

Sugar rush

Jan 11th, 2015 | Category: [Food](#), [Slide News](#)

While health is increasingly an issue for Asian consumers, pleasure is still the priority when it comes to desserts, writes Jane Ram

Fashions come and go in desserts as with everything else. Asia's sweet tooth seems almost insatiable, although some conscientious chefs are trying to save sugarheads from themselves by making healthier desserts. Butter, sugar and cream are being reduced or sometimes completely omitted but with such skill that customers rarely notice or complain.

At the same time there's a new trend for ever fancier plating, painting dabs of this and that all over the plate as if to disguise the actual portion size.

Today's chefs must be increasingly mindful of the need to keep their food Facebook-friendly to ensure the best instant, free exposure as pictures go viral. For novelty and decorative impact Australian chef Shaun Hergatt is in a class of his own at Juni. New York's hottest boutique restaurant, Juni was awarded a Michelin star in October this year, only 18 months after opening. Hergatt creates memories for guests with a highly technical yet personal fine dining experience. His vibrant dishes relay the beauty of nature and often recall his childhood in remote Queensland.

Chocolate, fresh lovage (a sweet herb) and oats are the unlikely main ingredients of a recent creation that tops a milk chocolate ganache with a lovage wafer drizzled with dark chocolate glaze and toasted oat stout ice cream garnished with toasted lovage meringue. Another success story is Delicata, based on pickled ginger milk ice cream garnished with huckleberry compote (seasoned with cloves and orange rind). Hergatt makes cookie dough from dehydrated squash skin, seasoning it with salt and pepper.

Think creative

Pastry chefs in the Sri Lanka-based Jetwing hotels are encouraged to create their own signature desserts based on local ingredients. Chef Kennedy at Jetwing Blue works magic with coconut and jaggery plus croissant flakes. At Jetwing Beach chef Kalyanapriya turns local woodapple and honey into a sophisticated, sweet version of a local steamed coconut and rice speciality, pittu. The most complex dessert is the creation of chef Nalin at Jetwing Yala, who combines hot and cold elements into a miniature model of the local sand dunes.

Hong Kong's Ms B's cakery, which describes itself as the SAR's "bespoke cakery purveying Hong Kong's most unique cakes" offers 'the million dollar truffle cake', wrapped in 24-carat gold leaf and coins. At the same time, however, owner Bonnie Gokson is also doing good business with her more down-to-earth lines of gluten and/or sugar free cakes and cookies, using flour made from root vegetables and a German sugar substitute derived from beets.

Louis-Antoine Giroud, executive chef at IPC's newly-opened fine dining restaurant, Chefs' Table, mixes stevia juice and egg white to make a soft meringue topping for his signature 'blueberry tart revisited,' which uses fruit sweated for 12 hours with honey. The pastry shell is a crisp fluted wafer made from flour, egg and muscovado. He uses stevia – sweetener and sugar substitute extracted from the leaves of the plant species *Stevia rebaudiana* – and makes fresh fruit sherbets and pumpkin ice cream.

Healthy food is also important at Chiang Mai's 137 Pillars House resort. Executive chef Amporn Choeng-Ngam says in recent years he has become increasingly concerned about the excessive amount of fat and sugar in the average Thai diet. He has developed healthy dessert recipes using more fruit and natural sweeteners, Muscovado or coconut palm sugar.

Flavourings such as cinnamon create their own mouth feel, which greatly enhances some of his signature specialities including brown rice pudding. He uses tapioca and rice flour for bacon scones. "It is excellent news for us *bons vivants* that good food and good nutrition can be enjoyed together," he says.

Newly-opened Thai restaurant at Hong Kong's City Garden hotel, lives up to its name, Amazing, with its revival of some traditional Thai desserts, including baby coconut milk pudding and Thai iced milk tea with red beans. Meanwhile Will Meyrick's first Hong Kong venture, Mama San Restaurant & Bar, offers an inspired twist on some traditional Asian flavours in lemongrass panacotta with cucumber lime jelly served with citrus lemon basil sorbet.

Gordon Ramsay has also been creative with popular Asian flavours and ingredients at his newly opened Hong Kong Bread Street Kitchen: pineapple carpaccio, passion fruit and coconut sorbet are included on the menu.

Historical inspiration

Retro is the way forward for desserts, says Peter Marx, executive chef at Bintan's Sanchaya resort. He is a tireless innovator and trend watcher and finds himself moving towards more desserts with a homemade touch. As chefs become increasingly creative in their search for the perfect ingredient to make a perfect pudding, the sweet course at the end of a meal is gaining new popularity, he says.

"We cherish puddings for their sentimental value. Many restaurants and hotels, resorts and even coffee shops have at least one type of old fashioned pudding on their menu, albeit with some modern twists such as our molten bittersweet chocolate pudding with pink Himalayan sea salt paired with summer berries and mascarpone."

Marx is a self-confessed cookie addict and tries a new type almost every day. But he says he has long since tired of commercial mass-produced cookies with their samey taste.

"Nothing beats a home-style jumbo size 180-gram cookie made with wholemeal flour, Macadamia nuts and chunks of Callebaut chocolate. Crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside and slightly chewy, made one at a time by traditional methods using wholesome ingredients free from additives.

"There is no commercial product like it. This style of cookie is on the rise. You start to see display jars in many places and it is nearly irresistible to put your hand in the jar. They come with quite a hefty price tag but are worth it. Consumers are starting to look at quality not quantity and are more health conscious these days."

Marx adds that artisanal jams and premium ice creams are also increasingly creative.

"Ice cream is one of the biggest sellers among sweets in the market regardless of whether you live at the North Pole or in the tropics. Smaller ice cream parlours are opening up and producing high quality ice cream with endless combinations of nuts, fruits and pralines. It's a treat to go to places with something new to try. You come across different flavours geared to local taste buds in different parts of Asia.

"Sundried and dehydrated fruits are gaining popularity on account of their high nutritional value, long shelf life and versatility. Organic farmers are producing high quality fruit free of pesticides to meet the demand of today's healthy life style."

In the Italian fine dining restaurant Tosca at the Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong, Michelin-starred chef Pino Lavarra outdid himself in a recent five-course dinner menu for the 90th anniversary celebration of Italian jewellery house, Damiani. The high point of the evening was the dessert, chocolate ring hazelnuts with five-spice sauce, which replicated the hand-cut amethyst, citrine, madera quartz and prasiolite of the Tribute 1980's bracelet.

"The culinary preparations were complicated for this special menu," says chef Pino Lavarra. "On top of a good balance of taste and flavour pairings, everything served had to be picture-perfect."