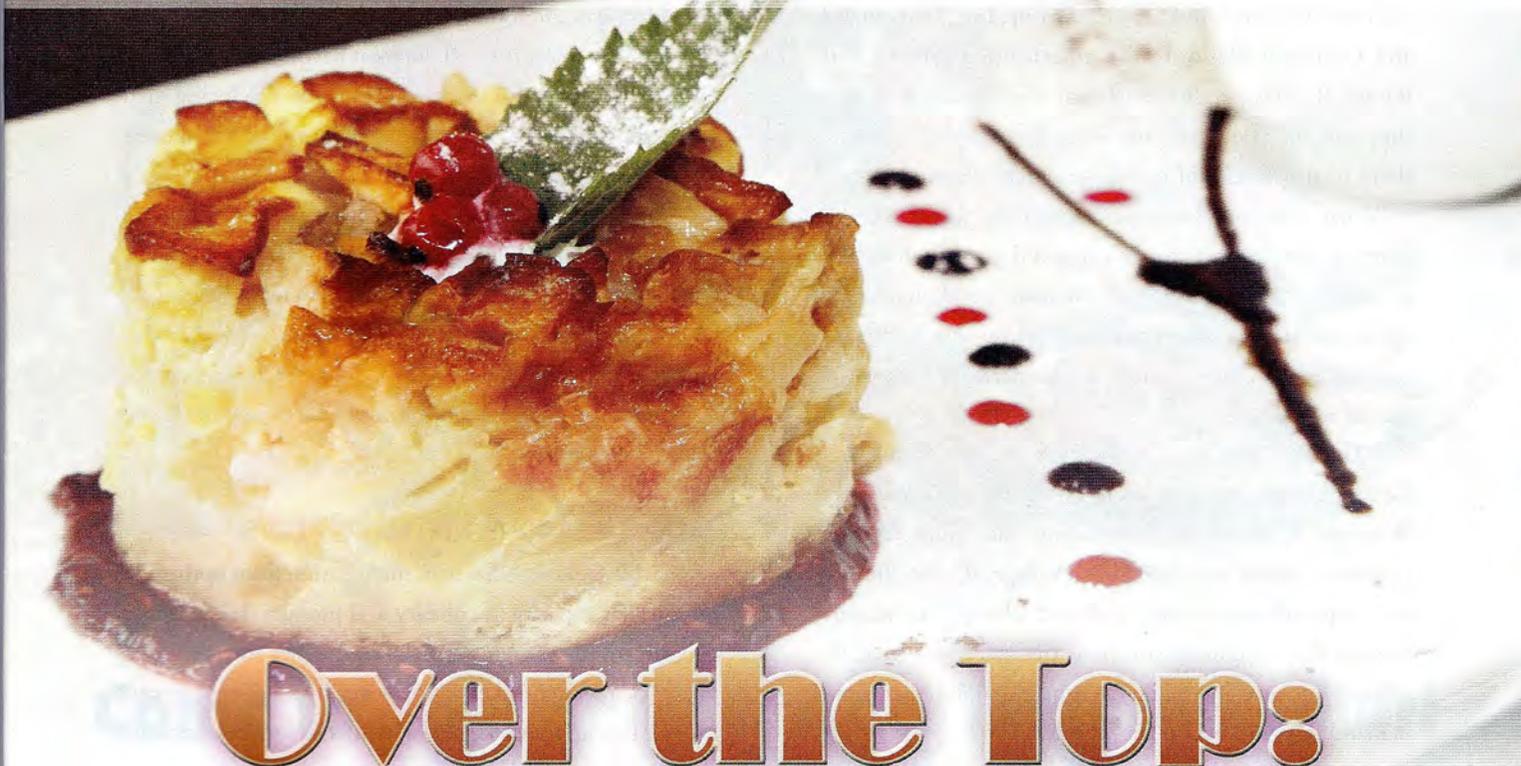


Executive Summary

▶ A look at the sweet market for manufactured desserts and prepared mixes.

▶ Ingredients that help convey the perception of a natural, upscale gourmet dessert.

▶ Using intermediate products for consistent results and lower costs.



Over the Top:

Giving Dessert the Gourmet Treatment

BY KIMBERLY J. DECKER

Contributing Editor

Just when you thought the gourmet cupcake was running down the clock on its 15 minutes of fame, the collected cravings of a nation swoop in to reset the timer. It's been more than a decade since Carrie Bradshaw made the dainty pink pastry a status symbol for fashionistas and gastronomes alike, but the specialty cupcake boutiques that continue to colonize tony shopping boulevards across the country suggest that this "trend" is now the ordinary state of play.

But cupcakes have company. Though the NPD Group, Chicago, says Americans bought 669.4 million of the diminutive baked goods between October 2010 and October 2011, the research firm caught us ordering fully 722 million servings of pie in 2010 alone. As for how many French macarons, designer doughnuts, artisanal lollipops and "frosting shots" we're downing, the numbers aren't in yet, but when they arrive, they could be equally notable—or shocking.

It's just proof that Americans always save room for dessert, even when saving anything is a struggle. For despite—or perhaps because of—the down economy, our appetite for sweet indulgences remains robust. And "indulgence" is the operative word: If we're going to splurge on dessert, it had better look, feel and taste like something special. Thanks to the creativity and formulation know-how of manufacturers, today's desserts can.

Sweet surprises

Part of the appeal of "gourmet" or "artisanal" desserts is telegraphed by the name: These are handcrafted items made fresh for you with top-of-the-line ingredients. Except, that is, when they're not. And lately, that's been a lot of the time.

Consumers have been outsourcing dessert production for years, thanks to a wholesale decay in culinary skills and the ease of prepared options. And when they're in the market

for something fancy, leaving it up to the pros becomes even more imperative. As Walter S. Zuromski, president and culinary director, Chef Services Group, Inc., Lincoln, RI, and a culinary advisor to the American Egg Board, Park Ridge, IL, says, consumers “want the elaborate desserts they see on television, but they’re unable to produce them to that level and so must purchase them in stores.”

What may surprise those consumers, though, is that many of the elegant princess cakes and summer-fruit tarts in their upscale bakery cases, or even on their favorite restaurant menus, aren’t made in-house either, but are outsourced, as well—whole or in part, and often for similar reasons.

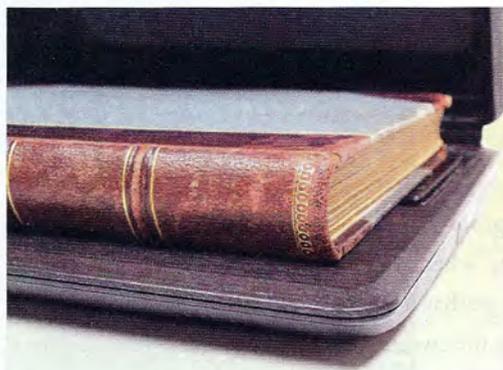
“The skill level just isn’t as high in these final selling locations as it might’ve been 20 or 30 years ago,” says Winston A. Boyd, vice president and chief chemist, Lawrence Foods, Inc., Elk Grove Village, IL. “So the way you approach assembling a dessert changes to accommodate the equipment you have, the space you have, the storage you have, the skill set you have—and the customer demand in your neck of the woods.”

Debbie Marchok, vice president of marketing, The Eli’s Cheesecake Company, Chicago, believes that variety also drives retailers and foodservice operators to serve prepared desserts. “We make over 50 different flavors of cheesecake,” she says. “Each one has its own personality.” Producing such a selection in-house would be prohibitive to all but the most specialized operations.

Ultimately, it’s cost that’s been most pivotal in shifting industry toward manufactured desserts or prepared mixes. Craig Nielsen, CEO, Nielsen-Massey Vanillas, Waukegan, IL, says this is particularly so in foodservice, where the need for packaged, ready-made items is “very widespread, especially with the present economy and pastry chefs being the first downsized in a restaurant.”

Lemons into lemon bars

Martha Geiseman has seen the situation from both ends, both in her capacity as culinary and product development coordinator at Lawrence Foods, and in her former life as owner of a scratch bakery “for longer than I’d want to say.” On her first in-store assignment with a Lawrence customer,



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she recalls, “I knew what I was supposed to do with our product, but once I got into the back and looked at their operational setup, I said, ‘This isn’t a bakery.’”

Why? It’s not unusual for stores to lack mixers, proofers, doughnut fryers, significant storage space—even, in some cases, ovens. “But that’s not stopping some really great in-store bakeries,” Geiseman says. “They can still get an excellent product [from a manufacturer] and make it gourmet in the store—fill it with unusual fillings or decorate it differently. So craftsmanship is definitely involved.”



Photo: Ellis Cheesecake

John Namy, vice president of applications for desserts, Kerry Ingredients & Flavors, Beloit, WI, notes, “Packaged and ready-made gourmet desserts have come a long way in recent years.” And their improvement, he believes, parallels that of packaged foods as a whole. “Looking back at the traditional ‘TV dinner’ and how it has evolved over the years provides a good indicator of how packaged, ready-made desserts will evolve,” he says. “Premium, restaurant-quality frozen and ready-to-eat (RTE) meals have really paved the way for RTE desserts to become more commonplace and successful.”

Balancing wish with reality

The secret behind their success is food science soundly deployed. “With improvements in technology, dessert manufacturers have the ability to produce upscale gourmet desserts on a larger scale,” says Courtney LeDrew, marketing manager, cocoa and chocolate, Cargill, Lititz, PA. They just have to know when to lean on tech, and when to leave well enough alone.

Balancing the wish list with reality is “situational, depending on what you’re delivering,” Boyd says. “For instance, if you’re running a gourmet cupcake shop and you expect your cupcakes to sell out the day you make them, you can make a very nice, good-tasting buttercream icing using butter and fondant and powdered sugar and natural vanilla extract.”

But spread that buttercream on a cake that “might sit in a display case for a week, 10 days or longer”—or, better yet, freeze the cake and ship it to the shops in your chain—and “now you’re dealing with stresses on those natural ingredients where they’re perhaps not quite so robust in dealing with those situations,” Boyd says. This “is where the science and technology side of food comes in,” he says.

Boyd speaks of “pulling the right levers to get things to work.” Those levers may be functional ingredients, careful processing, packaging schemes or otherwise. “You can view this all as a continuum,” he says. “You can go from 100%-natural, handmade-from-scratch all the way to something that’s stamped out of a machine from all-synthetic ingredients. The trick is to balance those qualities that you need against the levers that you can successfully pull.”

A natural fit

When pulling the ingredient lever, we have to reinforce consumers’ perceptions of what qualifies as “gourmet” while attaining enough processing and long-term functionality to make the dessert practical. That can be challenging when the concept of “gourmet” overlaps so much with that of “natural.” As Namy says: “The words ‘all-natural’ give consumers comfort and make them feel good about what they’re eating. When it comes to desserts, the all-natural claim can provide instant credibility, as it promotes the perception of homemade or made-from-scratch.”

Consumers expect a gourmet dessert to contain the kinds of “stuff” they stock in their own pantries. In some cases, that’s easier (if not necessarily less expensive) than others, as when working with chocolate, eggs, sugar and butter—all of which are longtime staples in home kitchens and in industry. Nielsen notes that some premium ingredients can “very easily” accommodate industrial production, such as pure vanilla, which, he says, “adds very little additional cost to a product but can create a product dramatically different in flavor from an artificial vanilla.”

Diana Moles, vice president, research and development, Eli's, says that "having clean ingredient legends was really part of our thinking of gourmet." Thus, her team "worked for a good year with a vendor" to develop and fine-tune an all-natural cultured sour cream for their cheesecakes. "We got it to the consistency where we can work it into a large batch without it turning slacky or loose—and all without any artificial stabilizers." The product takes 18 hours to culture, but is worth the effort, she says, for the "wonderful characteristics of acidity, tang and cultured flavor" it adds.

Fruit is another ingredient with solid consumer acceptance and processing practicality. Notes Thomas J. Payne, industry specialist, U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council, Folsom, CA: "Blueberries are a gourmet ingredient that works especially well in packaged desserts. In part, this is because the interest in 'natural' over 'artificial' ingredients has food manufacturers looking for real sources of color and flavor. It's also because there are blueberry powders, fibers, concentrates, purées and even versatile formats like osmotically preserved blueberries that allow bakers to use them in a variety of ways."

Payne says concentrates and purées act as coloring and flavoring agents, and their low pH "provides tangy flavor and helps improve storage stability." Available year round, they "may be produced to meet manufacturer specifications," he says. Sweetened blueberries work as fillings in pies, cakes, pastries and tarts. Fresh or frozen blueberries "are great in mini pastries and cupcakes," he continues. To prevent blue batters, he advises coating the berries with flour or starch to soak up excess juice. "And if they're frozen, fold blueberries into the batter, avoid over-mixing and bake immediately," he says. Adding the berries while still frozen also produces less breakage.

Tell your story

Blueberries evoke a "sense of place" or *terroir*—the latter a term borrowed from the wine world to describe the influence of geography on a food's sensory qualities. This association with "locality" holds tremendous appeal in the upscale market, as "more and more consumers desire to know the story behind the food they're eating and want to be aware of ingredient provenance," LeDrew says.

Other ingredients with a "story" include almonds from California, which "has a strong reputation for high-quality and safe products," says Harbinder Maan, manager, North America ingredient and category marketing, Almond Board of California, Modesto, CA. Although the state yields a bountiful supply of almonds, they "remain a distinctively luxurious ingredient that consistently brings new life to gourmet desserts and sweets," she says. And, because almonds "are available in more forms than any other nut," including sliced, roasted, diced, blanched and more, "the creative possibilities are endless," she says.

The 21st-century pantry

While gourmet dessert makers strive to keep ingredients familiar and labels brief, Zuromski points out that "'all-natural' is not synonymous with fresh, high-quality or fine ingredients." Formulating with all-natural ingredients may strengthen a product's upscale image, he notes, "but their presence alone does not produce a gourmet dessert."

Indeed, even with an ingredient legend that Grandma could grasp, no gourmet dessert will remain "gourmet" for long if the rigors of extended storage or distribution chip away at its quality. For example, "The toughest thing

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about cakes, tortes and classic baked goods is preserving texture,” Zuromski says. Old-fashioned sugar and fat can tenderize and improve crumb quality by delaying the recrystallization of gelatinized starch that leads to staling. And eggs, whose yolks are rich in natural emulsifiers, can tenderize and add moisture.

But if these basics aren't enough, you'll need help from more advanced ingredients. Hydrocolloids, enzymes and high-performance emulsifiers can extend the fresh texture of cakes and pastries individually and in combination—sometimes preventing staling for weeks. But, says Kathy Koszuta, marketing services specialist, ADM Cocoa, Milwaukee, “It's important to understand the synergies of these ingredients in a particular application and under particular processing conditions for optimum effect. Also, one should consider that while you may achieve the effect of a moister product, water activity may still be very high, with the risk of bacterial growth.”

Stabilizing whipped cream and foams also requires ingredient ingenuity. “Eggs foam naturally,” Zuromski notes, “but a stabilizer like sodium lauryl sulfate added to egg white as a whipping aid can produce more aeration and bubbles.” The same high-whip egg whites also strengthen the matrix of creme and mousse fillings, “so the mousse or filling will have more stability,” he adds. Enzyme-modified yolk can create more stability within the filling “so that it does not leech as much into the baked good,” he says.

Incorporating stabilizers into cremes and custards can keep them smooth and fluffy under frozen storage, Namy adds, noting that “there are also stabilizers that function to reduce or eliminate moisture migration to crunchy ingredient components during the freeze/thaw cycle.”

Controlling moisture migration is a critical goal when designing desserts for the freezer—which, in many respects, is an ideal place to keep them. Laurel Boger, executive pastry chef, Eli's, believes “cheesecake is a wonderful dessert for frozen manufacturing. It's in the custard family—similar to ice cream in how it functions. And the mixing is similar on a large or small scale.” In fact, she's discovered that mixing at bigger batch sizes actually produces “better aeration and texture. I was amazed at the texture we could get with just a basic mixer with a paddle and scraper—very silky. And it still has very simple ingredients.”



Photo: Almond Board of California

Respect the ingredient

Simple, yes—but not Stone Age. Case in point: Moles says the company uses a cream cheese formulated “just for us” with hydrocolloids to improve freeze/thaw stability over the cheesecakes’ six-month frozen lifespan.

While functional ingredients like these can maintain gourmet quality, Koszuta points out that “‘maintain’ is the key word. Good processing practices and procedures must first exist to create a good quality crumb, or a smooth filling. Any time a formula is ‘tweaked’ toward achieving one aspect, something else usually suffers or, at best, changes. Therefore, it is always a balancing act between wants and needs.”

The “No. 1 key,” Koszuta says, is to “respect ingredients for their quality. Give consideration to their source, correct handling, proper storage and processing.” Past experience convinces her that many of the challenges manufacturers face take root at the “front end of production, during planning, ordering and receiving.” And when inattention leads to inadvertently sacrificing pricey ingredients, it “has a much greater impact than the same waste or loss with lower-cost materials,” she adds.

All in the mix

Manufacturers can simplify the whole process with “intermediate products,” Koszuta notes. “Ingredients, such as concentrates, bases, mixes, premade batters and so on, offer not only the opportunity for time savings in production,” she says, “but can be implemented with reduced labor costs of lesser-skilled workers and provide greater consistency.” And in an era when jealous defense of intellectual property is common, such products “offer protection by not giving employees—or even co-manufacturers—access to formula details where customized private-label intermediates are used,” she adds.

More likely, mixes and preblended ingredients simply leave users fewer variables to mess up—like batch weights and ingredients ratios in dry blends—and thus remove margin for error and let manufacturers “focus more of their attention on the finished product,” Namy says.

And that’s what they’re doing. “You can still take a prepared mix and add your own twist to it,” Geiseman says. “You can put a unique flavoring system in there. You can use real butter if it works in the procedure. So even though you’re buying a product that’s premade, the end customer can still make it their own with the finishing touches.” This gives manufacturers “the best of all worlds,” she says, because mix suppliers “are very agile in getting the right specs from the customer, following through with several rounds of batch testing and working very closely with them, whether it’s on flavor, function or processing.”

Small packages

While these secret weapons help manufacturers produce high-end treats on a large scale, many of today’s most popular treats are actually quite small. “You’re seeing mini indulgences on more menus and in more retail stores on a global basis, which is a great way for consumers to enjoy desserts while still getting the added benefit of portion control,” Namy says. Having your cake and eating it, too?

And because mini desserts require less commitment from the diner than full-sized servings, they offer “a really great avenue to experiment with new, exciting flavor profiles, or perhaps just try out some traditional flavors they might have been afraid to try in the past,” Namy says.

That flexibility pays off for their creators, too, who “can scale their creations appropriately and indulge their creativity” when designing mini desserts, says Harold

CONCEPTS

Nicoll, marketing manager, TIC Gums, Belcamp, MD. "One-portion servings of cake pops, miniature cupcakes, miniature cakes, dipped cookies, pretzels and petit fours are among the emerging and continuing trends consumers are adopting for all things sweet."

The Almond Board of California got a taste of mini creativity when it participated in Food Ingredients Europe last November in Paris. "We worked closely with world-renowned pastry chef Yann Brys, of the famous Dalloyau in Paris, to develop and showcase some of the most intricate and inventive gourmet almond desserts we've ever seen," Maan says. Among the standouts were several single-serving items.

Take ChefYann's *petite bulle Saint Honoré*, which Maan describes as a bite-sized cake with a panna cotta base—made largely with almonds—topped with whipped cream and a caramelized cream puff. "Almond cream boosts the smooth, silky textures and flavors," she says. *Sucettes chocolat* are Chef's posh spin on the "pop" phenomenon, featuring roasted chopped almonds with a chocolate molding. She

says the "on-trend treat" provides a "perfectly portioned bite of smooth, creamy chocolate enhanced with nutty flavor and unique almond texture."

Next up were mini *financiers*—no, *not* short Wall Street workers, but updates on a French pastry classic made mainly of almond flour with a smidgen of white flour "for consistency and binding," Maan says. The almond appeal comes through in the "subtle fragrance and unique flavor of this signature application," she notes. "And the best part is that everything ChefYann created was to inspire CPG and commercial thinking—not just high-end one-offs for the independent bakery case." Given the quality of these and other manufactured gourmet desserts, one might be hard-pressed to tell the difference. 

Kimberly J. Decker, a California-based technical writer, has a B.S. in consumer food science with a minor in English from the University of California, Davis. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she enjoys eating and writing about food. You can reach her at kim@decker.net.



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