

BY DIANE FOX

inspiring *Indulgence*

Fresh fruit, nuts, ganache and new sauces make familiar chain menu desserts even more irresistible

A "TEXAS-SIZED" PIECE OF CHEESECAKE GETS CROWNED WITH STRAWBERRY GLAZE AND A FRESH BERRY AT TUMBLEWEED SOUTHWEST GRILL.



- ▶ The 10 most frequently menued desserts at the Top 200 chain restaurants, and what's ordered most where
- ▶ How old-fashioned classics are updated with flavorful new twists
- ▶ How fresh, unadulterated berries and nuts add healthful elements to popular indulgences

Just the word “dessert” brings to mind images of a rich and moist chocolate cake capped with creamy icing, a luscious cheesecake drizzled with fresh fruit sauce or a heavenly pie with filling that oozes from beneath a golden, flaky crust.

Treating ourselves to something sweet at the end of a meal is a time-honored tradition. And menu developers at creative restaurant chains are finding more and more ways to fill that need.

A review of menus from 200 of the largest U.S. restaurant chains shows that, on average, casual-dining menus include six dessert offerings; family mid-scale chains provide seven; fast-casual chains, five;

quick-serve, two; and upscale chains, seven.

The most frequently menued desserts at chain restaurants (in order of menu mentions; second half of 2004) are displayed in Figure 1. Frequency of dessert mentions varies somewhat with chain segment. For example, among casual-dining chains, cheesecake is the most frequently mentioned dessert, followed by chocolate cake. Among family mid-scale operators, sundaes and splits are No. 1, followed by apple pie. At fast-casual chains, brownies and cookies tie for top billing. Cookies are No. 1 at quick-serve chains, followed by ice cream. And at upscale chains, cheesecake and chocolate cake earn the top slots.

PIES TAKE THE CAKE

On the list of most frequently menued desserts are three categories of pies — apple, fruit other than apple and cream pies — that account for 50 percent of all pie mentions on chain menus.

Pies satisfy consumers' need for homespun comfort in a classic favorite, while at the same time showcasing some updated twists, such as the following:



BOB EVANS

APPLE DUMPLING PIE

Whole, succulent apples are combined with a diced-apple filling in a flaky crust. Topped with caramel sauce and served warm — Bob Evans

CARAMEL APPLE GOLDRUSH

Sweet, sliced cinnamon apples tossed with butter and brown sugar, baked in a golden pastry shell. Served warm with vanilla ice cream and Maker's Mark whiskey caramel and raspberry sauces — LongHorn Steakhouse

IRON SKILLET PIE

Homemade apple pie baked with a flaky crust and a sprinkle of cinnamon. Served in a piping-hot skillet with Mexican brandy-butter sauce and topped with premium vanilla bean ice cream — Don Pablo's

COCONUT CREAM PIE

The soft, fresh coconut cream inside blends perfectly with the toasted-coconut shavings we sprinkle on top of the pie. Two kinds of cream are used: sweet whipped cream on top and coconut cream inside — Coco's

CREAM PIE

Choice of French silk, peanut butter fudge, coconut or banana cream — Fuddrucker's

“SKY HIGH” BOSTON CREAM PIE

Famous flaky crust, vanilla cream, layers of rich yellow cake, more vanilla cream, topped off with a glaze of chocolate fudge and real whipped cream — Marie Callender's

GO BANANAS! CREAM PIE

Banana cream in a chocolate shortbread crust, topped with whipped cream, caramel, coconut and glazed walnuts — Max & Erma's

LEMON SUPREME PIE

Layers of lemon-flavored filling, cream cheese and whipped cream topped with candied lemon slices — Perkins Restaurant & Bakery

BANANAS FOSTER PIE

Our twist on the New Orleans classic: chilled layers of sweet banana pudding and vanilla butter sponge cake in a cinnamon graham pastry shell, layered with banana rum sauce. Topped generously with fresh sliced bananas and warm buttery caramel — Dave & Buster's

OOEY GOOEY CARAMEL PIE

Graham cracker crust filled with creamy caramel and topped with whipped topping, chocolate chips and pecans — O'Charley's

FIGURE 1: Top 10 Desserts

Most frequently menued desserts at
Top 200 chain restaurants (last half 2004)

1. Cheesecake
2. Sundaes/splits
3. Chocolate cake
4. Ice cream
5. Brownie/brownie á la mode
6. Apple pie
7. Cookies
8. Fruit pie (other than apple)
9. Pastries
10. Cream pies



LAYERS OF RICH CHOCOLATE CAKE AND SWEET BUTTER CREAM ICING STACK UP IN OLIVE GARDEN'S CHOCOLATE LASAGNA.

THE DARKER SIDE OF DESSERT

Chocolate desserts represent an especially indulgent domain, rich with chocolate that's been layered, embedded, sprinkled and sauced. Lately, sophisticated elements like ganache, mousse and mascarpone have been sneaking in, enriching this category even more.

TRIPLE CHOCOLATE MELTDOWN

This rich and magnificently moist chocolate cake is topped with both dark and white chocolate. Its fudge-filled center will erupt upon first bite, richly rolling into vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate fudge — Applebee's

BLACK-OUT CAKE

Our deepest, richest, most fudgy chocolate cake, filled with chocolate chips and finished with almonds — The Cheesecake Factory

SMOTHERED CHOCOLATE CAKE

So rich, it's sinful. Served warm and topped with homemade chocolate ganache and sprinkled with pecan pieces — Romano's Macaroni Grill

DEATH BY CHOCOLATE

A Bennigan's original. Dutch chocolate ice cream and nutty Rocky Road ice cream, mixed with Twix cookie bars, then dipped in a rich chocolate sauce. Served on top of a crumbled Oreo cookie crust, with a side of hot chocolate topping — Bennigan's

CHOCOLATE RUSH

Two slices layered with rich chocolate fudge, dark chocolate mousse, white chocolate mascarpone mousse, chocolate and rich chocolate ganache, topped with shaved white chocolate and served with drizzled raspberry sauce — T.G.I. Friday's

CHOCOLATE SIN CAKE

Flourless chocolate cake covered with a semisweet ganache, served with a fresh berry sauce — Ruth's Chris Steak House

TRIPLE CHOCOLATE TRUFFLE CAKE

Three grand layers high — dense cake, the scrumptious chocolate truffle, then chocolate cake again — splashed with plenty of rich chocolate sauce and delicate whipped topping — Damon's Grill

KILLER CAKE

Three monstrous layers of chocolate cake, drizzled with white chocolate sauce and accented by dark chocolate — Jillian's

MOOEY GOOEY GRANDE SUNDAE

Choice of ice cream in a chocolate tortilla bowl topped with hot fudge and caramel — Fuddruckers

CHOCOLATE STAMPEDE

Two peaks of chocolate cake packed with six types of chocolate, including chocolate mousse, fudge icing and chocolate shavings. Served with vanilla bean ice cream, fudge sauce and whipped cream — LongHorn Steakhouse

MOUNTAIN HIGH MUDD PIE

Our homemade creation of chocolate and vanilla gourmet ice cream, peanut butter and cookie bits, chopped nuts, fudge and peanut butter in a chocolate cookie crust. Served in a pool of chocolate fudge and caramel sauce topped with whipped cream, chopped nuts and a cherry — Red Robin

SPARKLING VOLCANO

Enough for two or more! A giant rich chocolate-brownie cake stacked up high, served warm with vanilla ice cream, fresh whipped cream and topped with caramel and chocolate sauces — Rainforest Cafe

NUT CASES

As we investigated other ingredients associated with desserts, we couldn't help but notice a significant increase in the mention of nuts on desserts, particularly almonds, pecans and walnuts. Over the past five years, the number of mentions of almonds on desserts is up 32 percent; pecans, 62 percent; and walnuts, 186 percent. Here's a sampling of today's nutty desserts:

ALMONDS

TALL BOSTON CREAM CAKE

A triple layer of moist cake with a vanilla pastry cream filling and rich chocolate frosting, garnished with finely sliced almonds — Bickford's Grille

NUTS OVER CARAMEL SUNDAE

Nuts over caramel ice cream with swirls of caramel, chocolatey caramel cups and chopped almonds, under hot fudge, gobs of gooey caramel, whipped topping and almonds — Friendly's

KONA PIE

Mocha-almond-fudge ice cream and cookie crust topped with chocolate fudge, roasted almonds and whipped cream — Islands Fine Burgers & Drinks

BILLY MINER PIE

Mocha ice cream on a chocolate crust, with hot fudge, caramel and almonds — The Keg Steakhouse & Bar

OUTRAGEOUS PARFAIT

Our premium vanilla ice cream, sliced strawberries and hot-fudge sauce. Topped with whipped cream, chopped almonds and a maraschino cherry — Steak n Shake

NEW YORK CHEESECAKE

A delicious reduced-carb version of the smooth and creamy classic, with whipped cream and toasted almonds — T.G.I. Friday's

PECANS

BANANA & COCONUT "SPRING ROLLS"

Fresh bananas, toasted coconut and pecans in a rich vanilla cream wrapped in a crispy spring roll and served with dulce de leche ice cream, chocolate and cajeta sauces — Chevys Fresh Mex

PECAN PIE

Plenty of buttery pecans top our caramel filling, giving this Southern classic a deep, nutty flavor — Village Inn

CHOCOLATE TURTLE EMPANADAS

Flaky pastries filled with rich chocolate, caramel and pecans, rolled in cinnamon sugar. Served warm with ice cream and drizzled with chocolate and pecan praline sauce — On The Border

CINNAMON APPLE OBLIVION

Vanilla ice cream covered in cinnamon apples and pecans topped with caramel sauce — Outback Steakhouse

BROWNIE OBSESSION

A warm brownie covered in Ghirardelli Chocolate-fudge sauce, vanilla ice cream, caramel sauce and pecans — T.G.I. Friday's

PECAN CARROT CAKE

A Southern favorite. Light, tender, moist cake enriched with pecans, carrots and spices, separated with a whipped-cream-cheese frosting — Copeland's of New Orleans

PECAN TART

Luscious, Southern-style pecan tart with a flaky crust. Served with two scoops of vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce — Country Kitchen

BROWNIE SKILLET SUNDAE

Triple-chocolate brownie with pecans served in a sizzling skillet and topped with Mexican brandy-butter sauce and vanilla ice cream — El Chico

BANANAS FOSTER MUD PIE

Layers of vanilla and banana ice cream swirled with caramel and candied pecans, with sliced fresh banana, whipped cream and a drizzle of caramel — Mimis Cafe

SOUR CREAM APPLE PIE

Baked apples, sour cream topping, sprinkled with cinnamon and buttery pecans — Marie Callender's

KENTUCKY PIE

A hot chocolate-chip-pecan pie topped with vanilla ice cream, whipped cream, chocolate syrup and a cherry — McAlister's Deli

WALNUTS

ITALIAN CRÈME CAKE

A LaRosa's exclusive. Two layers of buttermilk cake with coconut and walnuts, filled and covered with creamy icing, garnished with chopped walnuts and served with raspberry sauce. Enough to share — LaRosa's

CHOCOLATE CHIP PARADISE PIE

A warm, chewy bar layered with chocolate chips, walnuts and coconut. Topped with vanilla ice cream and drizzled with hot fudge and caramel — Chili's

CHOCOLATE MOTHERLODE CAKE

Super-moist slice of our six-layer chocolate cake with chocolate chips, fresh walnuts and chocolate fudge frosting — Claim Jumper

MINI STRAWBERRY-UPSIDE-DOWN CHEESECAKE

Walnut-and-graham-cracker crust with strawberry sauce — Houlihan's

BANANA CREAM PIE

Fresh bananas, our mouth-watering banana cream and toasted walnuts have made this a favorite for years. Two kinds of cream are used: sweet whipped cream on top and banana cream inside — Coco's

HOT FUDGE KAHLUA BROWNIE

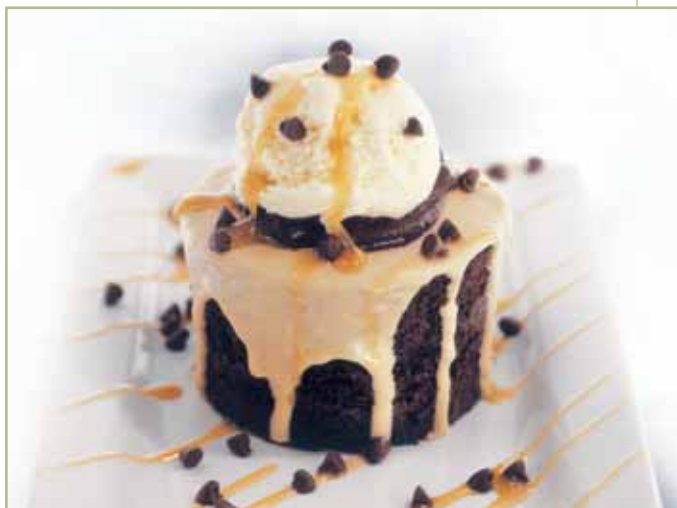
For the chocolate lover: a warm walnut-topped brownie topped with hot fudge and served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and whipped cream — Famous Dave's

CARROT CAKE

The finest golden carrot cake layered with a delectable cream-cheese frosting and chopped walnuts. Garnished with grated carrots — Flying J Travel Plaza



WHETHER FILLED, MOUNDED OR SURROUNDED, TODAY'S STANDOUT DESSERTS PILE ON THE FLAVOR AND OFFER A MULTI-DIMENSIONALLY SWEET EXPERIENCE.



MODEST INDULGENCE

Some diners seek a more modest indulgence, and for them there's a growing category that might be considered "better for you." Many of these items rely on the appeal of fresh fruit. A search through chain menus for desserts on the lower end of the decadence spectrum uncovered these interesting options:

GOBLET OF FRESH STRAWBERRIES

— The Cheesecake Factory

BERRY LEMON CHEESECAKE, WEIGHT WATCHERS

A scoop of lemon cheesecake sweetly served over fresh strawberry slices and drizzled with a crushed raspberry sauce — Applebee's

FRESH BERRIES

— Shula's Steak House

FRESH SEASONAL BERRIES WITH SWEET CREAM SAUCE

A celebration of natural flavors. Simple and simply sensational — Ruth's Chris Steak House

BLUEBERRY D'LITE

Low-fat vanilla yogurt topped with blueberries and toasted almonds — Ruby Tuesday

REDUCED-FAT APPLE PIE

No sugar added. Our double-crust pie is lower in fat and cholesterol — Perkins Restaurant & Bakery

FRESH STRAWBERRY PIE

With no sugar added. Only the sweetest, red ripe strawberries are used every day. Gently tossed in a light, flavorful glaze and mounded in a freshly baked crust — Marie Callender's

FRESH FRUIT PLATE

— Maggiano's

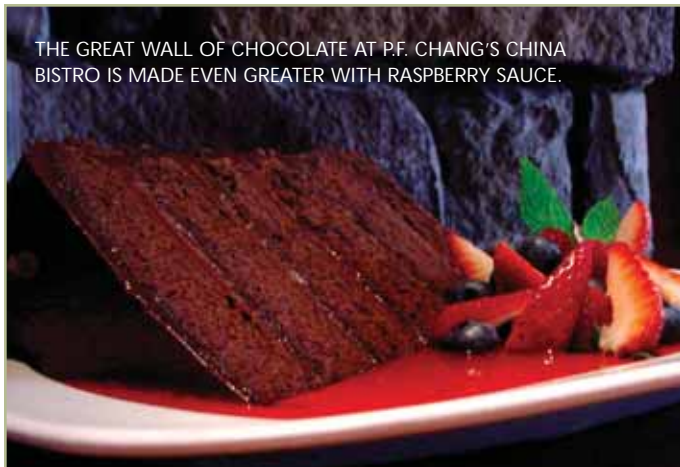
SUGAR-FREE CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

With unsweetened whipped cream — Legal Sea Foods

SKINNY MINNIE MOUSSE

Our fabulous chocolate mousse dome is served on a cookie with whipped cream and a strawberry. Made with low-carb chocolate — Houlihan's

THE GREAT WALL OF CHOCOLATE AT P.F. CHANG'S CHINA BISTRO IS MADE EVEN GREATER WITH RASPBERRY SAUCE.



PIÑA COLADA BREAD PUDDING

Homemade with pineapple and coconut served warm with rich coconut-rum sauce — Bahama Breeze

MAPLE BUTTER BLONDIE

A blondie baked with pecans and topped with a scoop of ice cream and chopped walnuts. Served warm and covered tableside with a rich, sizzling maple-butter sauce — Applebee's

PANNA COTTA

Baked custard in a light tropical fruit sauce — Bice Ristorante

COOKIE ESPRESSO

An edible bowl made of warm chocolate-chip cookie filled with French vanilla ice cream and drizzled with espresso-chocolate and butterscotch sauces, finished with whipped cream — Champ's

SOURDOUGH BREAD PUDDING

San Francisco-style sourdough baked with raisins, apples and cinnamon and topped with sweet whiskey sauce and whipped cream — Claim Jumper

BANANAS SUPREME

Sliced bananas and vanilla ice cream on warm banana-nut bread with hot homemade butterscotch-brandy sauce — Bahama Breeze

WARM CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING

French-bread custard pudding with shaved white chocolate and Frangelico cream sauce — Copeland's of New Orleans

SOPAPILLAS

A plate full of fried puff pastries, sprinkled with powdered sugar, in a pool of Mexican brandy-butter sauce — Don Pablo's

SAUCE-ABILITIES

While many of the desserts on Top 200 chain menus mention caramel and chocolate sauce, we found a number of other sauces — buttery, spirited, fruity, to name a few — adding yet another dimension to a dessert's flavor profile. Just picture the following:

APPLE DUMPLING

A tart whole apple baked into a flaky pastry shell, then covered with cinnamon sauce and served with two scoops of ice cream — Country Kitchen

COWBOY CHEESECAKE

A Texas-sized piece of creamy cheesecake with a flaky graham cracker crust. Drizzled with a summer-sweet strawberry glaze — Tumbleweed Southwest Grill

GRILLED STICKIES À LA MODE

Two slices of our famous sweet and cinnamon loaf, grilled in butter and topped with vanilla ice cream and a warm honey sauce — Eat'n Park

DAVE'S WORLD-FAMOUS BREAD PUDDING

Served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, smothered in praline sauce and topped with whipped cream — Famous Dave's Grill and Barbeque

KEY LIME PIE

An authentic, tart and creamy pie served with raspberry and kiwi-lime sauces — LongHorn Steakhouse

BERRIES & CREAM NUVOLA

Red currants, blackberries, blueberries and raspberries float upon a cloud of lemon cream and semolina cake — Bertucci's

FRESH SEASONAL BERRIES

Served with sabayon sauce — Morton's, The Steakhouse

THE GREAT WALL OF CHOCOLATE

Six layers of rich chocolate cake frosted with semisweet chocolate chips and served with raspberry sauce — P.F. Chang's China Bistro

CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY PASSION

Sinfully delicious, this homemade triple treat features a moist chocolate brownie topped with rich vanilla ice cream, buttery nougatine, bittersweet chocolate and a spirited raspberry sauce — Rock Bottom

take-away tips

- ▶ **EMBRACE THE DARK SIDE:** Dark chocolate delivers complex flavors and enjoys a healthful reputation
- ▶ **GO NUTS:** Full of satisfying crunch, nutrition and flavor, nuts deserve more attention on the dessert menu

These delectable desserts prove that, while favorite flavors like apples, cinnamon, rich chocolate and fresh berries are sure to please, creative menu developers and pastry chefs are finding even more ways to entice the American sweet tooth. ☺

DIANE FOX, a principal of menu-and-trend analyst Food Beat, can be emailed at dfox@foodbeat.com