

FINAL SCORES



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By Marvin Gentry, US Presswire

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From Payard Patisserie, photo by Rogério Voltan

### America gets just desserts

Neither diets nor costs have curbed our last indulgence — the great American dessert, 1-2, 6-7D

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SECTION D

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## Destinations & Diversions



### An eye toward tourism

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By Mick Cochran, USA TODAY

"I saw it in USA TODAY."

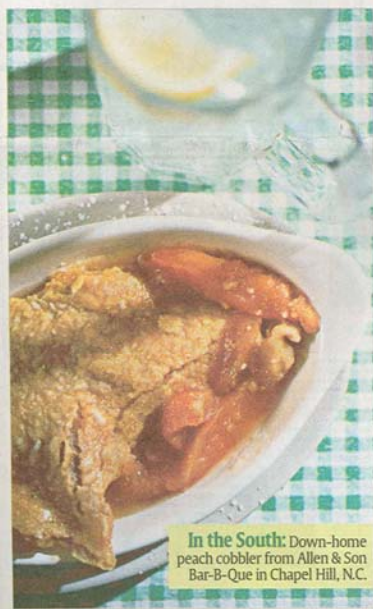
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**In Chicago:** Della Gossett's watermelon sorbet with sake gelée and cucumber at Charlie Trotter's.



**In the South:** Down-home peach cobbler from Allen & Son Bar-B-Que in Chapel Hill, N.C.

# Dessert

The last indulgence

### Americans forgo belt-tightening for far-out confections and flaky pastries

By Jerry Shriver, USA TODAY

The front line in America's battle to preserve its sanity, creative spirit and good cheer runs through places like Allen & Son Bar-B-Que in Chapel Hill, N.C., where regular customers know the menu will carry five or six pies, a half-dozen puddings and fruit cobblers, ice cream, cookies, and always, always the cream cheese pound cake with cream cheese icing.

It extends past Tartine Bakery & Café in San Francisco, where the morning pastry makers double up the Valrhona filling in the pain au chocolate. And it curlicues in front of Charlie Trotter's in Chicago.

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

#### More treats

**6-7D:** USA TODAY's Jerry Shriver takes you on a sweet, sweet tour.

**2D:** A Q&A with the crème de la crème of pastry chefs.

**Online:** View video of delectable desserts — and tell us your own favorites — at [travel.usatoday.com](http://travel.usatoday.com).

# Despite diets or budgets, America will always make room for dessert

Continued from 1D

where pastry chef Della Gossett wrestles purple Okinawan sweet potatoes away from the savory cooks so that she can spontaneously create a homage to Asian regional cuisine for the dessert menu.

No matter how tumultuous the times, the country's pastry chefs, confectioners, chocolatiers and dessert makers have your back (your middle, too). They are keepers of flames, breakers of rules, classicists, *artistes* and most of all hedonists, and they are enjoying their heyday in America's ongoing culinary revolution.

"The popularity of baking and pastry has never been greater," says Mark Erickson, dean of culinary and baking and pastry arts at the Culinary Institute of America. "It used to be a subset of culinary training, but now it's a (career) track within the profession itself."

When gas prices cracked the \$4-a-gallon barrier this summer and the bottom fell out of the housing market, the restaurant industry braced itself for the inevitable fallout. And it has arrived, according to anecdotal reports from restaurateurs in major markets. Customers are eating out a little less often, becoming more particular about where they dine, and are ordering more thrifflily when they do venture out. High-priced entrees and the second cocktail have taken hits, and diners are sharing dishes as never before.

But one segment appears to have suffered less than others: dessert. Those who normally soothe their sweet tooth are not skipping — not tonight.

"Even in a down-turned economy, dessert is an affordable luxury," says Alison Nelson, co-owner of two Chocolate Bar boutiques in New York City. "I think we still need to do things for ourselves and things that make us feel happier. If you're looking for a comfort food, dessert is one of those areas that people are going to turn to."

"We have people who look at the dessert menu before the regular menu so they can plan ahead," says Karen Barker, who with husband Ben owns and operates Magnolia Grill in Durham, N.C. At their upscale contemporary Southern restaurant, a steady 70% to 75% of their customers have ordered desserts since the restaurant opened 21 years ago. That's much higher than the industry norm of 40% to 50% for fine-dining restaurants, and is partly attributable to Karen's national reputation as a master baker. But the point is, Magnolia's figure has remained impervious to stock-market crashes and crash diets.

"We used to laugh about that because when everybody was no-carbing and low-carbing and all that, it didn't really affect our dessert percentage," says Karen. "It affected how much bread people ate, but they still ordered



By Bruce Flashnick for USA TODAY

**Big and tall:** Pastry chef Travis Shy displays his Branded Cherry Black Forest Cake outside Village Bakery in Mount Pleasant, S.C.



By Davis Turner for USA TODAY

**Homemade:** A waitress at Allen & Son Bar-B-Que in Chapel Hill, N.C., serves peach cobbler, apple cobbler and pecan pie.



By Jerry Shriver, USA TODAY

**Edgy but sweet:** Pastry chef Elizabeth Dahl of Boka in Chicago prepares buckwheat cannelé with honey ice cream, sorrel and Michigan blueberries.

## Baker's dozen of desserts

Who's counting? The nation's restaurant chains, whose websites list the calorie content of their popular desserts:

Dessert	Calories
<b>Sugar-free red gelatin,</b> Golden Corral	10
<b>Carrot cake,</b> Country Buffet	240
<b>Baked apple pie,</b> McDonald's	250
<b>Jelly-filled doughnut,</b> Dunkin' Donuts	270
<b>Single-scoop ice cream cone,</b> Hardee's	285
<b>Dutch apple pie,</b> Burger King	300
<b>Lemon pie,</b> Chick-Fil-A	350
<b>Banana nut pound cake,</b> Au Bon Pain	520
<b>M&amp;M Twisted Frosty,</b> Wendy's	560
<b>Mini white chocolate chunk sundae,</b> Uno Chicago Grill	660
<b>Peanut butter cup sundae,</b> Bob Evans Farms	816
<b>Banana split,</b> Denny's	894
<b>Double chocolate cake,</b> Ruby Tuesday's	955

dessert."

"I think people are going to do it no matter what," says Lally Brennan of Commander's Palace in New Orleans, who says about 75% of their customers order desserts. (Half of those orders are for the bread pudding soufflé, a best seller for nearly 30 years.) "People are eating smaller portions, and they want to be healthy, but there are certain things they don't want to give up."

Fortunately, lean times do not appear to have stifled creativity in the pastry world. Traditional desserts may be more prominent these days, particularly in the South and the heartland, but a scan of the menus at the country's top progressive restaurants reveals that boundary-pushing is thriving. ("There's only so much you can do with a nice piece of fish," explains pastry chef Ben Roche of Moto in Chicago, who tinkers with liquid nitrogen, science-fiction-themed palate cleansers and inside-out dream-sicles.)

Pastry chefs, who tend to be artistically inclined and design-oriented, are taking advantage of the technological innovations spawned by the experimental cuisine movement, employing all

manner of mind-blowing techniques and gadgets.

They're also catering to customers with ever-more-sophisticated palates who don't think it odd when Meg Galus of Tru in Chicago deconstructs a candy bar. Or when Roche sends out an "intergalactic dreamsicle" followed by an "alien space crash" palate cleanser. Or when Pichet Ong of P'ong in New York layers foie gras with bittersweet chocolate and pineapple.

### Ethereal indulgence

Unlike the timeless tall-cake parade at The Village Bakery in Mount Pleasant, S.C., and the classic cobblers and egg custards served at the Carriage House in Natchez, Miss., these edgy creations may exist just for a few moments, never to be nibbled again.

"A lot of my desserts, I don't think I'd ever redo them the next year," says pastry chef Elizabeth Dahl of Boka in Chicago. "I almost had to battle a customer the other day: 'Bring the corn flan back! Can't you do it? Can't you do it?' I'm sorry, I wanted to do something else with corn this time. I'm never going to grow as a pastry

chef if I have these same desserts all the time."

Running parallel with the traditionalists and the high-concept artists are the growing number of dessert makers who embrace the fresh/local/seasonal approach to ingredients that has been widely adopted by savory cooks.

In a recent survey of pastry chefs conducted by StarChefs.com, half of them said that 50% to 75% of their produce is sourced from a 50-mile radius.

"It's not about taking a magnificent product that's been handcrafted by a farmer and steaming or boiling it or roasting it or serving it simply," says chef Bruce Sherman of North Pond in Chicago, where some of the dessert ingredients come from a garden in the rear of the restaurant. "It's about molding it into something interesting, innovative in a way someone might not think about."

No matter what form it takes, be it strange, earthy or nostalgic, "dessert just brings out the kid in you," says Barker. "It's something that really makes people happy, and there are really very few people who are not dessert people. It's just a nice ending to the meal."

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— chef Bruce Sherman, North Pond in Chicago