LATIN AMERICAN CUISINE

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“Waiter, what are these peas doing in my panna cotta?” That’s a response risk you take when you add vegetables (or pork rinds, fish skin or garlic) to dessert.

But it’s a risk many pastry chefs are undertaking, evidenced by the fact that savory desserts are among the top 20 hottest food trends, according to the National Restaurant Association’s “What’s Hot 2017 Culinary Forecast.” It may be one of the most chef-driven trends on the list, as customers surely aren’t clamoring for parsnip cake or jalapeño cornbread doughnuts.

Times are changing, for sure. Classical desserts and preparations can be overwhelming, and not the way people like to eat or the way they were raised, says Kaley Laird, executive pastry chef at Asheville, North Carolina’s Rhubarb and The Rhu cafe/bakery/pantry. She believes guests want to walk away from a meal, including the dessert, feeling as if they had a balanced meal, and not feeling they just ate something bad for them.

Thus, combining vegetables with common dessert ingredients appeals to a broader spectrum of guests—many who may not want something too sweet, Laird says.

Before launching into sweet and savory desserts, consider four mental approaches for inspiration and a way to explain unlikely ingredient pairings to guests.
In their prime, vegetables and sprouted grains have naturally enhanced sweetness. Find ways to bring that out, says John Shields, executive chef/co-owner of Smyth, Chicago. He once ran a simple rhubarb with spring onion dessert. “It was quite delicious and beautiful, with just a few ingredients,” he says. He served sweet rhubarb sorbet dressed with pieces of candied rose accompanied by pureed spring onions garnished with tiny pieces of candied onion petal and raw chive flowers.

For years, Shields and his wife Karen, co-owner/pastry chef, worked with the late Charlie Trotter, and Shields credits Trotter for being on the forefront of sweet and savory desserts back in the 1980s. Including seasonal vegetables in the dessert was to Trotter simply the natural conclusion of a cohesive menu—a sensibility carried forward at Smyth.

Back to peas and panna cotta. Late spring/early summer is the best time of year to bring the two together, says Laird. “Peas in their prime are super-sweet with great color and a unique flavor that blends well with and brightens other flavors, like apricots.” Besides apricots, her Sweet Pea Panna Cotta includes coffee and pea tendrils.

In June, the ground sprouts new herbs to forage for the dessert plate. Brian Mercury, executive pastry chef at Oak + Rowan, Boston, is fond of lovage with its intense celery flavor to pair with the sweetness of strawberries. The fruit also combines well with the pineapple flavor of wild chamomile (also called pineappleweed). He also is partial to a variety of bay leaf that grows near the Atlantic shore that he believes goes well with rose petals in desserts.

From a foraging point of view, Mercury believes the dessert trend favoring sweet and savory springs from the local movement. “It’s a way to utilize ingredients relative to the restaurant’s area,” he says.

In June, the combination of sugar snap peas or snow peas and asparagus is among the first spring vegetables to show up on the dessert plate at L’Etoile, Madison, Wisconsin, says pastry sous chef Phil Rodriguez. He likes to make asparagus consommé with snow pea sorbet garnished with local flowers. For the consommé, he adds simple syrup and light balsamic vinegar or white wine vinegar to asparagus puree.

### REIMAGINE THE FAMILIAR

Building on what already works is one play from the R&D toolbox that also could help the guest make the jump from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Rice pudding is one example. Charlie Trotter used to explore grains to replace the rice, Shields says.

In lieu of carrot cake, Thim Yee, pastry chef at Woods Hill Table, Concord, Massachusetts, makes parsnip cake. On a recent menu, he served it with white chocolate and ginger cremeux, caramelized pineapple, rosemary and buckwheat ice cream. He figured carrot cake was an American and Asian favorite, but he didn’t want to be like everyone else, says Shields, so he looked for something that could stand in for carrots.

In parsnips, he found greater sweetness that made the addition of cinnamon unnecessary. However, when he shredded the parsnips as he would carrots for carrot cake, there was no parsnip flavor. He solved the problem by peeling and sous viding the parsnips for three hours and leaving them to marinate in their own juices overnight. He then pureed the parsnips and folded the mixture into the cake batter. “The natural sweetness came through, and it was delicious,” he says.

Kim Rodgers, executive pastry chef at Hugo’s in Portland, Maine, sought to re-envision Waldorf salad for a dessert application. With lemon olive oil cake and cucumber ice cream as the foundation, she considered how she could work in the common Waldorf salad ingredients. Her conclusion was to add torn pieces of red butter lettuce, candied walnuts, shaved apple slices twisted into a cone, almost like a flower, and local green grapes juiced and turned into a foam. She also added Earl Grey mousseline, cucumber blossoms, lemon balm and Ruby Moon bean blossoms.

Reimagining the familiar in a savory way could be as simple as changing the cooking method. For strawberry shortcake, consider roasting or grilling the strawberries, instead. “Adding char and smoke makes you think of savoriness more than sweet,” Rodgers says.
SAVORY ELEMENTS

A few good savory ideas are worth their weight in sugar. Consider some of these:

1. Bring forward the sweetness of tomatoes in a frozen tomato mousse using a Pacojet. John Shields, executive chef/owner of Smyth, Chicago, cooks down, purees and freezes his favorite local tomatoes in a Pacojet with no added ingredients. It’s the base of his frozen tomato mousse with noyaux and spicy flowers that also includes candied tomatoes.

2. Turn cucumbers into a frozen dessert soup. Shields included green strawberry juice, cured green strawberries, rose geranium and broken vanilla marshmallows made with vanilla and fuscum flower frozen with liquid nitrogen.

3. Consider what pigs graze on (apples and hickory nuts in Wisconsin) and make it into a dessert. Phil Rodriguez, pastry sous chef at L’Etoile, Madison, Wisconsin, mixes local apple ice cream topped with hickory nuts, spiced pork rind and a delicate pork powder for an extra dose of umami.

4. Shortbread and a spice blender lead to many sweet and savory desserts at L’Etoile. Rodriguez toasts and blends espresso grounds with sugar to make a spice sugar topping. Sugar mixed and ground with lavender, thyme and/or sage makes a vibrant green dust for the dessert.

5. Make fun of odd pairings for a lighthearted marketing approach. Kamal Grant, owner of Atlanta-based Sublime Doughnuts, features a wheel of donuts on his Will It Doughnut YouTube channel, where he picks an odd ingredient to incorporate in a doughnut.

EXPLORE OTHER CULTURES

“The world is big. You’ll find lots of interesting ideas in other countries,” says Kamal Grant, owner of Sublime Doughnuts with two units in Atlanta. “Many cultures utilize items in desserts that we don’t. See what they are doing and implement some of it.”

Grant is from Malaysia, where red bean paste—and other beans—are commonly woven into desserts. In his trips to Thailand, he found that corn and ice cream is a popular pairing, noting that soft-serve ice cream at KFC in Thailand comes with a cream corn topping option. “It’s right up there with chocolate,” he says.

As she imagines desserts, Rodgers tries to think of ingredients that are used in both sweet and savory roles, such as coconut in Thailand’s popular tom kha gai soup that combines coconut milk with such other ingredients as galangal, lemongrass and fish sauce. “Knowing that they go together, how can I use some of those combinations and make something a bit more sweet instead of savory?” she asks.

The traditional Japanese savory seasoning miso can make a good substitute for salt in a sweet dessert. “I’ve used it as the salt or acid in a dessert,” Rodgers says. Knowing that the Japanese make great use of miso leads her to explore what else is common in that culture that she could apply it to.

Empowered by success, he regularly combines winning pairings, such as jalapeño cornbread doughnuts, chicken-and-waffle doughnuts (which he devised for Food Network’s “Incredible Edible America”) and salmon/lemon thyme doughnuts. For that one, knowing that fish, lemon and thyme go together, he made a lemon thyme icing and topped it with chunks of candied salmon.

Grant almost can get away with anything by now, he says. “Customers trust us. We haven’t let them down. I try things, and if it’s not good, I don’t put it out,” he says.

Trust may be the most important element of all. Before he puts out a sweet and savory dessert, Shields looks at it from the guests’ standpoint. ‘Is this pleasurable? Is this delicious? When they pick up the fork or spoon, will they say, ‘This is interesting,’ or will they say, ‘Wow, I want to keep eating this?’”

WORK WITH POPULAR PAIRINGS

A sweet and savory dessert isn’t such a stretch when at least two of the ingredients are recognized common pairings, providing a peanut-butter-and-jelly comfort level.

Grant with Sublime Doughnuts discovered, almost by accident, how ready customers were to experience sweet and savory when he sought to play a joke on April Fools’ Day nearly a decade ago. He decided to trick customers by devising savory doughnuts that looked sweet. For one, he reduced balsamic vinegar and salty caramel. The vinegar came out sweet and tangy, and combined with the salty caramel, the experiment was so successful that the salt-and-vinegar doughnut is still on the menu.

Cheese and bacon was his other surprising April Fools’ doughnut. He dipped a raised yeast doughnut in cheese sauce so it looked like orange icing, and placed candied bacon on top. “Customers loved it,” Grant says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) Ricotta cheesecake with sunchoke, fennel, maple and orange at Oak + Rowan, Boston. 2) Frozen tomato mousse, noyaux and spicy flowers at Smyth, Chicago. 3) Bayley Hazen Blue dessert with Bayley Hazen blue cheese, pomme soufflé, flax cracker, sea buckthorn berry, almond cream, celeriac ice cream, confit kumquat, celery leaf and micro mustard at Hugo’s, Portland, Maine.

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