Day or pink for their romantic Valentine's Day parties. Since chocolate fountains come in small, medium and large, no crowd is too big for a fondue dessert. Sir Chocolate brought six dessert fountains to the 2005 Cherry Creek Mask Project and served chocolate to a crowd of intergalactic fans at Denver's premier of the latest Star Wars film.

"Everyone loves chocolate," says Steve Barela, owner of Child's Pastry Shop in Denver. Steve's creative crew dips strawberries in chocolate and bakes chocolate teddy bear and bumblebee

cakes. Chocoholics delight when they take a forkful of Sandra's wedding cake layered with Bailey's, caramel, and mascarpone cream and toffee. She also crafts edible chocolate cappuccino cups and saucers for coffee lovers. For the Colorado Symphony Orchestra's "Brahms to Barbecue," a theme party that revolved around music in the West, she made a chocolate metronome with a cowboy hat.

Shawn Smith, co-owner of Mountain Flour in Eagle, bakes his signature double chocolate mousse cake in three layers; one dark, one milk and one white. Now that's a lot of chocolate! He tops this mouth-watering beauty with chocolate glaze. For the Knapp-Reiwerts wedding in 2005, Shawn filled a four-layer vanilla cake with white chocolate mousse and adorned it with fresh strawberries and rose petals. A graduate of culinary school, Shawn sculpts handmade chocolate to garnish his cakes. A recent wedding order called for 250 individual cupcakes, so he created white chocolate roses and leaves for each and brushed them with a red glaze. His desserts are works of art.

At Child's Pastry Shop, four out of five decorators hold an art degree. "We have over 1,000 designs in our book and are always ready to come up with something new for our customers," says Steve. Child's specializes in 3-D marzipan figures. The bakery sculpted John Elway playing golf and a likeness of Governor Bill Owens out of the almond-flavored paste. "We can actually put a wedding couple's likeness on top of their cake."

Child's Pastry Shop gives whimsy to weddings with their precariously balanced Topsy Turvy cake or the Cirque du Soleil cake covered in swirls, stripes, balls and squares. Last Halloween, Steve's talented crew baked a cake in the shape of a severed head with blood, an exposed brain and popping eyeballs to feed 100 ghoulish guests. No request is too bizarre!

Once a design is selected, Steve focuses on the ingredients. "All scratch baked makes it a better tasting cake. It would be easier and less expensive to use a mix, but it tastes different." Sandra agrees. "I am interested in cakes that taste better than they look. At the Hyatt, we use no artificial ingredients, no hydrogenated oils. There isn't any shortening in this hotel."

Cake filling is equally important. "We can put anything inside a cake," says Steve, "from fresh fruit to amaretto to champagne." Kathleen Karr, owner of Mulberries Cake Shop likes to fill her cakes with mocha Bavarian cream, chocolate pudding, cream cheese or raspberries. "You can mix and match and just go crazy."

Mountain Flour customizes flavoring for customers. Shawn's team concocted a black peppercorn vanilla ice cream to go with a strawberry tart for one client. When another requested a jalapeno lime sorbet for dessert, Shawn steeped peppers in warm limejuice, sugar and water. "It had a sweet and sour taste."

Pleasing customers is the goal. At Mulberries, Kathleen wants clients to have the wedding cake of their dreams. "We took an order for a cake with less than 24 hours notice. I love to help somebody that's desperate." Shawn goes the extra mile for his customers too. For one wedding, he baked a groom's cake in the shape of a football field. "Notre Dame was playing that day so we put their logo in the end zone. The groom wanted the final score added on later, but only if his team won. I had to wait and see." When the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup, Child's Pastry Shop baked a giant replica of the trophy to celebrate the occasion.

Quirky theme cakes add a new twist to wedding receptions with desserts that resemble everything from circus clowns to cigar boxes. Shawn says, "I made several carrot cakes with chocolate wood grain on the side to look like a cigar box and then we stacked them for the groom."

Kathleen explains that wedding traditions are changing. Stacks of colorful cupcakes often take the place of the traditional white cake. "Cupcakes have become extremely popular. We use a clear acrylic seven-tiered cupcake stand and once it's filled, it looks like a wedding cake." Her bakery, Mulberries made 250 individual four-inch cupcakes as take-home favors for a wedding in 2005. They baked, filled, decorated, boxed and wrapped each with a fresh flower nosegay.

Another fashionable dessert trend is the interactive buffet or "action station." "I think it's popular to do dessert buffets," says Megan. "It gets people out of their seats and gives them huge choices of cakes, pies, cookies and ice creams." Sandra lists crepes, bananas foster, cherries jubilee and crème brule crusted by torch flame among the Grand Hyatt's list of interactive desserts. "People like to see you light things on fire."

Adriane describes an action station Aramark designed for a Harley Davidson group meeting over the summer. They fried fresh peach fritters and topped them with ice cream for the crowd. Another creative Aramark dessert took folks out into the "woods" for an old camping favorite, s'mores. "We put rocks around sterno and made it look like a campfire with wood piles. Guest roasted marshmallows over an open flame and topped them with coconut, dark chocolate, crushed M&M's or Butterfingers. People like to see us make their dessert. They want action."

Doug says his chocolate fountains, based on the original interactive dessert, serve as an icebreaker at weddings. "We get two families together who don't know each other. They gather around and talk during dessert and there's something on the table for everyone."

With so many choices, dessert continues to be the crowning glory of any meal. Remember, life's too short to skip it.