

PASS IT ON TO YOUR CHEF!

WINNER'S KITCHEN

Interview with Dan Hunter,
Royal Mail Hotel

DEAL WITH IT

Labour costs
and staff management

DISH IT OUT

Chocolate desserts
a win-win solution that's sweet!

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MAGAZINE



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Paul Hewitt, Head Chef, P. J. Gallagher's Irish pub restaurant in Parramatta



Chocolate slab,
Piccalilly, The Battery Point, TAS

CHOCOLATE DESSERTS a win-win solution that's sweet!

“If in doubt, go for the chocolate option” may be on customers’ minds when they scan the dessert menu. It’s an option that chefs shouldn’t overlook either.

Despite everyone's obsession with dieting, fat and calories, restaurant customers haven't stopped ordering dessert. From family restaurants to fine dining, many guests feel the experience wouldn't be complete without an ice-cream, a piece of cake or a chocolate extravaganza. This is especially true in full-service establishments.

This is good news for operators. Desserts are based on lower-cost staples like sugar, flour, eggs, butter and cream, providing the opportunity for better profit margins in comparison to appetizers and entrees. And as we know chocolate wins the popularity contest again and again! OURHotel spoke about chocolate desserts to three well-known chefs.

Why chocolate desserts?

"I think 90% of our customers would buy a chocolate dessert because hey, who doesn't like chocolate? Chocolate desserts always sell very well!" enthuses Paul Hewitt, Head Chef from P. J. Gallagher's Irish pub restaurant in Parramatta. The pub was awarded Best Restaurant (City) in the 2009 Australian Hotels Association NSW Awards For Excellence. "It adds colour, richness, texture (both hard and soft), shape and interest to a dish; it's a very versatile ingredient," says Iain Todd from Piccalilly. The Battery Point, Hobart, restaurant was voted Best Overall Restaurant of 2008/2009 in the Tasmanian Hospitality Association Awards for Excellence. "My favourite chocolaty dishes are those where the chocolate has been lightened in texture so it melts away in the mouth," Todd says.

Managing the cost of chocolate as an ingredient

"Chocolate is and always will be a hit with diners," says Leigh McDivitt, Head Chef of the multi award-winning Restaurant in the 3 Weeds Hotel, Rozelle. It has two chef's hats from the Good Food Guide and was awarded Best Restaurant in a Pub 2009 from Australian Restaurant and Catering Association.

"And yes, good chocolate can be expensive. You must, of course, balance the costs of your ingredients so that you can make money. I couldn't sustain having a dish on my menu that didn't make money."

But he says the very high-perceived value of chocolate, at the same time makes it a perfect ingredient to produce a high rate of return. Piccalilly's Iain Todd agrees.

"The better the quality of the chocolate the more intense the flavour, so you can afford to use less in your recipes. As you mentioned, chocolate is a good seller, so you know you will move plenty of units," Todd says. "Buy chocolate in bulk and never waste it. Chocolate, as long as it remains uncontaminated, can be used again," he advises.

Paul Hewitt describes his approach to chocolate desserts: "Well, just like any dish, we weigh up the cost of all the ingredients and find the best price that not only is profitable, but is also value for money for our customers."

All the chefs agree that chocolate desserts will always sell. The trick is to find the right balance between cost of the produce and labour. Then the knowledge, experience and skills come into play.

Tips on working with chocolate

Skills and knowledge of the product's properties and behaviour are a must when working with chocolate. "You need to know what you are doing. Chocolate can be very tricky and takes skill and patience to achieve good results," warns Leigh McDivitt. "Using quality chocolate and having the right equipment does make the difference."





3 Weeds Hotel, Rozelle, NSW

Paul Hewitt gives chefs a few tips how to work with chocolate: "Work quite quickly as chocolate tends to go hard and lumpy if left out too long; never add cold ingredients to warm chocolate; don't melt chocolate over direct heat or it burns; and make sure all bowls and utensils are clean and dry before touching chocolate with them."

"Do your research," Iain Todd advises. "Ask for samples and taste the chocolate to decide which one suits you best for both price and intensity. Think about cocoa percentage and how that will affect bitterness or sweetness of the finished dish. Don't be afraid of it – it is easy with some understanding and practice."

Creativity with chocolate

Todd suggests using chocolate to release your creativity. "Think outside the box and be creative," he says. "Think about incorporating chocolate into other areas of the menu, but always be careful. If too much chocolate is used, it can ruin a dish just as much as it can improve one." OURHotel spotted an unusual dessert on Piccalilly's menu, so we asked him about it.

Your current dessert menu pairs unusual flavours together (for example dark chocolate ice cream, pear and parmesan salad and mint jelly), where do you find your inspirations?

"The creative process at Piccalilly involves the whole team; we discuss the dishes we would like to create and any ingredients we would like to see on the menu. We then trial the new dishes and manipulate them until they are what we are looking for," Todd explains.

"The chocolate ice-cream dish is comprised of flavours that work well together - chocolate, pears and mint is a classic combination. The Parmesan was added because it works so well with the pear. It adds salt to the dish, which is important, and gives it a more adult feel. Piccalilly's diners eat a large number of courses over a long period of time, it is important not to overload them with sugar."

Leigh McDivitt loves use of different textures in his chocolate desserts. One of his favorites in 3 Weeds is "Textures of chocolate with mandarin cigar and hazelnut praline."

While being creative with ingredients, he also takes a pragmatic approach. "We have found that we can be adventurous but must keep it real. I like to take a classic dessert and add on top of that my own take. And then, of course, price will always be the defining point."

Upselling desserts

"Selling desserts is an important part of running a profitable kitchen," Iain Todd reminds us. "Educate your staff by getting them to taste the desserts. For the cost of one or two portions, the people who can influence your guests' decisions can describe how lovely all the desserts are."

"Try and be diverse to suit various tastes, make some items less sugary and remember to include fruit. If only one person on the table feels like a dessert, they are likely to say no, so they're not the only one eating, but if there are more varied options on the menu to suit a range of tastes, you're on a winner!"

"For example, have some classic options and some more modern ones, use various methods of cookery to add interest to your menu. Look at interesting cheese for your cheese platter or offer petite fours with coffee to try and boost sales. Dessert can be petit fours. Cheese? Anything else?"

Paul Hewitt offers some straightforward advice on selling desserts. "Giving a good and proper description on the menu always helps, and taking into account customer feedback about what desserts they like to eat."

And also the coffee, the tea, and another glass of wine which people generally order to go with their dessert all add another opportunity to make a profit.