

September 2002

Food Product

DESIGN™

FOODSERVICE FOCUS

Sweet Indulgences

By Deborah Silver
Contributing Editor

Chocolate-truffle cake. Dulce de leche tart. White-chocolate raspberry cheesecake. Caramel-apple tart. Such sweet treats once were the exclusive domain of high-end restaurants, where in-house pastry chefs specialized in creating sumptuous desserts daily. No longer. Today many chain-restaurant menus offer these delicacies, which have become top sellers and a way to keep customers coming back for more.

"Consumers are not only eating out more these days, they're eating out with a more sophisticated palate," says Michael Goldstein, vice president of R&D and quality assurance for Love and Quiches Desserts in Freeport, NY. "As a result, they want a dessert menu that offers variety, flavor, eye appeal and quality. Offering plain and simple desserts just won't do anymore."

But while chain restaurants recognize the need for upgraded dessert rosters, they also know that the cost to hire a chef to create high-end sweets is prohibitive on a regional or unit basis. In addition, the volume of customers that chain restaurants serve daily makes any menu item's ease of execution of the utmost importance. For desserts, the ideal item requires only plating and serving. As a result, chains are turning increasingly to premade products to fill the demand for upscale dessert fare.

"There's been a trickle-down effect from white-tablecloth establishments and restaurants on the coasts to chain eateries," says Hilliard Creath, research and development chef for Popeye's Chicken & Biscuits, Atlanta. "Our customers want desserts with finesse, and it's our job to give them that – but in a cost-effective and efficient manner."

Brand power

The dining industry has found one of the best ways to provide high-end desserts is by partnering with proven brands. "Top brands are a lifeline to innovation," says Burton Stapp, director of operations at Wild Jack's Steaks & BBQ, a trio of 250-seat restaurants in Orlando, FL. "They have the biggest R&D capabilities of anyone out there, and restaurants get the benefit of that. We decided to create relationships with the best brands in the industry, so they'll come to us first with new ideas and tests. Our brokers are also involved in recruiting the involvement of top brands and in positioning our operation as a desirable foodservice partner."

Wild Jack's has developed a relationship with Reading, PA-based Sweet Street Desserts, a supplier of gourmet desserts to more than 70 distributors across North America. That bond boosted the

frequency of dessert purchases at Wild Jack's by more than 2%, to more than 11% overall, in the first 10 weeks that it served the brand.

Stapp credits his distributors with advancing Wild Jack's brand relationships. "Distributors can't afford to have their reps just be order-takers. Restaurants must make reps know their concepts and what they're reaching for. There are so many new product rollouts, and it's so important that operators have them," he says.

Arlene Spiegel, president of New York-based consulting firm Arlene Spiegel & Associates, believes the key ingredient of a preferred brand is simple. "The brand has to have my best interest in mind. Can (the manufacturer) develop products of a particular portion size, deliver in ways that make it easy for my staff to plate, price it so I can easily make a profit, and offer a customer-service process that makes it easy for me to order and receive (the branded product)?"

Spiegel contends that the best brands share three common traits: they dominate a category by refining and perfecting no more than a handful of products; they make sure that the branded product is easy to prepare; and they sell the product in institutional sizes for back-of-the-house, as well as in retail size for private-label, front-of-the-house sales.

"Savvy operators today are constantly in search of brands like these that enable them to run better restaurants," says Spiegel. "They realize they can enhance their image by showcasing that they use the highest-quality brands. They appreciate and recognize that their guests are brand-centric."

She also notes the importance of the distributor's role in the brand-operator relationship. "Many wonderful products aren't user-friendly because they don't have good distributors," says Spiegel. "If I specify product, but distribution isn't wide enough, I can't spec it."

The most-successful brands look at trends in the foodservice industry and develop products that reflect those directions. Sweet Street, for example, recognized the growing popularity of wrapped food and translated it into a dessert brand name, Xangos. The dessert, which consists of cheesecake wrapped in a pastry tortilla that is fried and then dusted with cinnamon sugar, now comes in four cheesecake flavors: original, chocolate marble, lemon and banana caramel.

But no matter what the dessert, one factor holds true for every restaurateur that purchases one of Sweet Street's products.

continued