

Exclusive: *Special Events* Magazine's 18th Annual Corporate Event Forecast
Gorgeous and Good for You: Caterers Reinvent Desserts to Please Today's Guests

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FOOD FOR FÊTES

Stunning sweets: Beautiful desserts from Legendary Events include individual cheesecakes topped with piped 'tulips' (here) and s'mores with smoked chocolate ganache, burnt meringue, raspberry coulis, micro basil and chocolate pearls (below). Photo here by Robin Lori; photo below courtesy Legendary Events.

You Sweet Thing!

From clean and green to drippy and decadent, desserts at special events today are both gorgeous and good for you. By Susan Cuadrado

CLEANER CLASSICS The desire of event guests—especially millennials—to eat cleaner extends all the way to dessert.

“More of our clients are requesting gluten-free and vegan dessert options, so we enjoy getting creative and reinventing popular classic dishes to meet their needs,” says Ami Dand, executive pastry chef at Atlanta-based Legendary Events. She cites a vegan pecan pie/crème brûlée hybrid—caramel crème brûlée topped with dulce de leche and toasted pecan filling and finished with whipped cream and candied pecans as a prime example, saying, “It has all the flavors of pecan pie, but substitutes coconut milk for dairy milk and uses gluten-free flour.”

Robin Selden, managing partner and executive chef at Stamford, Conn.-based Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning, has also found great success with plant-based sweets that cater to consumers’ increasing desire to eat cleaner—even when it comes to dessert.

“Our dance around this has been to create a series of really delicious plant-based, gluten-free desserts that can cover most of the dietary restrictions that come our way,”





Beautiful bites: Elegant desserts from Marcia Selden Catering include a milk chocolate-chile shortbread tart (here) and an upscale strawberry tart (below). Photos by Robin Selden.



Selden explains. Two favorites include a vegan and gluten-free raspberry coconut crème trifle with pistachio brittle and a strawberry meringue tart with lemon curd and dehydrated strawberries—a refined, gluten-free twist on strawberry shortcake.

SPICIER BITES Incorporating herbs and spices into the dessert realm lends an overall sophistication in terms of both taste and presentation to dishes. “I don’t like my desserts overly sweet, so using basil or thyme, or even a hint of cayenne, helps curb the sweetness and add a whole different level of flavors,” Dand says. “Micro herbs and edible flowers are also a great way to add a pop of color and flavor to a plated dessert.”

One of Dand’s most requested desserts is her take on a s’mores-inspired tart—a graham cracker shell filled with smoked semisweet chocolate ganache topped with toasted vanilla bean meringue and served with sea-salt caramel, fresh raspberries, dark chocolate pearls, and a micro basil garnish. “Sometimes we make the meringue different flavors to add to the uniqueness,” she adds. “Passionfruit meringue is a delicious complement to the chocolate and raspberries.”

“We use a lot of savory seasonings in our desserts, such as specialty salts, chiles and spicy honeys,” Selden says. “And we have been doing a ton of work on the sweet and savory side with tea,” citing a milk choco-

late-chile shortbread tart with candied orange and zabaglione, and a honey chamomile panna cotta with Mandarin orange as examples.

BOLDER BUFFETS From both a visual and variety standpoint, dessert buffets and action stations will never fall out of fashion. If anything, they are becoming more and more creative—and sometimes downright edgy.

Case in point: The team at Reseda, Calif.-based Someone’s in the Kitchen puts the “hot” in hot chocolate at their “Bad Ass Hot Chocolate” station, wherein a tattooed, machete-wielding server chops white, milk and dark chocolate shavings into customized cups of cocoa.

On the whimsical side, over-the-top candy stations appeal to both the kids and the kid in all of us, as do ice cream cone stations featuring dipped cones stuck into mounds of cotton candy.

“The preponderance of dessert lovers let loose when it comes to the sweets,” says Someone’s in the Kitchen president/owner Joann Roth-Oseary. “When we walk out with the monster milk shakes and individual chocolate souffles, they come running.”

At Marcia Selden Catering, stations go off the wall with custom-built bakery walls holding half-sheet pans filled with a variety of pastries and baked goods, such as doughnuts, retro black and white cookies, and house-made Twinkies. “We make fun stickers themed to the event and use them on mini bakery boxes or bags that guests use to collect their sweet treats,” Selden says.

Other popular stations include a “Float It or Build It” ice cream bar featuring fixings for DIY floats and sandwiches, and a walkaround custom cannoli station featuring flavors ranging from the classics (such as vanilla chocolate chip, hazelnut Nutella, pistachio, chocolate peppermint, and Key lime) to the creative (apple crumb, peanut butter-banana, salted caramel and bacon, Almond Joy candy bar and even a White Russian). ●