

# DESSERT

*A Tale of Happy Endings*

JERI QUINZIO

REAKTION BOOKS

*To Barbara Ketcham Wheaton and the late Pat Kelly  
For their wisdom, generosity and, most of all, friendship.*

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A selection of today's splendid pastries.

# INTRODUCTION: THE LOVELY INDULGENCE OF DESSERT

WHETHER IT'S HOMEMADE strawberry shortcake eaten on a screened porch in summer or a chef's complex medley of delicate pastries served in an elegant restaurant, dessert is the perfect ending to dinner. It is the encore that concludes a wonderful performance and sends us off in a haze of delight. Growing up, dessert was my favourite course. It still is. My dessert might be as simple as a scoop of coffee ice cream or as indulgent as a buttery lemon tart. It doesn't have to be elaborate; it simply has to be. Without it, my dinner would be incomplete and my life would be less sweet.

Some of my best food memories are of desserts. I still recall the intensely fresh peach taste of the ice cream a friend of my parents made for us one summer when I was a child. I remember the brief glow of blue flames on a plum pudding I made one Christmas and how impressive it looked in the darkened room. I can hear the crackling sound my spoon made when it shattered the top of a perfect crême brûlée in Paris and the creaminess beneath its sugar crust. When I think of those desserts, I smile and savour them all over again.

I do understand that consuming too much sugar can result in problems like obesity and diabetes, and that we should not eat it in excess. But much of the sugar we consume is contained in seemingly savoury shop-bought foods. Let us cut down on those and allow ourselves the pleasure and lovely memories desserts offer. I believe a little indulgence is good for the psyche, which is why I wrote this book.

As I was writing, I often asked friends, relatives and acquaintances about their dessert memories and asked, 'What's your favourite dessert?' I thought it would be entertaining to hear what they chose and wondered how similar the choices would be. I was surprised at how seriously they took the question and how thoughtful they became in answering it. It was as if I had asked the classically unanswerable question, 'Which is your favourite child?' Some rather plaintively asked if they could name more than one. Even when I asked them to limit it to one, because favourite means the one most liked rather than one of many liked, they often told me their first choice and then, as if to avoid hurting the feelings of other desserts, they named one or two more.

Although this was certainly not a statistically significant poll, it did include people from several countries and a variety of ethnicities and ages. The answers were not only well considered, they were somewhat surprising. Fewer people than I would have expected chose a chocolate dessert. Where were the chocolate cupcakes, the brownies? Most of the favourites were soft and milky, one of the most ancient dessert categories. Comforting, mother's milk desserts such as *crème brûlée*, custard pie, tiramisu and various flavours of ice cream led the pack. Many people chose something creamy accompanied by meringue, from lemon meringue pie to pavlova to floating island. Where were the apple pies? Does no one like soufflés? Just two people chose fresh fruit. My favourite dessert is ice cream. My favourite flavour varies according to my mood, the weather, the season and the surroundings.

Most of us have a favourite dessert, even those who seldom indulge. After all, sweet is one of the most basic flavours, and we seem to be hard-wired to like it. However, although everyone does have a taste for sweetness, not every culture enjoys a dessert course at the end of a meal. Nor does each one delight in the sort of dishes most Westerners think of as dessert. Setting aside today's rapid globalization of dining habits, the traditional end to a meal in many countries was and is fruit, whether fresh, dried or cooked in syrup. In medieval times, when fresh fruit was considered unhealthy, Europeans mostly ate fruits

dried, like dates or raisins, or cooked in honey or sugar syrup. That tradition lives on in Greece's spoon sweets, which are still a speciality. However, they are generally offered to afternoon guests along with coffee or cold water rather than served as an after-dinner dessert.

The custom of serving sweet dishes as snacks between meals or as celebratory foods, but seldom after a meal, is widespread. The Chinese generally end everyday meals with fresh fruit, and reserve desserts for formal dinners and special occasions. In Japan, sweets are served with tea, but seldom at the close of a meal. In the West, Italians traditionally conclude a meal with fresh fruit and nuts, and enjoy sweet dishes as mid-afternoon treats or holiday specialities. Austrians are likely to go to a pastry shop for indulgences like the cream-filled, chocolate-glazed cakes called *Indianerkrapfen* or *Indianers* in the afternoon, rather than have them after dinner.

Even those who seldom have dessert after everyday dinners do have a favourite holiday dessert. From *capirotada*, Mexico's festive Easter-time bread pudding, to China's autumn festival mooncakes, the holiday dessert is essential to the celebration.

Many desserts we know and love – the ethereal sponge cakes, the lush ice creams, the light and airy profiteroles – are neither as old nor as ubiquitous as they seem. In *Dessert: A Tale of Happy Endings*, I trace the history of dessert, the sweet course served at the end of a meal, and the way it has evolved over time. I begin before dessert was a separate course, when sweets and savouries mixed indiscriminately on the table, and conclude in the present, when homey desserts are enjoying a revival and, at the same time, molecular gastronomists are making desserts an alchemist would envy.

Historically speaking, the serving of a separate dessert course is not an ancient practice. Although the word was used as early as the fourteenth century in France, the course was likely to include savoury dishes as well as sweet ones. The English came to dessert later. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* first citation of the word is not until 1600, when Sir William Vaughan wrote in *Naturall and Artificiall Directions*

*for Health*, 'such eating, which the French call desert, is unnaturall'. The *OED* defines dessert as 'a course of fruit, sweetmeats, etc. served after a dinner or supper'.

The term comes from the French word *desservir*, to remove what has been served. In other words, to clear the table. Before the seventeenth century, however, the table was not cleared for the sweet dishes. Foods were not served sequentially: a dozen or so dishes for each course were set out on the table at the same time, in much the way a buffet is today. According to plans illustrated in cookbooks, dishes were symmetrically arranged on the table with similar dishes at either end and on the sides. The centre of the table would feature an impressive dish, which could be anything from a sirloin of beef to a pyramid of sweetmeats. Although each dish was precisely placed, the mix of sweet and savoury was random, according to today's standards. A cherry tart might be placed next to a pigeon pie, a platter of salmon alongside a bowl of custard, buttered turnips beside a selection of marzipans. When one course concluded, a second equally eclectic one would be served. Sweet dishes were scattered throughout cookbooks as well, rather than placed in a separate section.

On special occasions in medieval France, when there was a final serving after the table was cleared, it was usually called an *issue de table*. The spiced wine called *hypocras* would be served as a *digestif*, along with *oublies*, or wafers. Finally *dragées*, or comfits, might be offered. Comfits were sugar-coated seeds or nuts, which were often sprinkled on both savoury and sweet dishes for decoration in addition to being served on their own. They were also eaten as bedtime snacks and as breath-fresheners; in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare has the lustful Falstaff call for the sky to 'hail kissing-comfits'.

At Renaissance-era feasts, the appearance and entertainment value of foods was at least as prized as their taste. In fact, some of the most impressive dishes were not intended to be eaten. Cooks sculpted towering castles from sugar paste and set them out as centrepieces or focal points on the table. They filled sturdy, standing pies with

blackbirds that flew out when the pie was carved, much to the surprise of dinner guests. They moulded realistic-looking fruits and animals from marzipan. When the marzipan sculptures that Leonardo da Vinci created for the court of Ludovico Sforza were gobbled up, Leonardo complained. He had wanted them to be admired, not consumed.

The lofty architectural desserts some pastry chefs create today are part of the same tradition. They are a feast for the eyes but a challenge to eat. Putting a fork to one of these can feel like attacking a work of art with a wrecking ball. As some of their early predecessors did, these pastry chefs value spectacle and display over dining. Flaming desserts, although intended to be eaten and not as spectacular as soaring blackbirds, are also meant to dazzle diners.

Before the eighteenth century, the high cost of sugar and spices made them status symbols, so those who could afford them flaunted them. Many a savoury dish was made with or strewn with sugar. English cooks sweetened their hefty meat pies with sugar and candied fruits. Renaissance-era Italians feasted on tagliatelle tossed with sugar, oranges, cinnamon and almonds and served alongside poultry and meats. Some of these ancient sweet and savoury combinations survive. A festive Iranian rice dish called *shirin polo* is rich with candied orange peel, pistachios, almonds and cinnamon. The ingredients are perfect for a rice pudding, but this is a pilaf made for special occasions and served as part of a meal, not as a dessert. The dessert pudding we call ‘blancmange’ was once a savoury dish served with the meal rather than after it. It was a mixture of cream and shredded capon, chicken or fish, thickened with grated stag’s horn or rice, sweetened and flavoured with almonds. Italians called it *biancomangiare*. In most countries, without the chicken and stag’s horn, it became a sweet dessert pudding. In Turkey, where it is called *tavuk göğsü*, it retained the shredded chicken even as it became a dessert.

In the United States, children are usually surprised when they are told that the mincemeat in their Thanksgiving or Christmas pie used to be made with actual minced beef (or venison) along with raisins, apples, spices and brandy. They are even more surprised to learn that

in some places mincemeat is still made at home, not purchased at a supermarket, and that meat is still an ingredient.

Eventually, however, most savoury dishes lost their sweet ingredients and most sweet dishes went without their meats. Sweet and savoury went their separate ways, and dessert, both the word and the course, gained widespread acceptance throughout most of Europe. New World ingredients, such as chocolate, entered the marketplace. New equipment such as ovens and accurate measuring utensils transformed baking. Sugar was more affordable, largely as a result of the exploitation of slave labour. People travelled, learned about new dishes and took that knowledge back home. Others emigrated and took their favourite recipes to new lands.

These and other changes resulted in a proliferation of sweet dishes. Professional kitchens made a distinction between cooks and dessert cooks. The French divided the labour between the main kitchen, the cuisine, and the cold kitchen, known as the *office*, where pastries, cakes, custards and ice creams were made. Sweet dishes no longer shared the table; they had their own course, their own chefs, their own tableware and their own menus. Dessert had arrived.

In 1708, more than a century after Vaughan called dessert ‘unnatural’, William King, author of *The Art of Cookery: A Poem in Imitation of Horace’s Art of Poetry*, was inspired to write ‘Tis the Dessert that graces all the Feast’. In 1846, Eugene Briffault wrote similarly in *Paris à table*,

The dessert crowns the dinner. To create a fine dessert, one has to combine the skills of a confectioner, a decorator, a painter, an architect, an ice-cream maker, a sculptor, and a florist.

The splendor of such creations appeals above all to the eye – the real gourmand admires them without touching them!

I agree with Briffault that the dessert crowns the dinner. However, I do strongly believe that it should be eaten and enjoyed.



Carducius P. Ream's delectable 1861 print is titled simply *Dessert No. 4*.



An 18th-century Dutch still-life of the style called 'little banquet pieces'.