

Just desserts

As indulging in sweet treats enjoys a post-lockdown renaissance, we talk to some of the UK's top pastry chefs to find out what makes the humble pudding so appealing

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Everyone knows when you're out for dinner, it is obligatory to dive straight in for (at least) three courses – a luxury many of us do not indulge in at home, apart from perhaps on special occasions. And as much as we enjoy our steak tartare starters and succulent black cod mains, many of us are waiting for the pièce de résistance, the joy de vivre, the grand finale... the dessert.

But what makes this last course so appealing? 'There is something so special about how desserts make you feel,' says Ami Ellis, head pastry chef at The Bailiwick in Egham (thebailiwick.co.uk). 'It is pure indulgence, it is not something you have all the time.' After emerging from 18 months of uncertainty, and with a longing to treat ourselves every so often, all eyes are on the UK's top pastry chefs. Elevating dessert menus and sweet treats, chefs such as Ellis are conjuring new indulgent creations that combine innovative flavours and immaculate presentation with nostalgia.

With the popularity of Instagrammable puddings on social media, the desire to order a dessert that doubles as an objet d'art is at its peak and our pastry chefs are taking note. 'Pastry is art and science working simultaneously,' says Ellis. 'When I am creating a dish, flavour always comes first but I believe how it looks is equally important so having an artistic flair definitely helps.'

For Angela Pace, head pastry chef at Davies & Brook (daviesandbrook.co.uk), no dessert ticks all the boxes more than her classic baked Alaska. 'It's a beautiful ice cream dome decorated with meringue, which we light on fire at the tableside with rum,' she explains. Dating back to the turn of the 19th century, this opulent dish may be a

classic but it is also open to experimentation. 'It's easy for it to be overwhelming so, I've kept it light with apricot sorbet, apricot ice cream and lemon verbena ice cream,' says Pace. 'I want to show it can have a real depth of flavour and brightness.'

Pace has also launched her own small-batch kombucha and chocolate brand called Foglia, where she experiments with delicious flavour combinations. 'I have always enjoyed learning about fermentation, a process that occurs in both kombucha and chocolate,' she says. 'I started making bonbons to make an otherwise perfect product more approachable, and show people how delicious and fun these small bites can be.' With bonbon flavours such as balsamic and olive oil, yuzu caramel cheesecake and brown butter miso, Pace enjoys blurring the line between sweet and savoury, for an elevated experience.

Cutting through the sweetness is something pastry chef Heather Kaniuk also embraces. The delicate dishes she created as executive pastry chef at Shangri-La and the Mandarin Oriental hotels led her to co-found doughnut brand Longboys (longboys.co.uk) with chef Graham Hornigold. Using the expertise picked up in Michelin-starred kitchens, Kaniuk has elevated the long cream-filled doughnut by using a light brioche base and replacing artificial colours and flavours with natural handmade fillings and toppings. 'Almost everything is made from scratch – right down to the chocolate décor or candied zest,' explains Kaniuk. 'The lemon meringue pie doughnut is my favourite. It's deceptively simple: the key is in balancing the tangy lemon curd and light meringue, so the overall doughnut is clean.'

Inspired by Kaniuk's after-school bakery visits in

New Zealand, Longboys represents how pleasant memories play an important role in the creation of a successful sweet treat. 'Pudding is the ultimate comfort food,' says Kaniuk. 'Many desserts are things we remember from childhood, and often remind us of special moments.'

Verena Lochmuller, development chef for Ottolenghi delis (ottolenghi.co.uk) agrees: 'For me a good pudding is like a security blanket, it makes me feel safe and that all is well in the world, even when it isn't.' The key to finding the balance between creativity, innovation and comfort is in elevating a classic. 'Sometimes I have an ingredient in mind that I really want to use, like black lime, and then build the rest of the dessert around it,' says Lochmuller. 'In that particular case, I was inspired by a classic key lime pie, using black limes as one of the key elements and a lightly sweetened goat's cheese cream. The base was made with oats and buckwheat. Yum.'

And often the most exciting creations are the ones that conjure happy memories. 'I once made a toasted spelt and honey ice cream,' remembers Ellis. 'I expected it to have a nutty flavour, but to my absolute delight it transported me straight back to drinking the leftover milk from my sugar puffs before school as a child: a delicious sweet, malty, toasty, honeyed grain taste.'

For those of us who enjoy a spoonful of sugar to round off a good meal or as an afternoon treat, there is always room for dessert, especially one that meets all the requirements of the ultimate nostalgic indulgence. And after the year we've all had, we're holding on to the good times. ●

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