

Sweet Companions

Entice diners to order something sweet by going beyond the usual presentations

The economic downturn of the past five years has squeezed restaurants' bottom lines. But no category has suffered more than desserts—the indulgent finale to a great meal out. To lure diners into staying put, operators have had to dream up creative ways to trigger dessert purchases.

Fine-dining full-service restaurants, where price isn't usually a consideration, have long paired after-dinner wines and cordials with desserts. But a new and increasingly mainstream approach serves classic and imaginative sweets in fresh, modern ways. Now, artisan beer is stepping up to the dessert plate. Dessert "flight" offerings are becoming a thing, and some chefs are pairing desserts with craft beer.

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What factors drive dessert sales in casual-dining restaurants? A recent survey by Culinary Visions polled consumers who'd ordered dessert within the past month from casual-dining restaurants. Their findings include:

More than one third of female consumers said they consider dessert before they order their main course—to make sure they save room.

20 percent of men said they choose a restaurant that sells a dessert they crave.

Older Millennials (ages 31-36) order desserts more frequently than any other age group.

Of consumers' favorite flavor profiles, 71 percent said sweet desserts topped their list, followed by sweet/savory (49 percent) and bitter/sweet (47 percent).

Chocolate wins by a mile; eight out of 10 dessert buyers prefer it. Caramel and vanilla tied for second place at 56 percent. Some 41 percent of diners said nut-flavored desserts were their top choice.

Nearly half of consumers said fruit ingredients helped sway their dessert choice. And, of them, more than two-thirds ranked strawberry as their favorite flavor. Raspberry (48 percent) and apple (45 percent) weren't far behind.

Capturing a sale was more likely if it included an interesting or new flavor profile (81 percent), if it was shareable (76 percent) or it included a dessert flight (72 percent). Mini desserts swayed 63 percent of diners, too.

Read "Sweet Companions" to learn more on how to entice diners to order something sweet.

"Though there are some gender roles attached to beer that are completely baseless, it's still perceived as a masculine beverage," says certified cicerone Mike Reis, based in Oakland, Calif. "The fact is, everybody is intrigued by the world of beer. If they see a beer and food pairing, they might take notice."