

How Sweet it is!

Introduction

Desserts remain a popular section on the menu. Seasonal inspiration and portability emerge as key trends in dessert items, providing menu developers an avenue to promote limited-time treats to attract consumers. In this issue of Culinary Trends, we look at growth in number of dessert offerings over time by type, flavor and menu marketing claims. We'll also view flavor profiles, both classic and innovative, that are key in the marketplace. Finally, we've provided some key takeaways to assist you with your dessert menu development.



Baskin Robbins® Waffle Chip Dippers

Desserts on the Menu: Current Trends

The number of dessert menu items increased nearly 27% from Q3 2009-Q3 2012. Seasonal and limited-time offerings provide operators with a platform for innovation and opportunity to create interest in the often overlooked “dessert menu.” Increased snacking demand and opportunities have encouraged restaurant operators to adapt classic dessert items into bite-sized, minis or portable treats.

There has been solid growth in the classic desserts (i.e. ice cream, cake, pie, cheesecake, cookies), and this has contributed heavily to the overall increase in dessert menu items. Dessert bars are also gaining traction (up 77% from 2009) as the trend for portable, hand-held treats heats up. Bars also offer ease of production and service. Sorbet and gelato have also shown exceptional menu growth. This trend is being driven by fine dining players using fancier frozen treats to showcase seasonal flavors and unique ingredients. The following are a couple of recent innovations in dessert LTOs or menu additions:

- **Baskin Robbins Waffle Chip Dippers:** Vanilla soft serve drizzled with chocolate syrup and topped with M&M's and Snickers pieces, accompanied with six hand-cut triangle-shaped waffle and brownie chip pieces that are ready for dipping.
- **Outback Steakhouse Oreo Cookies 'N Cream Waffles:** Featuring warm chocolate waffle cakes, vanilla ice cream, Oreo cookie crumbs, whipped cream and chocolate sauce.

Top 10 Dessert Menu Items (% growth Q3 2009 – Q3 2012)	
Dessert Item	(% growth)
Dessert	442.9%
Gelato	125.0%
Sorbet	77.3%
Brownie	70.0%
Bread Pudding	47.4%
Cheesecake	46.2%
Cheese	41.7%
Tiramisu	37.5%
Flan	16.7%
Cake-Chocolate	15.9%

Flavors: Looking Beyond Classics

Although a large share of dessert menu items do not specify flavor, classics like vanilla and chocolate remain widely used. Fruit flavors like raspberry, lemon and banana are gaining presence; tropical fruits (mango, coconut) are also on the rise. Solid growth in caramel flavors is driven by the popularity of salted caramel to create a sweet-salty flavor profile; peanut butter (up 84.6%) offers a similar flavor contrast. The following are examples of recent menu additions featuring a salty-sweet flavor profile:

- **T.G.I. Friday's Salted Caramel Cake:** Vanilla cake layered with vanilla bean pudding and caramel crunch then drizzled with a salted caramel glaze. Served with vanilla ice cream.
- **Carlos O' Kelly's Margarita Cheesecake:** The sweet, citrusy flavors of a margarita whipped into smooth cheesecake and suspended between layers of crunchy pretzel crumbles.

Top 10 Dessert Flavors (% growth Q3 2009 – Q3 2012)	
Dessert Item	(% growth)
Peanut Butter	84.6%
Mango	64.3%
Lemon	56.3%
White Chocolate	50.0%
Banana	50.0%
Caramel	43.5%
Raspberry	42.3%
Chocolate Chip	28.6%
Chocolate	25.3%
Vanilla Bean	19.6%



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Dessert Staples- Ice Cream, Cake and Cheesecake

Ice Cream: Vanilla remains the ice cream flavor stalwart on restaurant dessert menus. Vanilla provides a good base for menu developers to explore interesting flavor profiles and ingredient add-ins. Ice cream sundaes and parfaits allow operators to individualize their dessert menu and create signature ice cream desserts, often layered with other desserts (pie, cheesecake, cookies). The following is a recent ice cream LTO:

- **Friendly's S'mores Sundae:** Made with Graham Central Station ice cream, marshmallow topping and hot fudge.

Cake: Chocolate cake remains the most popular flavor in cake desserts, by a wide margin. The popularity of molten cake and red velvet cake has encouraged many operators to add these dessert items to promotional and permanent menus. Cupcakes remain a hot trend, while more portable, small-bite cake pops and bites are gaining traction. The following is a recent cake LTO:

- **Maggiano's Venetian Red Velvet Cake:** Mascarpone Cream Cheese Frosting, Hot Fudge.

Cheesecake: The largest share of cheesecake desserts does not specify a flavor, which implies the overwhelming popularity of plain cheesecake. Flavor variety in cheesecake menu items remains relatively untapped, indicating missing opportunities for restaurant players to create unique signature desserts with added sauce and optional toppings. Bite-sized and portable cheesecake items are a hot trend. Fine dining leads an emerging trend of using savory soft cheeses in cheesecake variations. This trend could be the next iteration of "salty-sweet" dessert flavors. The following is a recent cheesecake LTO:

- **Magnolia Grill Blue Cheese Cheesecake:** Served with winter fruits and orange rosemary walnut honey

Top Dessert Marketing Claims

The overall increase in number of marketing claims for dessert menu items suggests operators need to "sell" dessert items via menu descriptors because these items are most likely bought on impulse. "Housemade" claims grew 53%, and appear to be replacing "homemade" descriptions (down 17%). Housemade implies the product was made on-premise, which adds to the fresh perception. The number of "seasonal" marketing claims has risen some 61%, creating a sense of get-it-now urgency for limited-time offers. Menu descriptors that give context to the texture of the dessert are also on the rise. In particular, "crisp", "crispy" and "crunchy" have shown significant growth.

Top 10 Dessert Marketing Claims (% growth Q3 2009 – Q3 2012)	
Marketing Claim	(% growth)
Crispy	114.3%
Classic	75.0%
Seasonal	61.1%
Housemade	53.3%
Crunchy	50.0%
Soft	41.7%
Crisp	40.0%
Golden	40.0%
Premium	40.0%
Crumbly	25.0%

Insights to Go

Make it Move: Menu developers should continue to develop mini, bite-sized and portable versions of classic desserts. By tapping into portable convenience, desserts will gain more snacking momentum and broaden consumer interest.

Less is More: Smaller bites can also be seen as a Better For You dessert choice because of the built-in portion control; smaller sizes also offer better value with lower price points.

Beyond Basics: Restaurant operators rely heavily on classic dessert flavors, and menu developers should see tried-and-true flavors as a platform for layers of innovation that align with the restaurant's food style. Think beyond sweet flavor profiles and add a touch of savory for the unexpected.

Presentation Matters: Deconstructing classic desserts or thinking outside the typical "dessert with a fork" presentation creates interest and will help operators create buzz with layered parfaits, minis, etc.

Ingredient Choices: Touting unique ingredients and local sourcing helps differentiate the dessert menu as well as establishing a "housemade" or "fresh" perception.



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Source: **MINTEL** Menu Insights