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DELECTABLE DESSERTS

by Diane Rumbaugh



When it comes to desserts during the holidays, taste usually trumps calorie counting. With restaurant goers in a festive mood, offering tasty desserts will contribute to the fun of the season—and to a restaurant's bottom line.

But how about the rest of the year? While the holiday season may be an excuse to splurge, it should not be the only time customers are tempted to throw caution to the wind and order dessert. Restaurant owners just need to use a little bit of psychology to overcome resistance. "Dessert is seen as an indulgence. Ordering dessert is an emotional decision," says Mary Chapman, senior director, product innovation at Technomic Inc., a food industry consulting and research firm. "It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with appetite. It's more, 'do I deserve this, will I be overdoing it, will I be cheating on my diet too much if I order dessert?'"

Price is another reason customers hesitate to reach for a slice of pie or scoop of ice cream. "People have it in their mind what their meal is going to cost," explains Chapman. "The meal may go a little higher than budgeted, but dessert still has to fit into that price range."

Chapman sees a trend toward mini portions as solving the price and over-indulgence hurdles. "Small portions mean customers are still eating something yummy, but not overdoing it indulgence-wise. The small portions cost less so the dessert doesn't stretch the cost of the meal. The mini portions make you feel good on all levels."

"Mini desserts are definitely popular with guests since they offer just a taste instead of a big heavy dessert," says Linda Duke, CEO of Duke Marketing, LLC and author of *Recipes for Restaurateurs*, a marketing "cookbook" for restaurant operators. "Mini desserts are less expensive to make so they have lots of profit built into them."

Dessert manufacturers are noticing. Rich's Products Corp. will soon launch the Jon Donaire Sampler Cheesecake as an addition to its line-up of Jon Donaire Cheesecakes. Jon Donaire cheesecakes, ice cream cakes, mousse cakes and cupcakes are served at restaurants throughout the United States. This new nine-inch variety cheesecake offers four slices each of vanilla bean, caramel sea salt, dark chocolate strawberry and red velvet flavors.

"With inspiration sparked from food service and retail trends, we developed appealing combinations," said Beth Naffziger, Rich's marketing manager. "The new Jon Donaire Sampler Cheesecake is a perfect fit to align with the trend of smaller, 'it's worth it' type of indulgences. The sampler appeals to multiple demographics and brings new flavors to a traditional item that consumers will be drawn to for its variety and shareability." The numbers bear out this thinking. According to a 2013 Technomic Dessert Consumer Trend Report, desserts are shared at 44 percent of full-service restaurants and 29 percent of limited-service restaurants, while 36 percent of consumers say they're more likely to order dessert if a mini portion is available.

A signature dessert suggestion at the beginning of the meal is a great way to sell desserts.

Ice Cream Still Rules

Other Technomic surveys show restaurant customers crave certain kinds of sweets over others. The top ingredients found in the almost 30,000 desserts on restaurant menus are ice cream, chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. Among dessert types that are increasing in popularity are chocolate-focused (up 12 percent), yogurt/sherbet (up 4 percent), trifles/layered desserts (up 4 percent) and dessert bars such as lemon squares (up 3 percent).

Salt, mint, raspberry sauce, yogurt and Oreos are finding their way into desserts. “Using Oreos and Hershey’s chocolate is on the rise. It’s tying desserts with recognizable and high quality brands. There’s a nostalgia factor,” explains Chapman. “Restaurants are using Oreos everywhere—in pies, crumbled into ice cream and in smoothies.”

Another dessert suggestion: don’t be afraid to experiment. Technomic reports that 15 percent of consumers would be willing to order a dessert that features a vegetable ingredient. That willingness jumps to 21 percent among millennials. “Unusual flavors and ingredients for desserts are appearing more and more on dessert menus,” notes Duke. “Beets are naturally red and sweet. It’s a twist on the classic red velvet cake that relies on cooked, pureed beets instead of red food coloring to deliver a subtle ruby-red color. Applesauce substitutes for fat, and prunes and dates add sweetness and texture. Restaurateurs can always try a new flavor and run it as a short-term special to see if it sells and to get guest feedback.”

Sweet Strategies

Wait staff plays an important role in promoting dessert purchases. “Good servers explain desserts when telling guests about daily specials,” says Duke. “Sometimes guests want to know about dessert

first because it will determine whether they are going to order a big entrée and appetizer or a big entrée and a dessert. If presented well, a signature dessert suggestion at the beginning of the meal is a great way to sell desserts after the main meal.”

Duke offers these additional ideas to increase sales.

- Create and promote holiday desserts—a twist of peppermint or cinnamon added for December, green treats for St. Patrick’s Day and orange and black cupcakes for Halloween.
- Hold a holiday dessert tasting event—give guests the opportunity to sample all desserts so they buy next time they visit.
- Make desserts visual. Offer a decadent dessert with the final topping added at tableside—hot pralines over vanilla ice cream, for example, so other guests will feel compelled to order.
- Show off desserts. Have servers wheel out a dessert cart before the meal is served and tell guests to save room. Other diners will also see what kind of desserts are available.
- Hold fundraiser toy/food drives where guests donate a toy or canned food and receive a complimentary or discounted dessert. This builds goodwill and customer loyalty and lets restaurants show off their dessert menu to guests who would not normally buy.
- Hold employee contests where servers that sell the most desserts win tickets to a concert or movie.

Menu Consolidation

Chapman says that restaurants are tightening their menus in general so she suggests making the desserts stand out. “We’re seeing extreme desserts—ice cream sandwiches made out of Pop Tarts, for example. Restaurants are offering desserts in bundled meals—with an appetizer and an entrée—a value meal at a full service restaurant.”

Duke suggests up-selling desserts with wines as another means of increasing dessert sales. “Pair them at a special price,” she says. “Display a menu with paired desserts and wines and have servers make suggestions.”

Whether or not to order dessert is still more psychological than anything else. “We’ve found that 31 percent of consumers won’t order dessert unless someone else in their dining party will too. More than half (56 percent) of dessert buys are impulse purchases,” says Chapman. “Not so surprising, low-sugar dessert options are not trending up. Help guests act on their impulses—make your desserts sweet and delicious.”

Left: Jon Donaire Sampler Cheesecake

