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## Culinary Olympian talks trends in upscale desserts, from foam to flowers



MARY ELLEN WRIGHT | Staff Writer Oct 12, 2016



### THINKSTOCK

A trend in dessert plating is to scatter elements on the plate, such as in this mango and black currant dessert.

You've seen them on cooking shows such as "Top Chef." You've ordered them at higher-end restaurants.

They're the kind of fancy desserts that pastry chefs train for years to develop and make.

Chef Susan Notter knows a thing or two about what's trending in this class of dessert.



Not only is she the program director for the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, but she's about to leave for Erfurt, Germany, to compete in the International Exhibition of Culinary Art (known as the "culinary Olympics") with the American Culinary Foundation team.

Since October is National Dessert Month, and Friday is National Dessert Day, Notter talked earlier this week about the forces that have shaped modern desserts.

She's talking about the desserts that are served in upscale eateries, and the kind she makes at high-level cooking competitions.

(Notter has also appeared on Food Network cooking competition shows, including "Halloween Wars," "Cupcake Wars" and "Food Network Challenge.")

### **Molecular residue**

One of the most significant movements that's still affecting how upscale desserts are created and presented, Notter says, is molecular gastronomy.

This modern cooking style, which began to blossom 25 years ago, came out of a movement that focuses on the science of food. Molecular-style desserts are characterized by the use of technology and avant-garde presentations — fruit sauces turned into little spheres and other shapes through the use of binding agents like algae derivatives, for example.

“We were using foams, and encapsulating coulis (fruit and vegetable sauces), and using alginates and a lot of gum items for binding,” Notter says. “I think that has, trend-wise, kind of peaked. But it has left us with a lot of things that we still do.

“We’re still seeing the molecular, but I think it got a bit calmer,” she says.

Notter still makes foams that accompany other desserts, including more traditional elements on her dessert plates.

“For example, I’ve made a popcorn foam,” Notter says. “I will infuse popcorn into milk and strain it, and then from that make a pastry cream, and add some heavy cream and milk to it. And then I add flavorings.

“And then I put it in a whipped cream dispenser, put it under CO2 pressure, and then pipe it out, and it’s all nice and creamy and foamy,” she says.

“Often we’ll use a cognac to enhance a flavor — to take the popcorn flavor and make it more adult-friendly,” Notter says. “It has nostalgic flavors, but also adult flavors, too. Those flavors that take you back to childhood are always with us.”

Molecular gastronomy has also brought cotton candy out of the childhood carnival visit and onto the plate as “a little garnish or a nest on your dessert,” Notter adds.

“Another thing we’ve been doing recently is hibiscus foam,” she says. “I take hibiscus tea and then add some honey to it, and lecithin — which is an emulsifier — some gelatin and then a little bit of milk, and then we put almost a fish-tank aerator in it.”

That causes air to bubble up through the liquid, she says.

“We scoop off the bubbles on the top, which are really beautifully pink and little flavorful pops in your mouth, which can go on a dessert as a little color enhancement.”



Chef Susan Notter is headed for the international culinary Olympics in Germany.

#### PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL OF CULINARY ARTS

### **Add some flora**

Serving delicate little edible flowers and edible greens with desserts is also a trend, says Notter. She orders hers from a company in Ohio that grows them.

At the culinary Olympics, she'll be using a little edible fern called citrus lace that adds green color and a citrus taste. She also uses Egyptian star flowers, which, she says, add a burst of reddish or pink color.

“You add that to the plate and the color really pops.”

### **How it's served**

“Another trend is in dessert presentation,” Notter says, “which has more of a scattered, organic look to it. Things tend to be spread a little bit more. ... You wouldn't just put everything in the middle.”

Notter says one type of presentation involves visualizing a round plate as a clock face, starting at

“midnight.” Then, “you come down the plate on either side and spread your items out a little bit more.

“In between your components, you might have some sauce, or you might have some mini meringues crushed, or little pieces of cake or something,” she says.

“You’re seeing that style of plating, being a little more scattered — an organic, natural, less contrived look.

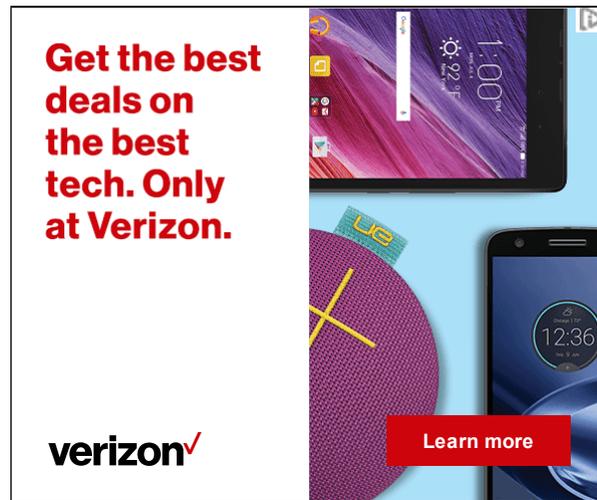
## Embracing trends

While the culinary school teaches the students the fundamentals of bread baking and pastry making, Notter says, sometimes the curriculum is expanded, based on dessert trends.

“A few years ago, everybody started doing layer cakes — we call them entremets — and you basically have a textured, crispy layer on the base, and you might have cake and then a mousse layer and then a cream or jelly insert, and this whole thing is glazed, with a very shiny glaze.

Notter notes the culinary school added glazing — including super-shiny mirror glazes — and the building of these layered cakes to the curriculum so the students would be ready to create these newly popular desserts.





## FLAVOR TIPS

Chef Susan Notter offers these tips for pairing flavors in sophisticated desserts.

- "I love to see where things grow," she says. "You could pair ingredients from (within) regions of the country."
- "We're coming in to fall, so we're going to get all the fall flavors, like the pumpkin and the spices. I always look at the drink selection that Starbucks comes out with. They're great flavor combinations and they've been researched and tested, and the consumers like them. You can base a dessert on those flavors."
- Notter recommends a book to her students called "The Flavor Bible: The Essential Guide to Culinary Creativity, Based on the Wisdom of America's Most Imaginative Chefs." You can look up a food, such as a fruit, she says, and read what goes well with it.

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## CHOCOLATE POT AU CREME



If you're willing to try turning your kitchen into that of an upscale restaurant, and your dessert course into a dream for your family or guests, you might want to try Chef Susan Notter's recipe for Chocolate Pots de Creme.

Notter puts together three different elements — a chocolate creme, a spiced cookie and a wine-flavored gelee — and then garnishes the dessert with whipped cream and a macaron.

### **CHOCOLATE POT AU CREME**

Ingredients for the creme:

- 800 grams heavy cream
- 400 grams whole milk
- 16 egg yolks
- 160 grams sugar
- 240 grams milk chocolate
- 2 whole hot peppers

Directions: Bring the cream and milk to a boil. Steep peppers. Set aside.

Bring the cream to a boil again.

Whisk yolks and sugar together.

Strain the boiled cream over the eggs and make an anglaise. Pour over the chocolate to melt.

Pour into containers and bake, covered, in a water bath at 360 degrees until set.

### **SPECULOOS (spiced cookies)**

Ingredients:

- 120 grams brown sugar
- 80 grams butter
- 80 grams flour
- 48 grams egg whites
- 10 grams Speculoos spices
- 1 grams salt

Directions: Combine all ingredients. Spread between two silpats (baking mats).

Freeze overnight. Bake at 320 degrees for 12-15 minutes.

### **ICE WINE GELEE**

Ingredients:

- 8 ounces ice wine
- 40 grams water
- 2 sheets of gelatin

Directions: Bloom gelatin in ice-cold water. Bring water and ice wine to a simmer.

Add bloomed gelatin and chill.

- Assembly of the dessert: The chocolate creme is the base layer and the gelee is poured on top when it is cold. The speculoos is scattered in the middle; you could also use a crushed spice cookie.
- Suggested garnishes: Whipped cream and a colorful macaron, available at pastry shops and restaurants.

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