Shanghai’s best desserts

From egg tarts to pavlovas, via cookies, cakes and cream puffs, Time Out presents your ultimate guide to the city’s sweeter side.

CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES (8RMB) at Marks & Spencer

These unapologetically heavy cookies leak oil right through the paper bag, but that’s the kind of moisture which gives these giant, flat pucks a wickedly soft, chewy bite and the perfect crumbly edge. Their intense sweetness and generous milk chocolate chunks left our office staff with satisfied, if guilty, grins on their faces – and an oily slick on their fingers. Despite many competitors, KK is still king.

CHICKEN & RICE CAKES (5RMB/THREE) at Shanghai Magnolia Bakery

For the time-trendy, these hearty, thick and chewy cookies are baked themselves, and following a family recipe because the difference is in the details, and our Guangdong office manager, who couldn’t stress using high quality ingredients, when our blind tasters unanimously voted for KFC’s egg tarts over the hometown favourite. ‘I’ve been tricked! Tricked!’ yelped our Guangdong office manager, who couldn’t believe she’d picked KFC over Lillian. Yet the fast-food chain won by a landslide thanks to a creamy egg filing and buttery, flaky pastry. Locations across town.

CHICKEN & RICE CAKES (5RMB) at Shanghai Magnolia Bakery

This 1937 recipe from Winston-Salem, North Carolina is a phenomenon that has spanned decades and international borders. The yeast based donuts must be eaten right out of the fryer for the magical combination of puffy interior and liquid sugar coating to meld on the tongue in a gratifyingly sinful duo of sugar and oil. Despite many competitors, KK is still king.

CHICKEN & RICE CAKES (5RMB) at Shanghai Magnolia Bakery

These traditional Japanese desserts made in the shape of sea bream are as delightful to look at as to eat. Our favourite versions of these custard filled cakes are sold from this tiny stall under an escalator in Metro City. Waffle-like batter is poured into moulds then pumped with a variety of fillings, both savoury and sweet, but our favourite is the thick chocolate custard with subtle vanilla tones. 81, Metro City, 1111 Zhaojiabang Lu, near Caicai (6170 9639; http://bytheco-op.com.cn). Open 10am-3pm daily. Xiujiahu

CRÈME PUFF WITH CHOCOLATE ICING (9RMB) at Beard Papa’s

So simple but so effective, the cream puff with chocolate topping is the ideal shopping trip indulgence – your teeth smash through choux pastry shell to meet gooey vanilla custard; it’s like a giant profiterole.

COCONUT TART (6RMB) at Tsai Wah

Just inside the door of bustling popular Hong Kong restaurant Tsai Wah is a small counter selling classic Cantonese pastries. We love their small coconut tart with crispy short crust pastry surrounding a fluffy coconut sponge cake that’s topped with half of a glace cherry. Simple and delicious.

COCONUT TART (6RMB) at Tsai Wah

20 years is how heavy it is – it’s nearly as big, as round, and as heavy as a baseball. Magnolia’s ‘sesame balls are incredibly chewy thanks to the quality sticky rice flour. Dense, sticky yet not too sweet – they’re the best version of this traditional sweet we’ve tasted. $10 Yuanxiao Lu, near Xingcheng Lu, Huangpu district (3668 2638). Open 11am-midnight daily.

COCONUT TART (6RMB) at Tsai Wah

Our blind tasters unanimously voted for KFC’s egg tarts over Lillian’s when baking. ‘We’re seriously convinced. www.striclycookies.com; Available at Pantry by the Co-op 90 Nan Yang Lu, near Xikang Lu, Jingan district (2255 7271; http://bytheco-op.com.cn). Open 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri; 8.30am-5pm Sat-Sun. Nan Yang Xi Lu,静安区南京西路近长乐路; 291 Fumin Bei Lu,静安区南京西路近石门一路号; 863 Nan Jing Xi Lu, near Shimen Yi Lu, Jingan district (6218 2558). Open 10am-10pm Sun-Thur; 10am-11pm Fri-Sat. No 31, 1725 Gonghexin Lu, near Yanchang Lu,闸北区共和新路近延长路; 291 Fumin Bei Lu,静安区共和新路近华山路; 1725 Nan Jing Xi Lu, near Changle Lu, Xuhui district (6170 3030). Open 10am-11pm midnight daily.

CREAM PUFF WITH CHOCOLATE ICING (9RMB) at Beard Papa’s

50 Best Dishes list for their glorious hongshao pork) and this desserts list. One portion provides three cakes, each delightfully encased in buttery, flaky pastry with a crunchy, sesame-seed underbelly. Bite in to release an ooz of goey molten durian custard. While the fruit has a reputation for smelling like old socks, even duriansophiles can be converted by this mild yet luxurious pastry.

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CARROT CAKE (16RMB/SLICE) at Baker & Spice

With two inches of moist, cinnamon-enriched, walnut-scattered sponge that’s neither too sweet nor too oily, plus a generous layer of orange zest icing that peaks in waves on top. Baker & Spice have created carrot cake perfection. The best carrot cake in town by a wide margin.

195 Anfu Lu, near Wulumuqi Lu, Xuhui district (6434 2733; www.bakerandspice.com.cn), Open 7am–10pm daily.

CHOCOLATE (and New York) cheese (with a ‘cake’ part in their product names) with an array of ingredients including Oreo cheese, buttermilk and slightly bitter. As the icing of matcha-flavoured soft serve melts, however, the mix sweetness slightly, and you can position your straw at different depths to slurp mouthfuls of creamy, rich matcha ice cream run off. The unsweetened rice balls are a purely textural complement, something to chew on, to eat with sticky rice balls at Nana’s spectacular parfaits complement, something to chew on, to eat everything at once.

185 Madang Lu, near Xingfu Lu, Changshu Lu, Huangpu district (6336 6899).

TARO ON SHAVED ICE (20RMB) at Xian Yu Xian

The queues are notorious. They stretch toward the door, or wind back and forth like waves on top, Baker & Spice have created carrot cake perfection. The best carrot cake in town by a wide margin.

195 Anfu Lu, near Wulumuqi Lu, Xuhui district (6434 2733; www.bakerandspice.com.cn), Open 7am–10pm daily.

BANANA ROTI PLANTA (25RMB) at Food Fusion

Food Fusion is one of the most popular destinations for South-East Asians in Shanghai searching for authentic home cuisine. Their banana roti planta contrasts crispy golden-brown fried roti with a layer of squishy banana running through the middle. The servings are generous and, when topped with a ball of vanilla ice cream (add 5RMB), makes for a mouth-watering melange of textures and temperatures. See Top 100, page 40, for details.

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ORANGE CHOCOLATE MUD CAKE (36RMB) at hof

While many cafes have tried to copy the hof formula, owner and experienced pastry chef Brian Tan’s exacting standards mean his desserts have little real competition. Of these, the tantalisingly moist orange chocolate mud cake has an almost cult-like following and is continually lauded as one of the best desserts in Shanghai. The dense cake (made with 64 per cent dark chocolate) is topped with a caramel glaze, candied orange rind and a sprinkling of sea salt that lends a surprise kick. See Top 100, page 43, for details.

DURIAN PENGAT (39RMB) at Tang Pin

Brian Tan’s newest dessert café is already eclipsing his madly popular hof with people lining up out the door for treats like durian pengat. Unlike some other durian entrants on this list, this is not mild, not subtle and not a good choice for that friend you want to convert to durian. However, if you are a fan of the pungent, creamy fruit, you have found your haven. To make it, the durian flesh is mashed with a spoon, mixed with coconut milk, sweet corn and nata de coco (coconut juice jelly) cubes for texture, and topped with durian ice cream. Brian Tan calls it ‘a double killer’. For durian wimps, Tang Pin still has to go.

CHOCOLATE ALMOND CAKE (35RMB) at Buttonwood

A chunky single square of milky cocoa cake layered with whole flakes of almonds, this dessert from newly opened hof-esque cafe Buttonwood is more of a brownie than a cake, but that doesn’t stop it being one of the most indulgent chocolate puddings on this list. The flaky crust is followed by a large plate with squiggles of chocolate sauce and flakes of chocolate sticking out on top, which Tan makes from in-house stone ground manna. To make it, the durian flesh is mushed and its purpose: to mop up the lip-smackingly delicious butterscotch that surrounds it.

TRIO CHOC MOUSSE CAKE (38RMB) at Choc Republic

This new temple to all chocolate-related confections has gone straight to the top of the chocolate cake charts with its trio chocolate mousse cake. Elegantly presented on a large plate with swirls of chocolate sauce and flakes of chocolate sticking out on top, the cake is three sturdy layers of milk, white and dark chocolate mousse on a thin cake base, sprinkled with a dusting of chocolate flake bits. Unadulterated chocolate goodness. 88 Yuyao Lu, near Hengfang Lu, Jingan district (5255 6893). Open 2pm- midnight daily.

UPSIDE DOWN (45RMB) at Whisk

With the tagline ‘chocolate has an almost cult-like following and is continually lauded as one of the best desserts in Shanghai’. Since opening last year, their typical dessert rebuilds it with a big serving of imagination. Created by Gordon Ramsay’s protégé Jason Atherton, Table No.1 has become known for its purpose: to mop up the lip-smackingly delicious butterscotch that surrounds it.

VANILLA BOURBON ICE CREAM WITH ESPRESSO AND CANDIED CORN FLAKES (60RMB) at Fulton Place

Despite the long name, this is a version of the traditional Italian dessert of ice cream and espresso called affogato, which means ‘drowned’. Fulton Place serves a gorgeous variation: oval dollops of vanilla and Four Roses bourbon ice cream and a single serving of hot Nespresso, poured ceremoniously tableside (usually) by restaurant owner Nat Alexander. The real surprise is the salty, sweet candied cornflakes scattered in the mix, creating a complex dessert that is at once sweet, bitter, salty and crunchy. Chef Marc Johnson puts it perfectly: ‘It’s a dessert good enough to have for breakfast.’ See Top 100, page 43, for details.

CHOC REPUBLIC has gone straight to the top of the chocolate cake charts with this trio chocolate mousse cake.

PEANUT SMOOTHIE (35RMB) at Charmant

This jumbo dessert is one of the most popular at Charmant, the go-to Taiwanese restaurant. The secret to the texture is the ice-making machine which pumps out soft airy crystals. There’s no cream in this dessert, the main ingredients are just peanut butter, peanuts (which they boil and chop daily) and water. Healthier than ice cream but just as juicy. See Top 100, page 42, for details.

CHOC REPUBLIC has gone straight to the top of the chocolate cake charts with this trio chocolate mousse cake.

STICKY DATE PUDDING WITH BUTTERSCOTCH SAUCE (58RMB) at Mr Willis

It’s devilishly sweet, but this tennis ball-sized island of soft sponge in a small reservoir of butterscotch sauce (which is covered in single cream once it arrives at your table), is irresistible. The light yet perfectly firm sponge only has a mild hint of date, but that just serves to reinforce its purpose: to mop up the lip-smackingly delicious butterscotch that surrounds it. See Top 100, page 44, for details.

WARM CHOCOLATE CAKE, SEASONAL FRUIT TEA AND WHITE CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM (63RMB) at Table No.1

Created by Gordon Ramsay’s protégé Jason Atherton, Table No.1 has become known for its unpretentious and innovative quality cooking since opening last year. Their typical dessert takes a classic dish, deconstructs it, then rebrands it with a big serving of imagination. This unconventional chocolate cake designed by chef Scott Melvin and pastry chef Kim Lye, who were recruited from Ramsay’s Maze in London, arrives with a toy-sized Perspex teapot filled with seasonal fruit tea (apricot on our latest visit). This is drizzled over the bitter chocolate and white ice cream tower that’s garnished with foamy ‘apricot air’ so light it evaporates on the tongue. The bitter chocolate slices through the natural sweetness of the apricot so well it’s a wonder this combination hasn’t been copied elsewhere. Table No.1’s ingredients are locally sourced so the fruit changes depending on the season. See Top 200, page 44, for details.

CHOC REPUBLIC has gone straight to the top of the chocolate cake charts with this trio chocolate mousse cake.
M’S VERY, VERY FAMOUS PAVLOVA (98RMB)
at M on the Bund

Australian owner Michelle Garnaut brought this dessert (pictured below) with her from the South Pacific, where it was invented. The oversized meringue with a wobbly centre was named after the elegant Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova when she travelled through the region with her own company in the 1920s. M’s version is a tall wedge piled even higher with fresh cream and fruits that may include pineapple, papaya, dragonfruit, kiwifruit (a nod to the dessert’s origins), and a single raspberry. The whole thing sits in a spill of passionfruit sauce. Pavlovas always smack of scientific experimentation, with the crunchy exterior transubstantiating as you near its centre. To some tastes, the texture of M’s pavlova changes a touch too quickly from its crisp, almost powdery crust to its cumulonimbus cloud centre without passing through that chewy sphere where angels fornicate. But we’re adherents. This is an outstanding dessert.

See Top 100, page 44, for details.

LEMON AND LEMON TART (100RMB)
at Mr & Mrs Bund

Paul Pairet’s lemon tart invention (pictured right) is at once simple and complex. It appears at the table like a single, shining, undisturbed lemon (pictured right). However, this lemon has been meticulously taken through the paces in the kitchen – all the innards have been scraped out through a tiny hole and it’s been simmered for six hours. Not once, but three times (yes, that means 18 hours). It’s then carefully tucked full of delicacies including lemon sorbet, sable, vanilla chantilly and jewel-like segments of lemon, lime, grapefruit and orange. Fork into it, place the candied peel and a collection of the fillings in your mouth, look skyward or close your eyes and you’ll think, yes, it was all worth it.

See Top 100, page 44, for details.

KAORI CAKE SELECTION (88RMB)
at Fount

Served on a flat, white ceramic sheet, the Kaori plate includes a matcha lava cake, an almond cream pudding, a thumb-sized cream puff on a rail of matcha powder, and scoops of green tea and mango ice cream served on beds of cookie crumbs. It’s a distinctly Japanese dessert set created by a chef who previously worked at Nobu and the InterContinental in Tokyo. The lava cake’s prevailing quality is its butteriness, which the bitter matcha flavour complements rather than overwhelms. Likewise, you can season the rich custard within with the perfect amount of green tea by dipping it in the matcha powder. The almond cream with diced fruit jam is a pleasant but quieter dessert, in marked contrast to the mango ice cream, which is almost synesthetic, its flavour as vibrant as its colour.

No 1, Bloug 5, Surpass Court, 570 Yongjia Lu, near Yueyang Lu, Xuhui district (6073 7788). Open 11.30am-2pm, 6-10pm daily.

Hengshan Lu. 日本料理 徐汇区永嘉路570号永嘉庭5号楼1号, 近岳阳路

BLACK FOREST CAKE (110RMB)
at Stillers

Chef Stefan Stiller’s artful, modern reboot of this classic from his native Germany (pictured above) is a potent reminder of what a straightforwardly devastating combo well-selected chocolate, cherries and cream can make – when done right, of course. He doesn’t wander too far from the original assembly with the Kirsch, a clear cherry brandy (also available here as a digestif, 120RMB), lending the cake that satisfyingly boozy, almond-bitter funk. It also serves to balance the sweet, dark Valrhona chocolate and cream with which Stiller creates a dense, fudge-like consistency instead of the foamy, squirt-cream rehashes you may have had before. Stiller spraycoats the whole cake with chocolate and serves it with Kirsch eau de vie-flavoured ice cream. From a pared-down list of only five afters, this is clearly his statement piece. And we’re smitten: full marks.

See Top 100, page 44, for details.

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