

Delectable Desserts

Chefs show off fruit's sweet, sassy and seasonal virtues through desserts.

By Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann

Fruit desserts don't have to be predictable. Granted, no one will argue with the satiating qualities of apple pie. But playing around with unusual fruit pairings, such as herbs and fruit, artful presentations and exotic varieties will surely give diners yet another reason to order this delicious last course.

Many chefs let the seasons dictate what fruit they menu in their desserts. Highlighting seasonal fruits not only educates diners about local produce,

but it is more cost-effective. That's what Martin Rainbacher, pastry chef at Shrine Asian Kitchen in the MGM Grand at Foxwoods in Mashantucket, Conn., discovered after purchasing fruit from farm stands near his home. "When I pick my own fruit, I find the quality better and cheaper," he says.

Brian Olenjack, chef/owner of Olenjack's Grille, Arlington, Texas, agrees. He always keeps

seasonal fruits on hand to turn into dessert sauces or compotes. Blueberry compote becomes the bottom layer of lemon crème brûlée. He tops grilled pound cake with pineapple salsa prepared by combining cubed pineapple, mint, jalapeño, lime juice, brown sugar and Shiner Bock beer.

While he admits that cherries are his favorite dessert fruit,

This pear crème brûlée from Asher Miller is caramelized and dressed with ginger syrup.



Pear Bureau Northwest

Olenjack lets tomatoes star in his port-wine/tomato/cherry pie, where the filling consists of a mixture of cherry, oven-dried tomato, port wine, cinnamon, sugar and vanilla bean. "An oven-dried tomato has a natural sweetness reminiscent of a berry. The tomato's acidity helps balance the dish's flavor. It results in a nice combination coupled with port wine and tart," he says.

An artistic approach

Asher Miller, executive chef at 20.21 Restaurant & Bar, a Wolfgang Puck

restaurant at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, jokes that incorporating fruit into desserts "tricks us into thinking we're eating healthy."

"If you get a piece of fruit, and it's perfectly ripe—when it tastes the best—there aren't many recipes for dessert that can beat fruit," he says.

Miller accentuates ripe fruit's simplicity with artful preparations. "Lately, I've been brûléeing every fruit I see. I sprinkle sugar on star fruit, pineapple or mango

and go after it with a torch. It's very yummy with ice cream," he says.

Pear crème brûlée is an upscale example of Miller's brûléeing frenzy. He hollows out a pear that has been poached in white port wine, Riesling, sugar, bay leaves, peppercorns and vanilla, stuffs it with crème brûlée filling, then caramelizes and dresses it in ginger syrup.

"At the first restaurant I worked in, I messed around with the idea of filling pear with brûlée. I found that the crème

Pear Crème Brûlée

Asher Miller, Executive Chef
20.21 Wolfgang Puck
Minneapolis

Yield: 4 servings

4 Bosc pears
2 cups white port wine
2 cups Riesling wine
1½ cups + 2 T. granulated sugar,
divided
2 bay leaves
¾ t. black peppercorns
1 vanilla bean pod, divided
1 cup heavy cream
1 t. ground ginger
¼ t. vanilla extract
¼ t. salt
3 egg yolks
1 cup water
½ cup fresh ginger, peeled,
finely chopped

Granulated sugar, for service
Mint sprigs, for garnish
Crystallized ginger, for garnish

1) Peel pears, leaving stem and a little skin around tops. **2)** In large saucepan, add wines, ½ cup sugar, bay leaves, peppercorns and ½ vanilla bean pod; bring to a boil. Add pears; add a little water if needed to completely immerse them. Reduce heat; cover. Simmer until pears are just tender. **3)** Cool pears and liquid separately. Return pears to liquid; refrigerate until chilled. **4)** In medium saucepan, combine cream, 2 T. sugar, ground ginger, vanilla extract and salt. Bring to a simmer. **5)** Whisk egg yolks in small bowl. Whisk ½ cup hot cream mixture into yolks. Return yolks to pan. Whisk over very low heat until mixture starts to thicken (165°F-170°F). (Should coat back of spoon and leave line when

finger is run across spoon.) Strain through fine-mesh strainer. Refrigerate until cold. **6)** In small saucepan, combine 1 cup sugar, water, fresh ginger and remaining vanilla bean. Bring to a boil; simmer about 10 minutes until slightly reduced and syrupy. Strain. Chill. **7)** To serve: Remove pears from liquid; pat dry with paper towel. Cut bottom of pears if needed so they sit straight on plates. Using melon baller or paring knife, core pears from bottom, making small hole for crème brûlée. Fill pear with spoonful of crème brûlée. Place on serving plates. Sprinkle granulated sugar over pears. Using torch, caramelize sugared pears. Drizzle with ginger syrup; garnish with mint sprig and candied ginger. Serve immediately, passing remaining crème brûlée.

FLAVOR

brûlée filling turned to a delicious thick, oozy consistency if we mixed it and put it in the fridge to bake off later," Miller says. "Pears are so easy to work with—it's a no-brainer for desserts. They're sweet, they hold well when cooked. You can sear them in a hot pan or poach them long and slow. It's hard to mess them up."

Anaheim White House Restaurant in Anaheim, Calif., also finds dessert success with its stuffed pear. The Pera Cotta is a poached Bartlett pear stuffed with pistachio, almonds, walnuts and chocolate baked in puff pastry and served in chocolate and caramel sauces. "I wanted

to add a bit of flair by crisping the poached pear and adding chocolate and caramel flavors," says Bruno Serato, proprietor.

Serato finds that fruits combine well with creams, custards and tarts. "Fruit works ideally in and on tarts because their rich tastes and flavors work so well with others," he says. "While some fruits can really 'pop' with fresh flavor, others add subtle undertones and augment the tastes of other ingredients." Tarts ranging from apple, fruit and a retro chocolate/banana topped with caramelized banana and vanilla gelato round out Anaheim White House's tart selections.

Exotic possibilities

Adding rare and exotic fruits brightens any dessert menu, yet many chefs stick to recognizable fruits. That's a shame, says Robert Schueller, produce expert at Melissa's/World Variety Produce, Los Angeles. "Exotic fruits like cherimoya, dragon fruit and South African baby pineapple have great potential in desserts if given the chance."

Schueller recommends the wary convert unfamiliar fruits into sorbet or ice cream, or purée into cakes first. That's exactly what Petrus Moldovan, chef de cuisine at The Russian Tea Room, New York, does. "I turn new fruits into sorbet or ice cream

to see how they taste," he says. "Other times, I use fruit as the base and build around it by asking if it would make a good soup, sauté, fried or frozen dessert."

Moldovan transformed dragon fruit into sorbet and created a dragon fruit tart topped with dragon fruit mousse and foam. Lychee, he found, worked best fresh. "I tried cooking it once, and it wasn't very good," Moldovan says. Instead he layers julienned lychee between chocolate, raspberry and Thai basil jellies. He spruces up a fall citrus tart (made with blood oranges, grapefruit, orange and lime) with kumquat confit. To reduce the kumquat's inherent bitterness, Moldovan blanches kumquat segments in three different waters, then simmers in pomegranate juice and grenadine. He doesn't stop there. He'll roast kumquats with sugar, sauté them, caramelize them, or even dry and grind them into a "dust" to use as a dessert garnish.

At Sepia in Chicago, pastry chef Cindy Schuman brings the tropics to the Windy City with her mango rum soup. She perches frozen vanilla parfait (frozen vanilla mousse) and almond granola boasting coconut and oatmeal atop a soup made from puréed mango, simple syrup and Myers's Dark Rum. "I already had the mango and coconut, so I decided to add rum to make it more fun," she says.

Rainbacher uses passion fruit in his desserts so often that it's become a running joke in the Shrine kitchen. His signature chocolate passion fruit drops



Lyle Okihara Photography

The Anaheim White House fruit tart is a butter and sugar tart brushed with a thin layer of chocolate, filled with pastry cream and topped with an assortment of fresh fruit drizzled with an apricot glaze.



Melissa's/World Variety Produce

Exotics for your consideration

Cherimoya

- Description: green leathery-skinned, scaled exterior with a creamy-white, custardy flesh
- Tastes like: combination of pineapple, papaya, vanilla and banana
- Usage: add purée to mousse, compote or crème brûlée

Dragon fruit

- Description: this cactus fruit has magenta skin dotted with bright-lime-green spines, and spongy soft pulp similar in texture to a grainy kiwi
- Tastes like: cross between kiwi and pineapple
- Usage: in cakes, ice cream, mousse or sorbet

Quince

- Description: looks like a squatty pear, with whitish-yellow flesh that has the texture of a hard, underripe pear
- Tastes like: it's dry and astringent when uncooked, soft with a pear/pineapple fragrance when cooked

- Usage: braise, poach or combine in pies, cobblers or crisps. Underripe quinces are high in pectin and great for jam or jellies.

South African baby pineapple

- Description: 5-7 inches high, with golden flesh and exterior
- Tastes like: super-sweet pineapple with an edible core
- Usage: grill, sauté or use in baked goods, such as cakes

Passion fruit

- Description: round with purple-tinged brown skin that wrinkles when ripe; inside, crisp seeds are surrounded by a jelly-like yellow/green pulp
- Tastes like: combination of banana, guava, lime and honey
- Usage: use raw seeds, pulp and juice in cake fillings, pudding, frosting or Pavlova

Source: Melissa's Great Book of Produce (*John Wiley & Sons, 2006*), by Cathy Thomas

Dragon fruit tastes like a cross between kiwi and pineapple.

After smelling espresso liqueur next to components of a work-in-progress strawberry/ginger dessert, Moldovan created a wild strawberry and ginger soup topped with espresso meringue. He also advocates melding Asian spices with fruit. His popular hot plum crumble showcases sautéed plums, five-spice crumble and crystallized-ginger ice cream.

Rainbacher is also a fan of Asian-inspired fruit desserts. He recently plated plum ravioli (layers of plum wine gelée) with a five-spice bread pudding topped with melted marshmallow and orange/ginger mousse.

For spring, he's tinkering with rhubarb/strawberry combinations. "Maybe I'll make a strawberry tart with rhubarb compote. I'm also playing around with rhubarb-infused tofu with grilled rhubarb, strawberry and white asparagus," he says.

fill tempered chocolate with chocolate mousse and passion fruit gelée, built with passion fruit purée, sake and sugar. "I really like passion fruit," he says. "You don't want to use pure passion fruit. The flavor is too intense. Sake or white wine downplays the intensity."

He gets around passion fruit's high price tag, by purchasing passion fruit purée instead of whole fruit.

An unlikely marriage

Fruit's adaptability makes it a welcome partner for unusual ingredients. Schuman pairs fruit with herbs. While her flourless chocolate cake with orange/basil ice cream, orange/pecan nougatine and caramel syrup hasn't exactly won over her diners, she's not giving up. "Customers shy away from it. They're not comfortable with herbs in dessert. I keep pushing it. The basil complements the orange and chocolate so well," she says.

White asparagus? "Oh, yeah," Rainbacher says. "I have a few recipes for white asparagus ice cream."

That's a story for another time.

Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann is a freelance writer based in Louisville, Ky., and a former editor of Chef and Chef Educator Today.