

Nuts TO Dessert

Nuts are nothing new to the last course, but innovative pastry chefs are drawing more flavor and texture from these old standards

Nuts pair nicely with fresh and dried fruits, as in the on-trend Fig and Walnut Napoleon at Mulvaney's in Sacramento, Calif.



- ▶ Traditional European pastries, American classics and other nut-centric desserts
- ▶ How pastry chefs add local or regional flavors to the dessert menu with nuts like pecans and hazelnuts
- ▶ Pastes, flours, oils and other nut-based ingredients adding interesting dimensions to sweets

BY DEB NORTH

Nuts have always held a place of pride in the pastry chef's pantry, and today's ultra-creative chefs are finding clever new ways to use these tried-and-true ingredients. Ground nuts and nut pastes are helping bring back a whole breed of traditional, European-based treats. Spiced and candied nuts are the finishing crunch on many smooth desserts, and nut flours, oils and milks are finding favor among chefs adept at layering one flavor in many forms to bring more interest to the finishing course.

SWEET ON CLASSICS

Because nuts are such a traditional pastry ingredient, it's no surprise to see chefs using them to resurrect classics on contemporary dessert menus.

"Because hazelnuts have historically been so very popular in Europe, [they tie into] the 'European' trend, which is alive and well," confirms Polly Owen, manager at the Oregon Hazelnut Marketing Board in Aurora, Ore.

Pastry Chef Lauren Fortgang of Paley's Place in Portland, Ore., features the rich-flavored, smooth nut throughout her dessert menu. The signature dessert at Paley's is a warm chocolate soufflé with toasted hazelnuts and honey-vanilla ice cream. Another classically inspired creation is the hazelnut-butter chocolate ganache she uses for filling chocolates. This pairing makes more than just perfect flavor sense: It also lowers the melting point of the two ingredients and creates an extra-smooth consistency, notes Owen.

Peanuts make the familiar exotic in Le Bernardin's upscale, dark-chocolate take on the peanut-butter cup.





Nuts take new shape in the hands of Tailor's Sam Mason, who creates almond beads to accent his black olive clafouti with tangerine sorbet.

Almonds are also showing up in many on-trend and contemporary adaptations of European standards, says Gennifer Horowitz of the Almond Board of California, from traditional German marzipan to dense, flourless cakes, tortes and panforte.

Pastry Chef Cindy Schuman of Sepia in Chicago recently added rich almond cake to her line-up. The dessert is based on the financier, a classic French dessert made with almond flour, brown butter and egg whites. Schuman's version is a dense pound cake baked in a mini-loaf pan. She grinds the almonds into a fine meal and further sifts it until the texture is very smooth.

"You taste just the flavor of the almond with the texture of a dense cake," Schuman explains. An accompanying espresso cup holds thick caramel-and-dark-chocolate custard for spreading on top of the loaf.

At Le Bernardin in New York City, Executive Pastry Chef Michael Laiskonis uses pistachios in his version of the financier, a petite, cherry-centered treat, but the walnut inspires his unusual take on a European dessert: nougat with frozen parfait flavored with caramelized walnuts and preserved green walnuts.

"I love these!" Laiskonis enthuses. He plates the dessert with a sauce made from

an Austrian green-walnut liqueur. "I enjoy seeking out such esoteric products as the green walnuts, and also special products with a sense of place and quality," he says.

CLASSICALLY ITALIAN

Almonds and walnuts feature prominently in classic Italian desserts, but pignoli (a.k.a. pine nut or Indian nut) cannot be overlooked. While best known in the States as a pesto ingredient, these tiny, delicate, high-fat nuts feature in rustic, home-styled desserts like Tuscany's Famous Grandmother's Cake, served at Adrian's Restaurant in North Truro, Mass. The sweet-butter-and-almond pastry is filled with vanilla, ricotta custard, pine nuts, powdered sugar and whipped cream.

Craft restaurant in Los Angeles serves honey-glazed strawberry shortcakes with honey-and-pine-nut gelato. The little nuts also stud many classic Italian cookies, like the chocolate-pine-nut cookie with vanilla gelato served at Fork in Philadelphia. Pastry Chef Nancy Olson of New York City's Gramercy Tavern makes a lemon cheesecake laced with pine-nut oil, which she says has a rich, ripe mouthfeel; the dessert is finished with a side of blueberry sorbet and more pine nuts.

"There are wonderful oils in pine nuts, and they also have a desirable soft crunch; it seemed like an interesting approach to our cheesecake, and it's really tasty," she says.

Olson is on to something: The French Laundry, Thomas Keller's culinary gem in Yountville, Calif., has a signature recipe with similar flavors, packaged in a classic lemon tart with a pine-nut crust and finished with honeyed mascarpone cream.

CLASSICS, REINVENTED

Inventive chefs are also employing various hip scientific techniques and using nuts to turn dessert classics into modern creations. Such is the case with Executive Chef/owner Sam Mason of Tailor in New York City, whose menu consists of small and large seasonal plates

that blend art and science, blurring the line between savory and sweet courses. Mason created a black-olive clafouti with tangerine sorbet and almond beads.

"Clafouti is a hot trend right now," notes the Almond Board of California's Horowitz.

This custard-like French dessert is typically made by baking fresh fruit — usually cherries — in a pancake-like batter.

Horowitz explains how Mason uses liquid nitrogen to formulate almond milk into tiny beads, adding visual and textural interest to the concentrated flavor.

At SPQR, a Roman-style osteria in San Francisco, another science-minded pastry chef, Jane Tseng, developed an unusual almond granita with espresso cream. To prepare, Tseng freezes the base — a mixture of almonds, sugar, anise seed and bitter almonds — in ice-cube trays. The cubes are then run through the grater attachment of a food processor to produce an almond fluff, a light, snowy confection she finishes with a cloud of barely sweetened espresso-infused whipped cream.

REGIONAL CLASSICS

Pastry chefs also rely on nuts to bring American regional classics to the menu.

"Hazelnuts are especially popular in the Northwest, because we grow so many here," says chef Fortgang. Indeed, the Willamette Valley of Oregon, where most of the state's



CAFE PONTE

A deconstructed, brûléed banana split gets textural interest when crowned with pecan halves at Cafe Ponte in Clearwater, Fla.

NUTS BREAK OUT

A sampling of nut desserts spotted on menus around the country

Blueberry Cashew Profiteroles with blueberry compote, cinnamon-blueberry-swirl ice cream, warm cashew caramel
— *David Burke's Primehouse, Chicago*

Coconut Crunch with white-chocolate-coconut mousse, macadamia-nut crisp, lime foam and fresh pineapple
— *One Sixty Blue, Chicago*

Warm Cherry Almond Tart, toasted-sunflower ice cream
— *Etta's, Seattle*

Caramelized Apple Baklava with rosemary, toasted walnuts, rum raisin gelato — *Brosia, Miami*

Naughty Angel: Barry Callebaut chocolate orb filled with whiskey-spiked bananas, sea-salted caramel, roasted peanuts, with hot-chocolate sauce poured tableside
— *Heaven Sent Desserts, San Diego*

Rocky Road: dark-chocolate torte, homemade Tahitian-vanilla marshmallow, curried candied peanuts, soy-salted caramel and chocolate ice cream
— *Zare at Fly Trap, San Francisco*

Valrhona Manjari Chocolate Hazelnut Torte, creamy marsala semifreddo, toffee and espresso crème anglaise
— *Wildwood Restaurant, Portland, Ore.*

Chocolate Hazelnut Baklava, with cocoa, honey, fig and almond serpentines
— *Sofra Bakery, Cambridge, Mass.*

Savannah Summer: cornbread, butter ice cream, peach jam and candied pecans
— *Lola, Cleveland*

population resides, is home to 99.9 percent of the U.S. hazelnut industry, according to Polly Owen of the Oregon Hazelnut Marketing Board.

At Paley's Place, where the focus is on local, regional and organic food, Fortgang takes advantage of the hazelnuts' abundance to add them everywhere possible, from house-made brittles to ice cream and seasonal specialties.

"In the fall, I make a hazelnut pudding with roasted apples, candied hazelnuts and candied-apple ice cream," says Fortgang.

Pecans are another nut with a decidedly regional flavor, and in Georgia, their prolific use is a matter of local pride. Georgia historically produces more pecans than any other state in the nation. The 2007 harvest peaked in November at 100 million pounds.

At Watershed in Atlanta, Executive Chef/owner Scott Peacock relies on an old Southern classic, the Hummingbird Cake, to anchor his dessert menu to the region. While the origin of name remains uncertain, Hummingbird Cake ingredients are standard, and Peacock sticks with tradition, combining chopped pecans, crushed pineapple, mashed bananas and a cinnamon-spice blend into a three-layer treat that gets topped with cream-cheese frosting studded with more pecans.

Peacock, a self-proclaimed pecan guy, notes that out of seven of his desserts, three or more at any given time feature pecans used in different ways. He points to his chocolate-pecan praline parfait, caramel-glazed fresh apple cake and pecan tart with shortbread crust as some long-standing favorites.

Another pecan fan, Cathleen Ryan, pastry chef at Cafe Ponte in Clearwater, Fla., finds the nut's appeal goes far beyond regional borders.

"While dessert trends may take many directions, the pecan works well in classic or trendy dessert menus," she observes.



Chewy, nutty pralines or crisp nut brittles and cookies, like these pistachio tuiles, are a delicious way to garnish frozen treats and creamy desserts.



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MANS FOODSERVICES

A sprinkling of minced Snickers Bar, here, atop smooth peanut butter icing, turns a standard cupcake into something special, adding visual and textural appeal, not to mention a nutty flavor accent.

Spiced and candied pecans can be found in several places on the menu. Ryan's favorite indulgence is pecan praline paste to enhance the flavor of cakes, cookies, ice creams and creamy desserts. It's the nut of choice for her petit-four cookie and also is used as a topper for panna cotta, cream puddings and in her famous rendition of the banana split.

"When deconstructing a classic dessert such as the banana split, visual elements are extremely important," notes Ryan. "Pecans have texture and add interesting structure to the brûléed banana and tuile cookie. In most desserts, pecans are hidden elements; in this dessert, they stand on their own."

FAMILIAR AND EXOTIC

Another Southern-styled nut (technically, a legume) is the peanut. While it's a comfort food to many, Marie Fenn, president of the National Peanut Board in Atlanta, says the peanut's real power is its ability to "make the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar."

The latter is a special talent of Le Bernardin's Laiskonis. His dessert menu has a broad petit-four program, supporting a series of individually plated small bites, which he views as "great vehicles for nuts." One standout is his delicate peanut-butter cup, a confection familiar to Americans young and

old that, in this pastry chef's hands, takes on a whole new dimension.

"Here, a chocolate shell is filled with peanut-butter powder. Peanut butter and roasted peanut oil are processed with maltodextrin, a derivative of tapioca starch, which absorbs the fats and 'powderizes' the product. The slightest bit of humidity, such as in the mouth, reverts the powder back to its original form," Laiskonis explains.

Schuman at Sepia is a bit more traditional in her nod to the peanut-butter cup, but the result is no less delicious. Her multi-textured version incorporates malted-milk-chocolate mousse and peanut-butter crunch with peanut-maple sauce and pretzel bark. It's a mouthful, both to describe and to eat, but the sum total of salty, sweet, smooth and simple is a top seller for the restaurant.

At Gramercy Tavern, Olson also takes advantage of the salty-sweet trend and riffs on the peanut-butter cup with a hot-and-cold variation. Tapping the "half-cold" concept of the Italian semifreddo, she creates a peanut-butter semifreddo, layers it with hot fudge, tops it with a pinch of large-grained sea salt and serves it with a chocolate macaroon. The semifreddo has the texture of frozen mousse; the hot fudge is smooth and warm, and the salt intensifies the sweet and bitter chocolate notes while emphasizing the perfect level of salt in the peanut butter.

"I am going for indulgence and textural contrast in many of my dessert items," says Olson.

Nuts deliver on both counts. They not only bring great flavors to desserts, they also range in texture from crisp and crunchy when toasted to smooth and moist when ground for use in batters and doughs. Whether sticking to the European classics or wildly updating a favorite American candy, there are plenty of reasons to go nuts with desserts. ☺

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▶ GO WHEAT-FREE:

Use nut flours or meal for richer, denser pastry

▶ GET SLICK:

Nut oils add richness, subtle flavor and a smooth finish to nutty desserts