PLATING FOR POINTS

GOOD DESIGN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT WAY TO DIFFERENTIATE OURSELVES FROM OUR COMPETITORS. —*Yun Jong Yong*

A PLATED DESSERT WILL SHOW EXACTLY WHAT KIND OF PASTRY CHEF YOU ARE. —*Francisco Migoya*

A GREAT PLATED DESSERT IS AN UNDENIABLE SENSE OF PLEASURE. —*En-Ming Hsu*

The Flavor Factor

What makes a plated dessert worthy of a gold medal? Pastry chefs may debate the finer points of this question, but there is little doubt as to what the most important factor is in creating an exceptional plated dessert: *flavor.* Whether it's a simple slice of pie served in a diner or an intricate, multicomponent dessert crafted for a competition, flavor is what makes a dessert memorable. Flashy presentations may draw admiring "oohs" and "aahs," but it's the taste of a dessert that remains embedded in our memory banks. Sébastien Canonne, co-founder of the French Pastry School at City Colleges of Chicago, sums it up by saying, "It's all about taste. Nothing else comes first." This concept is borne out by the fact that 40 percent of each team's score in the National and World Pastry Team Competitions is based on taste, also known as *dégustation.*

There are different schools of thought regarding how flavors should be combined in plated desserts, but most top pastry chefs recommend limiting the number of main flavors to three. Robert Ellinger, pastry chef–owner of Baked to Perfection in Port Washington, New York, served as the head judge during the 2010 World Pastry Team Championship. He has what he refers to as a "three flavor rule." Otherwise, he says, "you get the 'fruit salad effect,' and then you don't know what the hell you're tasting—there's just too much going on there."

En-Ming Hsu, a pastry chef consultant based in Las Vegas, has been a team member, coach, and head judge at the World Pastry Team Championships. She also cautions against using too many flavors in a dessert, particularly in an international competition. "Some teams become excited by the competition and become excessively flavorful," she notes. "They choose many flavors because they want to impress the jury. It's better to find two or three primary flavors that are understood and then complement them with one or two interesting flavors. Judges may taste as many as twelve desserts in one sitting. It's impossible for their palates not to become confused. The clearer the flavors are in the dessert, the more successful it will be—judges like to know what they are eating. It's always important to consider the flavor profile carefully, particularly for an international panel of judges."

Stephen Durfee, who runs the Baking and Pastry Arts Program at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, has a similar view on the danger of using too many flavors in a dessert. "I do think that you can overwhelm a person's palate pretty quickly by offering them too many things at once, so I think that's good advice," he explains. "I know this happens to me at school—I'll have eighteen people in a class each doing a menu, and I'll have to sit and try fifty-four desserts in a four-hour period. And after the fourth or fifth one, you're just like, 'Whoa!' So I know

what it's like to be in that position to have to taste so many different flavors."

Francisco Migoya, an associate professor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, also has strong views about the use of too many flavors. He advises, "Do not use more than three 'frontal' flavors, since the human brain cannot handle more than that." Frontal flavors, he explains, are clear flavors that are almost immediately identifiable. Examples include passion fruit, chocolate, strawberry, and lime. "More than three just becomes a jumbled mass of unidentifiable flavors," says Migoya. "You may add some 'background' flavors in addition to the frontal flavors, but for the sole purpose of enhancing the frontal flavors." Background flavors, he notes, "help push other flavors forward and round them out without taking over completely." Vanilla, caramel, and coconut are common examples of background flavors.

After the decision of how many flavors to feature is the equally important choice of *which* flavors to combine. In part, this decision should be based on the ingredients that are available at the competition site. Over the years, some teams designed their plated desserts without considering whether the featured ingredients could be easily procured in the area where the competition was held. Finding incredible produce in the Napa Valley, for example, is much easier than finding it in Phoenix in July, as Stephen Durfee discovered at the 2005 NPTC. "In Napa, you just go to the farmers' market and you come home with the best strawberry in the world, and you serve it, but you can't do that in Phoenix. So we went out to a store to get some strawberries the day before the competition, and that's tough to do. Nowadays, if I were doing a fruit dessert, I would rely more on a fruit purée, because you never know what the quality of fruit is going to be in the area."

Teams that have had success with their plated desserts tend to stick to the most popular flavors, which Robert Ellinger refers to as the "Five Cs": chocolate, caramel, coffee, cream cheese, and citrus (and other fruits). Innovation for innovation's sake is generally not a good idea, and will probably not impress the judges. Team Spain, led by master pastry innovator Albert Adrià, found this out during the 2002 WPTC in Las Vegas when it finished outside of the top six teams. Their plated dessert was a Berry Membrillo with Rose and Goat's Milk. A *membrillo* is a classic Chilean dessert, but it most likely did not have much resonance with the judges, none of whom were Chilean. And though the combination of floral rose and tangy goat's milk works, it probably didn't remind the judges of memorable desserts from their childhoods. That year Team Spain also featured an unusual chocolate bonbon featuring a filling made with Fisherman's Friend throat lozenges. That's right, cough drops. Innovative choice? Yes! Smart choice? No!

Francisco Migoya has firm views on the subject of innovation. "We are always so concerned about being unique and different that often we forget about the basic and straightforward flavors our profession is based on," he points out. "I am much more impressed by a pastry chef who can properly execute a flawless ganache than a pastry chef who can execute a flawless foam. Foam is easy, proper ganache is not."

Many chefs who have either judged or participated in the competitions cite the importance of knowing—or making an educated guess about—the judges' tastes before determining what flavors to showcase. When Robert Ellinger is preparing for a competition, this is the first thing he thinks about. "I find out who the judges are and what they like and dislike. You can have the best plated dessert, but if it has pineapple in it, and you put it in front of somebody who doesn't like pineapple, you're probably not going to do very well. We're all human beings. It's just not going to make my score go up if I give them something they don't like."

Sometimes the problem can't be foreseen at all. At the NPTC in 2005, Stephen Durfee made a meringue cake paired with chocolate, honey, and apricot. As a child, he used to eat toasted rye bread with butter and apricot jam, and loved that particular combination of flavors. So he decided to add caraway seeds to the meringue in his cake, to mimic the flavor of the rye bread. After the judging, one of the judges, Stanton Ho, came up to him to complain that he still had a caraway seed stuck between his teeth, and he couldn't get rid of the taste of it. "I guess I didn't

grind up the caraway seeds as much as I should've," admits Durfee. "I think I know flavors pretty well, I think that's my strongest suit, but it certainly didn't serve me well that day. It might come down to in the midst of the competition making a mistake, or having someone just flat-out disagree with your idea of what flavors go together. It was something that I didn't even really think was a gamble. In that environment, you want to save your creativity for techniques that are really going to impress a judge and not with flavors."

Looks Count

After flavor, the second most important element in the design of a great plated dessert is presentation. Simple, clean designs tend to work best. "Judges," according to En-Ming Hsu, "like to see desserts that appear simple, but are technically difficult. Simple desserts are more challenging because every detail counts and flaws become more apparent. In order to appear appetizing, the dessert presentation must look effortless and harmonious with each component fitting together and contributing to the presentation and taste. Judges are greatly influenced by the first impression."

Every detail counts in the presentation of a plated dessert, down to the choice of the plate. Some teams use simple, white plates that will keep the focus on the dessert. Others use plates that have been custom designed and made to their specifications for their dessert. Gimmicks, however, may invite trouble. At the 2008 WPTC, Team USA caused a stir by using a specially crafted plate that some viewed as a gimmick. "You moved the spoon and the sauce trickled down a niche in the plate," said Robert Ellinger. "There were rumors that they spent up to $1,500 per plate, but I don't know if that's true. I don't know what those plates cost. It was actually a pretty incredible design by a group of brilliant pastry chefs, but it was a gimmick. Now they've changed the rules so that you can't go crazy with the plates anymore, which is probably a good thing."

En-Ming Hsu's advice regarding plate choice is to keep it simple. "The plate is the frame that holds the dessert together. A custom-made plate will make a statement. If it creates a cutting-edge presentation, it may create some controversy at the same time. Sometimes it's best not to give judges something to talk about. A team can't go wrong with a simple, round, white, bone porcelain plate. If they design their dessert to fit the plate, it will be a classic, understated presentation."

Others see the use of custom plates as an unfair advantage for teams that have more resources than cash-strapped teams. As Stephen Durfee, who was at the 2010 WPTC, puts it, "It's really not fair when one team is so much better funded than another and can afford to do something like that. If I had been a judge, I would've been so blown away by that plate that Team USA had—it was so clever and so fun and whimsical. But, at the same time, I would've felt bad for another team that obviously didn't have the same resources. It's not a level playing field if you are able to bring in your own plate design. It's different than everyone just having a white plate and seeing what you can do with that."

As for the overall look of the dessert, En-Ming Hsu advises that "the presentation be approachable." In other words, don't go for anything that looks too complex. Kathryn Gordon, chef-instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York, has more specific advice on plating: "Looking at the plate from a three-dimensional perspective, your eye should be able to flow across the components, and therefore, appreciate them first as a whole, and then more individually, if you look that closely." She adds, "There should be movement on the plate, not a static weighing down of color or dark components, but the curve upwards of a tuile, or the connection between two components with a chocolate or caramel stick, or the flow of coulis with a brushstroke. The viewer's eye should never be *caught* on the plate—the proximity of the food creates a sculpture that should be appealing visually, and attract the eye of the diner before being eaten." She also suggests that the main component of the dessert should never be centered, but should either be placed at 8 o'clock or 10 o'clock, looking at the plate as the face of a clock. Generally, sauce, ice cream or sorbet, and main garnishes should radiate off the main component without a lot of separation. This allows the plate to have a balance

of white space on the plate and not look too busy or confusing.

Contrast Can Be Good—or Bad

Another important element in designing a plated dessert is contrast. This is achieved by juxtaposing different textures and temperatures of components in the dessert, which delivers interest and pleasant surprise to the diner. "I can remember a dessert I had at Arzak in San Sebastian over a decade ago," recalls Francisco Migoya. "It consisted of a simple sphere of pumpkin ice cream inside a warm chocolate pudding. The ice cream was unexpected. How could this ice cream stay frozen inside the hot chocolate pudding? I would learn the method later, but at the moment I was baffled and mystified and humbled by the simple genius of these two components that seemingly shouldn't coexist peacefully, and yet they did. In retrospect, it is an easy dessert to pull off, but the fact is that at that moment I had never heard or known of such a thing. If you can pull that off, your dessert will be memorable, and even more so if the flavors are there."

But Chef Migoya warns against using contrast haphazardly. "Contrast for the sake of contrast in anything—flavor, texture, temperature, color—can be absurd, and most chefs and sophisticated diners will be able to see right through that. However, when it is done correctly, it can be what makes the dessert successful, because it shows that there is a profound thought process behind the plate."

Some chefs advise against using too many colors on the plate. Gilles Renusson, professor and pastry chef at Grand Rapids Community College in Michigan, and a regular attendee at the World and National Pastry Team Championships, has strong views about using artificial colors to create color contrast. "Recently I saw in a competition components of a plated dessert that had been sprayed with color in order to add some contrast. It was hideous. It's just like all these bright-colored *macarons* that keep on popping up all over. And then we wonder why the rate of cancer is so high in this country?" Regarding temperature, however, he is in favor of strong contrasts. "I remember the first time I ate baked Alaska. What a wonderful shock it was!" He advises, however, that pastry chefs use common sense here, too. "Be realistic; you would not want to put a scoop of frozen ice cream on top of a soufflé, for example. It would deflate the soufflé instantly and the iced element would melt."

For En-Ming Hsu, contrasts in a dessert can create interest and "help make the dessert exciting to eat." She advises, "The contrast should relate to the style of dessert. If a dessert is styled to be simple, it may become confusing if too many contrasting colors are used. If there are too many textures involved, it can become confusing to eat as well. It's better to not create confusion and cause the jury to have to think too much about what they are eating."

Presenting a plated dessert with contrasting temperatures can present major challenges during a competition, but if a team can pull it off, it can work to their advantage. In En-Ming Hsu's opinion, "Temperatures are very difficult to control in a competition setting because there is usually so much going on at one time. Competition kitchens can be quite chaotic, even for the most organized team. For a dessert requiring warm and frozen components, it requires detailed planning and precision to coordinate proper service." She also emphasizes the importance of serving the dessert at the correct temperature. "In a competition, the smallest details count. If a dessert is served too warm or too cold, the judges sense it right away. Judges with more sensitive palates will quickly detect if a dessert is too sweet, too sour, or not sweet enough, simply because the temperature is off." Chef Hsu says that this can sometime be attributed to misuse of the blast freezer, a freezer that cools food to a low temperature very quickly. "One of the best pieces of equipment is the blast freezer. Teams gain so much time and have the ability to increase their production when it is used. However, it can be their downfall if the blast freezer is incorrectly used. Many times, beautiful desserts with the potential to win do not score well because they are served frozen. A dessert that is meant to be served at room temperature could easily be served partially frozen in the center, or worse, completely

frozen if the freezing time is misjudged."

Francisco Migoya points out the challenges of executing a plated dessert with contrasting temperatures: "[It] can be a smash hit, but again, it depends on the nature of the plate. Consider that there is a possibility that the judge who will be tasting the dessert may not be doing so immediately after you have plated it. As the clock ticks, the dessert dies. Perhaps a table-side addition of a hot or cold or frozen ingredient to the plated dessert can ensure that temperature contrast."

For Kathryn Gordon, the use of contrasting textures is a primary necessity in the success of a plated dessert. "When I was growing up, I remember my mother making mousse for dinner parties. Back then, nobody seemed to think twice about the fact that it was just one texture, and superrich—like eating a slab of cheesecake. Now, I can't imagine a competition chef just plating with just one texture. We eat with our eyes first, but then the mouth takes over and it reacts to textures."

The Final Flourish

Some pastry chefs may not regard garnish as an integral part of their design for a plated dessert, but it is generally foolish not to do so. Competition judges pay close attention to garnishes, which can make the difference between a good and a great plated dessert. "A garnish is the essential finishing touch for a plated dessert. Without it, the plate looks incomplete," reflects En-Ming Hsu. She also advises competitors to keep the garnish simple. "Garnishes look best when they are light and delicate. Judges like to see garnishes that are created with an interesting or unusual technique. It is most likely the technique that they will remember and use themselves in the future."

Garnishes should also work within the context of the dessert. "They must," explains Francisco Migoya, "make sense with the dish. I often see chocolate décor being used for the sake of decorating a plate or to give it height, but none of the other components of the dish have anything to do with chocolate." He criticizes the use of pulled sugar garnishes for a different reason—they are seldom executed well. "Stay away from pulled sugar if you don't feel that you can make the pieces thin enough to be easily broken with a fork and eaten without causing dental damage. Thin and delicate is the way to go with pulled sugar."

Robert Ellinger also discourages the use of elaborate garnishes. "You don't want to have to dismantle the dessert to eat it," he points out. "People who construct their plated desserts with elaborate garnishes are taking a gun and shooting themselves in the foot. Even a really elegant swirl of sugar is a wasted element because you're not going to eat it. If it's something you can't eat, it shouldn't be on the plate. During the judging you'll see garnishes like that get left on the plates as they're cleared. It's a wasted opportunity, because you had a chance to give the judges a great-looking garnish that they could eat, and you didn't do it. The garnishes that always impress me are the ones that you can eat. Even if it's a lowly mint leaf that you've candied—it's something I can eat, and that's what we're looking for. I know that every time I get a plated dessert that I need to dismantle before I eat it, I will deduct points as a judge."

On the subject of garnishes, Stephen Durfee says, "I don't add something just for the heck of it. I don't use a mint leaf unless the dish has mint as an integral part of the flavor profile. To me, that's a sign of laziness or poor imagination. The garnish," he adds, "is important for the opportunity it presents to add contrast to the dessert, especially with texture. That's why, so many years later, I still find a simple tuile-type cookie to be a great garnish."

Molecular Gastronomy: *Oui ou Non?*

In the past few years, many top pastry chefs have embraced the techniques of molecular gastronomy, a cutting-edge style of cooking that takes advantage of innovations in scientific discipline. But the use of these techniques in pastry competitions tends to be limited. A few brave souls may use a technique like "spherification"—shaping liquid into caviarlike spheres—in their plated desserts, but on the whole,

the prevailing theory is that it's just too much of a risk when being judged by those who favor classic French techniques. Francisco Migoya sums it up this way: "Often the judges are 'old school' and could potentially be unfamiliar with these techniques. The last thing you want to do is scare a judge or incite his contempt. A good génoise is always better than a not-so-good foam. Also, molecular gastronomy is still too new and too closely associated with a small group of chefs—Adrià, Blumenthal, Achatz, Dufresne—and it may seem like you are ripping them off. Eventually the items that are considered part of molecular gastronomy may become commonplace. Hey, at one point, crème anglaise was invented by someone and then it was adapted by many others, to the point where now many pastry chefs have no idea who invented crème anglaise and no one has real ownership over its invention."

Stephen Durfee concurs. "In this competition, I would lean towards making things that are more classic. And I think that a classic, executed perfectly, is always going to be better than something that is innovative and not executed perfectly." Robert Ellinger was surprised at the lack of cutting-edge techniques at the most recent competition. "I noticed no spherification or other techniques from molecular gastronomy. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen it being used in this competition, which is surprising."

It Takes a Team

While competitors tend to focus primarily on recipes and techniques in preparing for the World and National Team Pastry Championships, it is important to remember that 30 percent of the final score is for how cleanly and efficiently each team works. Working together as a well-oiled team is crucial for success. Stephen Durfee, who competed at the 2005 and 2007 NPTCs, says that before he competes he writes "a pretty specific schedule of the order that we do things in, and as you practice and refine it, you shave away time." One day a friend, Pascal Janvier, owner of Fleur de Cocoa patisserie in Los Gatos, California, came to watch Durfee and his team practice and offered him his opinion. "He said, 'You know, Stephen, you work so fast and you do so many things, that you look like you're out of control. You need to give some jobs to other people.' Someone else said, 'You look like a hummingbird—you're twice as fast as everybody else, and you do so many things, but in the end it comes across as if you don't know what you're doing because you look frantic.'" Durfee's frantic pace in the kitchen during practice was a result of a workload that was not divided efficiently among the members of his team. By giving his teammates a few of his tasks, Durfee was able to work at a more reasonable pace and appear more in control of his environment.

As En-Ming Hsu puts it, "Even if it's the most creative and flavorful dessert, it won't win if it is unable to be completed or served on time. . . . Judges like to see a team challenge itself and make good use of time. If the team members work together, communicate, and share responsibility, it shows good team effort." A team's ability to work well together allows them to create more complex and challenging desserts. "The team needs to be well prepared and have control over their timing," explains Hsu. "Depending on the rules, the team may only have a few hours to prepare their plated dessert. They have to ensure that their program is feasible. If they maximize their time and make good use of their tools and equipment, they can push the boundaries and be impressive. However, if timing becomes a challenge, it's better for the team to stay simple and focus effort on enhancing the best-quality products available."

There's enough pressure built into the competition without a team adding extra stress by being disorganized and incommunicative. As Robert Ellinger puts it, "Some teams look great on paper, but can't handle the pressure when they get in the kitchen. They're just not prepared. It's like building a beautiful airplane. And then you put it in the air and the wings fall off because of the stress and pressure." His best advice for teams is to practice, practice, practice. "There are a lot of guys that I know who should've done really well, but didn't, because they didn't practice the stress element of the competition. The only way to win a competition is to practice. That's how you get all the kinks out. Otherwise, you might as well stay home."