

November

09

Official Magazine of the American Culinary Federation

The
National
Culinary
Review™

That's a (Seafood) Wrap 24

Winter Squash Season 28

Fine Brines 36

Bring on the Bubbly 44



An Unlikely Marriage

Chocolate-and-cheese desserts epitomize sweet and savory success.

By Melanie Wolkoff Wachsman

Mention "cheese" and "chocolate" to chefs, and you'll hear them wax poetic about everything from flavor profiles to terroir. What you probably won't hear is gushing over pairing the two. Surprisingly, these most beloved of ingredients rarely overlap.

Balancing the flavors and textures of cheese and chocolate is a daunting task. A mild, soft cheese will disappear next to a hearty, nuanced chocolate. A marriage between a dark, bitter chocolate and a strong-flavored, aged cheese seems

destined for divorce. Not to mention that combining the two ingredients may not appeal to purists and aficionados who belong to either savory or sweet camps:

Skeptics may need to reconsider. With patience and a little serendipity, chefs show that desserts highlighting both chocolate and cheese can indeed succeed.

Sheep's-milk cheese truffles

When chef/co-owner Sabrina Tinsley of Osteria La Spiga, Seattle, asked pastry chef Betsy Balog to create a dessert

with formaggio di fossa, a pungent, hard, 6-month-old Italian sheep's milk cheese, Balog admits she was concerned. "Sabrina is so in love with this cheese. When she asked if I could come up with a recipe for it in a dessert, I was like, 'What?' This is not a mild cheese. It's intense."

Balog began researching chocolate/cheese desserts and discovered a blue cheese/chocolate truffle recipe. "I already had a ganache recipe that I liked. So I decided to try truffles," she says.

Andrea Curto-Randazzo's love of ricotta and dark chocolate inspired this chocolate/hazelnut ricotta pie.





Naomi Oluo



Ian Cole

To prepare the formaggio di fossa truffles, she grates the cheese and melts it into heavy cream and sugar. Then she pours it over bittersweet chocolate, allowing it to melt and emulsify. "The ingredients melt well but still maintain

a bit of texture from the cheese," Balog says. She stirs in Vin Santo (an Italian dessert wine) and lets the truffles solidify overnight at room temperature.

"There's no getting around it—it's still chocolate with sheep's milk cheese," says Balog. "The chocolate tones down the cheese's inherent saltiness, while the Vin Santo sweetens it. The saltiness also cuts the richness, so it's not super-decadent.

"Ever since we started playing up the unusual combination, the reception has been really good," she adds. "Diners are surprised to find the cheese filling, and are proud of themselves for eating it."

Balog is now a believer in chocolate/cheese dessert. "Anything is possible," she says. "You can't please everyone, so please yourself with your dessert—and please your executive chef. Mine loved it."

White chocolate and cheese

Curiosity led Erica Nicholl, pastry chef at Screen Door, Dallas, to experiment with chocolate/cheese combinations. Cream cheese and chocolate seemed too predictable. White chocolate and cheese, she thought, had potential.

"I needed to pair the white chocolate with a mellow but textural cheese that's universal—meaning it can go savory or

From left: Erica Nicholl's brie and mascarpone tart with white chocolate and cranberry was created out of her curiosity about chocolate/cheese combinations. Betsy Balog's truffles are filled with formaggio di fossa, an Italian sheep's-milk cheese.

sweet," says Nicholl, who decided to display both Brie and mascarpone in a tart with white chocolate and cranberry.

She creates a tart filling out of French Brie, BelGioioso mascarpone, sugar, melted white chocolate, eggs, heavy cream, vanilla and dried cranberries. The filling sits inside par-baked petite graham cracker crust shells that she bakes and drizzles with vanilla-bean-infused honey at service. "You can serve this dessert chilled or at room temperature and the character of the cheese gets a whole different feel," she says. "The mascarpone and Brie flavors don't fight each other. The tartness of cranberries brings out the cheeses' creaminess."

Even though Nicholl's executive chef and pastry assistant were "blown away" by the dessert, she feels diners may hesitate to order it as a standalone dessert. "We could definitely slip it in on a multiple-course prix-fixe menu," she says.

Ricotta replacement

For Andrea Curto-Randazzo, chef/owner of Talula in Miami Beach, Fla.,

Pairing tips

When it comes to pairing chocolate and cheese, Barrie Lynn, *The Cheese Impresario*, a cheese educator/pairing expert/cheese entertainer based in Los Angeles, recommends dissecting the flavor profiles of each ingredient in the same way that a sommelier looks at wine. What are the flavor characteristics? Pull from that when deciding on pairings.

An additional component—like a condiment or spirit—will bridge cheese and chocolate. Lynn recommends dark sipping rum, brandy, cognac or ice wine, and using condiments such as pear jam or honey. Olive oil, figs, dates and dried fruit also connect chocolate and cheese nicely.

Lynn's favorite chocolate and cheese pairings include:

- Milk chocolate with goat cheese
- Tcho chocolate with aged cheddar
- Dark chocolate with SarVecchio or Gouda



Kevin Hunter-Murphy



Orla Murphy-LaScola

Chocolate/cheese marriage advice

"Pick the particular cheese you want to use first. Try to avoid any cheese that is resistant to higher heats if you intend baking with it. Dried or fresh fruits are an excellent complement."
— Erica Nicholl

"The stronger each product's flavor profile, the less likely it will pair well with the other. For example, a funky, oozy washed-rind cheese would clash too harshly with the delicate floral notes in an overly bitter (70% or higher) chocolate. The spicy and creamy notes of blue cheese might be able to balance well with a sweeter milk chocolate."
— Graham Schave

"Don't be afraid to try new, unusual combinations, because cheese will surprise you with its versatility."
— Scott Gottlich

incorporating ricotta in a chocolate/hazelnut/ricotta pie was a no-brainer. "It was really a selfish reason so I could have cheesecake," she says. "I'm not a cream-cheese cheesecake fan. I'm Italian, and love ricotta. Milk chocolate is too sweet for me, but I like bittersweet dark chocolate. I wanted something nutty.

Chocolate and hazelnut go well together." Curto-Randazzo describes her pie as lighter and sweeter than a traditional cream-cheese cheesecake. "Diners love it. It's a nice display and goes well with coffee," she says.

Likewise, ricotta became the key ingredient in Graham Schave's fritters served with chocolate sauce and berry jam. The pastry chef at Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks in Boston needed a replacement dessert for the restaurant's traditional beignets.

"My first thoughts were to do a fruit fritter, but as consistently ripe fruit in New England can be troublesome, and wanting something that could last on the menu through a few seasonal changes, I realized ricotta cheese (which we make in-house) was my answer," says Schave, who found ricotta's fresh taste and slight sourness paired well with many flavors.

He builds a chocolate dipping sauce using Valrhona cocoa and bittersweet Callebaut chocolate. "Our chocolate sauce provides a rich indulgence—due to the fat content—to the ricotta's lighter freshness. The smooth texture of the chocolate also provides a nice contrast to the crispy exterior and light and fluffy interior of the fritter," Schave says. This was his first venture pairing cheese

From left: Scott Gottlich teams semisweet hot chocolate with an éclair filled with Nancy's Hudson Valley Camembert, strawberries and chervil. American Seasons features a blue cheese and dark chocolate brioche bread pudding.

and chocolate. "The Italians use ricotta in many dessert applications, and the idea of pairing it with chocolate is not that foreign to them. That is where I got my inspiration," he explains.

Blue cheese goes dark

At American Seasons, Nantucket, Mass., experimenting with sweet and savory desserts is normal. "We are known for unusual food pairings. Our desserts aren't just an ordinary crème brûlée. We push the envelope," says Orla Murphy-LaScola, owner/sommelier.

It was only natural for one of the restaurant's featured daily brioche bread puddings to evolve into a blue cheese and dark chocolate bread pudding, where Point Reyes blue cheese, then dark chocolate, are sprinkled over cubed brioche, which is covered in custard, baked and served with local honey and vanilla ice cream.

"People were leery of it at first," says Murphy-LaScola. But the flavor notes of sweet, salty and bittersweet proved a winning combination. "The super-creamy blue cheese works well with the bittersweet



Crammed Media

Ricotta Fritters with Chocolate Sauce and Berry Jam

Graham Schave, Pastry Chef
Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks
Boston

Yield: 8 servings (approximately 40 fritters)

1 lb. ricotta cheese
1 Tahitian vanilla bean, scraped
4 eggs
1 t. vanilla extract
½ cup sugar
1 cup flour
2 t. baking powder
½ t. salt
1 t. cornstarch

Chocolate Sauce (recipe follows)
Raspberry jam, as needed for service

Method: In mixer bowl, cream ricotta cheese with vanilla bean seeds until smooth. Add eggs, one at a time, scraping down bowl as necessary. Add vanilla extract. With mixer on second speed, slowly drizzle in sugar until completely incorporated. Add flour, baking powder, salt and cornstarch all at once, mixing on low speed until completely mixed in. Turn mixer back to second speed; paddle for 30 seconds to aerate and encourage gluten

development. Using small scoop, scoop balls of fritter batter; fry balls at 370°F until completely golden-brown on all sides. At service: Place fritters on plate; sprinkle with light dusting of powdered sugar. Serve with ramekin of chocolate sauce and ramekin of raspberry jam.

Chocolate Sauce

3½ cups heavy cream
2 cups light corn syrup
1½ cups light brown sugar
1 cup Valrhona cocoa
1 t. kosher salt
1 lb. 8 oz. bittersweet chocolate
4 oz. butter
1 T. + 1 t. vanilla extract
2 T. + 2 t. brandy or cognac

Method: Put cream, corn syrup, sugar, cocoa, salt and chocolate in large heavy-bottomed pot; place over medium flame. Whisk constantly. (At first, mixture will be lumpy, but will even out as chocolate melts and mixture emulsifies.) Once mixture is cohesive, bring to a gentle simmer; whisk constantly for 10 minutes while reducing mixture. When mixture thickens, remove pot from heat; whisk in butter 1 T. at a time, followed by vanilla extract and brandy. Strain mixture through chinois; chill over ice bath. Place plastic wrap against surface to prevent skin forming.

chocolate. We also use local honey, which adds sweetness."

Hot cocoa with cheese

Scott Gottlich, chef/owner of Bijoux and chef/partner of The Second Floor, Dallas, doesn't just meld together cheese and chocolate, but different ethnic foods, too. Conceptually, the desserts fall in line with Gottlich's love of combining savory and sweet.

He features a cheese course with Indian-style paneer alongside a small cup of hot chocolate. "In Latin America, hot chocolate and soft white cheese is often eaten together," he says. "The cheese found in Latin America is similar to paneer. It just clicked when we tried it. It does especially well in winter months."

Gottlich describes his housemade paneer as a rich marshmallow, just with more texture in the mouth. He also enjoys teaming semisweet hot chocolate with an éclair filled with Nancy's Hudson Valley Camembert, strawberries and chervil.

"The challenge is creating a dish that lets the chocolate and cheese each speak for itself and stand out while also blending together and complementing each other," Gottlich says.

Bottom line, chefs shouldn't be afraid of pairing chocolate with cheese. "If you like a cheese, find a way to use it," says Curto-Randazzo. "Some people opt to have cheese instead of dessert. Why not combine the two?"

Melanie Wolkoff Wachsman is a freelance writer based in Louisville, Ky., and a former editor of Chef and Chef Educator Today.