

Soft desserts may offer  
creamy comfort, but  
they're a solid platform  
for experimentation.

# DESSERT GOES

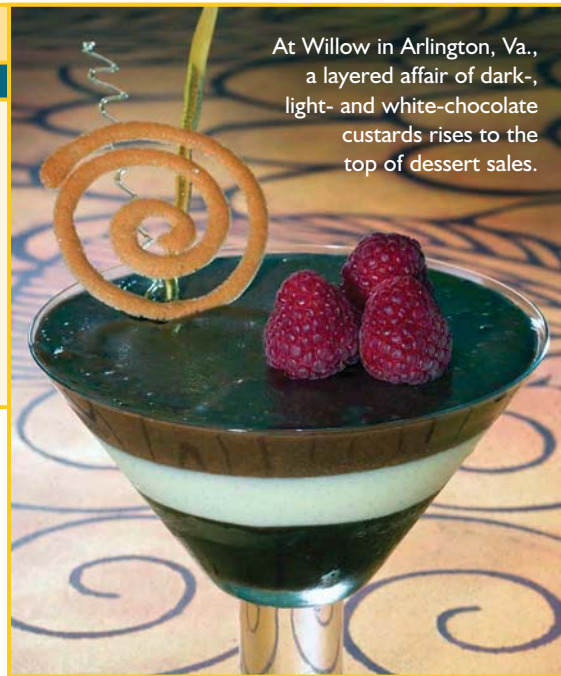
Full of flavor innovation  
and old-fashioned charm,  
pudding-based sweets prove  
their versatility and appeal

# Soft

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ Custards, crème brûlées, puddings, panna cottas and other creamy confections emerging in the dessert world
- ▶ Innovative pastry chefs who are giving soft desserts some cutting-edge flavors
- ▶ A global view of pudding's appeal, from English trifles to Spanish flan and Asian tapioca



At Willow in Arlington, Va., a layered affair of dark-, light- and white-chocolate custards rises to the top of dessert sales.

BY JOAN LANG

From comforting puddings to delicate trifles, gently infused panna cotta and sophisticated crème brûlée, custards are bringing a bit of old-fashioned solace — not to mention solid sales — to casual neighborhood menus.

There are also some exciting experimental notions, such as Sam Mason's daring Tonka Bean Brûlée with sour cherry and marjoram at wd-50 in New York City. On the opposite coast are Emily Luchetti's luxurious seasonal-fruit-soaked puddings at San Francisco's Farallon and such confections as Blue By You (blueberry charlotte cream and lemon ganache sandwiched between layers of white velvet cake) and Fruit and Cream Tarts (classic tarts filled with fresh fruit, almond frangipane and vanilla Bavarian cream) at Sue McCown's new Coco La Ti Da in Seattle. There's no doubt that creative chefs are taking advantage of custard's biddable nature for all they're worth.

### CUSTOMERS GO SOFT

"Who doesn't love pudding?" asks Matt Selby, executive chef of Steuben's, the new neighborhood-restaurant sibling of Denver's Vesta Dipping Grill. Selby is used to watching customers' eyes light up when they're given the option of classic butterscotch pudding on a menu that also includes such comforting delights as Truck Stop Chocolate Cake and chocolate-

chip cookies straight out of the oven, so he knows whereof he speaks.

"You can do just about anything with custard," avers Pastry Chef Kate Jansen, who opened Willow in Arlington, Va., in late 2005 with chef-partner Tracy O'Grady. Let her count the ways, from stovetop custards like crème anglaise and sabayon to baked custards, including crème caramel, crème brûlée and flan. Thickened by the controlled coagulation of egg proteins, custards are used universally in pastry- and dessert-making, Jansen says. If you think about it, even ice cream starts with a custard.

Jansen has examples all over the Willow menu, loving the endless directions she can take with dessert flavors and presentation. One of the top sellers is the Triple Chocolate Custard Parfait, layers of silken crème anglaise variously flavored with dark, light and white chocolate, stiffened slightly with whipped cream and gelatin and assembled in stages in a clear-glass coupe. After assembling each layer, the coupes go into the walk-in to set. A bit time-consuming, yes, but once complete, the parfaits stay cold in the refrigerator, ready to go, making them especially suitable for Willow's many parties.

### CUSTARD CARRIES THE DAY

Think of custards as building blocks to create any number of comforting or swanky desserts, Jansen says. She's particularly fond of trifles, an English-style

# CUSTARD *the World Over*

The Brits have it right when they refer to the dessert course as “pudding.” Whether it’s Brazilian coconut custards or classic crème brûlée, English cabinet pudding or Italian tiramisu, custard confections are more than just nursery food. Rice pudding alone stretches across the globe, from Asia to the United States. Here’s a sampling of some other pudding-style favorites from around the world.

## GREAT BRITAIN

**Junket** — A sweet, mild, pudding-like dessert made with milk, sugar, flavorings and rennin, which causes delicate coagulation; served chilled

**Trifle** — Cake layered with sherry, jam and custard, chilled for several hours, then garnished with whipped cream, fruit, nuts and grated chocolate

**Flummery** — A sweet, soft pudding made of fruit thickened and cooked with cornstarch and sweetener

## ITALY

**Tiramisu** — Like English trifle, this consists of ladyfingers soaked with coffee and Marsala, layered with fresh mascarpone cheese and grated chocolate

**Budino di ricotta** — An Italian ricotta pudding, similar in texture to cheesecake but not as sweet

**Panna cotta** — A light, silky “cooked cream” of eggs and cream (and sometimes gelatin), which can be flavored with just about anything

## FRANCE

**Crème caramel** — A French bistro standard, custard made in a caramel-coated mold; also known as crème renversée

**Crème brûlée** — Literally, burnt cream, or custard that has been chilled and then sprinkled with brown or granulated sugar and caramelized under a broiler to create a brittle crust

**Pot de crème** — Rich, thick and eggy, made with heavy cream and sometimes chocolate or mocha, served in a small ramekin

**Oeufs à la neige** — A “floating island” of poached meringue with custard sauce and berries

**Riz à l'impératrice** — Rice pudding, in French

## UNITED STATES

**Pudding** — From chocolate to butterscotch to banana, a dollop of Americana

**Cup custard** — The classic simple mixture of eggs, milk, sugar and vanilla

**Rice pudding** — Rice, milk, eggs, sugar, vanilla — what could be simpler or more satisfying?

dessert she constructs like a cake, with layers of sponge cake, pastry cream and berries. A trifle’s light texture is particularly welcome in warmer weather.

Then there are Chocolate Tiramisu Napoleon and Pumpkin Praline Mousse Cake, Warm Apple Nutmeg Custard Tart and Pineapple Crème Brûlée, rich with caramelized fresh pineapple and dark rum in a neutral custard base, garnished with a coconut tuile and torched from a slightly warmed state to order. You get the feeling there’s nothing Jansen won’t do with custard.

Sometimes, one is enough, especially when it’s as decadent as Lori’s Killer Banana Bread Pudding with warm bourbon sauce and whipped cream, a house specialty at Home restaurant in San Francisco. Why so popular?

“It’s really, really delicious,” explains Director of Operations Annette Yang, describing a rich banana-bread base that gives the finished product a soft, creamy texture and an unusual flavor. “It’s an absolute classic — we’ve had it on the menu since day one.”

## COLLECTING THE CUSTARD DATA

Home’s staff and customers are not alone in their devotion to pudding desserts.

“Custards represent a very simple and sophisticated way to add something that’s sweet and rich, yet still fairly light,” says Maria Caranfa, director of Mintel Menu Insights, which tracks menu trends and innovations from top chain and independent

**Indian pudding** — A dense, old-fashioned dessert made with cornmeal, milk and molasses

**Bread pudding** — Once a thrifty use of day-old bread, this dessert of custard-soaked baked bread and flavorings has become a dessert category unto its own

### MIDDLE EUROPE

**Noodle pudding** — From kugel to Nudlov náky, noodles are mixed with custard and baked to produce a rich, comforting dessert

### SPAIN & LATIN AMERICA

**Flan** — Caramel custard with a Spanish accent

**Dulce de leche** — A rich, South American caramel pudding, made from sweetened condensed milk

**Arroz con leche** — Rice pudding, Latin style

**Marquesota** — Cuban custard cake based on sponge cake, often flavored with orange

**Tie Me Up** — A pudding-like Caribbean confection consisting of cornmeal tied up in a banana leaf and steamed

### ASIA

**Tapioca** — Extracted from the starchy root of the cassava plant (also called manioc), tapioca is common in Asian and African desserts, such as Asian-style coconut tapioca

**Taro pudding** — Easy to digest and with a slightly nutty taste, taro lends its delicate flavor and texture to many East Asian sweets



USA RICE FEDERATION

**Rice pudding** — at once homey and worldly — can take on just about any sweet flavors, as in this lemon blueberry pudding.

**Steamed rice and coconut milk** — Versions of this rice-pudding-like confection exist all over Asia, often accompanied by other tropical fruits

**Yokan** — Japanese red-bean gelatin

restaurants. Looking at menu mentions of soft desserts, Mintel found that crème brûlée tied with ice cream for the No. 1 position on the dessert menus of fine-dining restaurants during the second quarter of 2006, followed by bread pudding in the No. 6 spot and mousse at No. 8. Panna cotta, the Italian custard you'd have been hard-pressed to find just five years ago, holds slot No. 15.

What's really interesting, however, are the flavors these custards come in. It's no surprise that vanilla and vanilla bean lead the flavor parade in crème brûlée, but Caranfa also cites such unusual varieties as ginger, oak spice, peanut brittle, green tea, mango, lavender and bay leaf as recent appearances on the crème brûlée round-up.

"Liqueurs like limoncello and bourbon, savory herbs and spices, 'school flavors' like banana and peanut butter — you name it, and it can go into crème brûlée," Caranfa says. "The category really lends itself to experimentation."

### INNOVATION-FRIENDLY

Chain menus are jumping into pudding with both feet, as in the case of the crème brûlée on multi-unit Claim Jumper's dessert menu.

"Not only did they put it on the menu," Caranfa says, "but they did it in full force." The operation even has a green-tea-and-ginger version, she notes.

This ease of flavor innovation could indeed be the reason crème brûlée has become such a force to be

# Soft ON TOP

A list of the top 10 pudding-like desserts across all segments

1. Crème brûlée
2. Flan
3. Panna cotta
4. Custard
5. Tiramisu
6. Mousse
7. Bread pudding
8. Banana cream pie
9. Zabaglione
10. Crème brûlée cheesecake

SOURCE:  
MINTEL MENU INSIGHTS DATA  
FROM THE 350 LARGEST CHAIN  
RESTAURANTS, 150 INDEPENDENTS,  
50 TOP CHEFS AND 25 BEVERAGE-  
FOCUSED RESTAURANTS

reckoned with on menus — now that it's fairly familiar to customers, chefs can tinker with it almost endlessly.

Take the Black Chai Tea Crème Brûlée with tomatillo marmalade served at Wish in Miami. Everyone else does. For this top seller, Executive Chef Michael Bloise and Pastry Chef Jason Morale borrow ingredients from the savory side of the pantry to complement Wish's Asian-accented menu concept.

"Chai has a lot of earthy flavors, and it pairs well with the light acidity of the tomatillo," says Bloise, who often looks to his Vietnamese roots for inspiration. Blended chai is mixed with additional spices and infused into the custard base, strained, baked in a ceramic water bath, then encrusted with sugar and caramelized to order so the crust stays really crisp. It's served with madeleines and a green-glass ramekin of sweet-tart tomatillo marmalade, echoing traditional tea and marmalade.

"Crème brûlée is a lot of fun because it's so versatile. You can use whatever's in season, like local mulberries or figs, and people will always want to order it," says Bloise, noting that a fig crème brûlée with gingerbread ice cream was a huge hit during the holidays last fall.

Bloise likes rice pudding for the same reason. Right now, he's experimenting with a citrus/rice-pudding tiramisu comprising classic

ladyfingers soaked in coffee liqueur and paired with sushi rice, delicately flavored with orange and kumquat, along with a very thin layer of whipped mascarpone, powdered cocoa and candied, grated orange zest.

"It really suits the sensual, tropical ambience at Wish," says Bloise. "Light, creamy and clean."

David Carmichael, the pastry chef at Oceana in New York City, is another pudding and custard fan. He spoons fresh huckleberry crème brûlée into a Hungarian strudel cup lined with sweet dulce de leche and huckleberry syrup, then crisps the top under muscovado sugar for extra character. His panna cotta may be plain vanilla, but it's accessorized with Muscat grapes and African Autumn tea syrup.

## SWEET NOSTALGIA

What's really got Carmichael's motor revving right now is Warm Sticky Toffee Pudding, an iconic dessert from the Lake District of England, birthplace of Carmichael's wife. The classic version consists of a rich date-cake base gilded with rum-flavored toffee syrup that is poured boiling hot onto the cooked cake to produce a gooey, molten pudding. At Oceana, it's made with the most carefully considered ingredients — skinned, imported dates, cream and butter, plenty of Myers's rum — all set and

Pudding-based desserts impart a down-home appeal but take well to a vast range of flavors.



CHERRY MARKETING INSTITUTE



WISH

# Cream OF THE CROP

Mintel Menu Insights mined these flavorful examples of custard and panna cotta desserts from its database

## French Lavender Crème Brûlée with Citrus-Laced Tuile

40 Sardines, Overland Park, Kan.

## Crème Brûlée En Parade with Bay Leaf, Tiramisu and Poire William

Aureole, New York City

## Rhubarb and Hibiscus Soup with Crème Fraîche Panna Cotta

Annisa, New York City

## Brazilian Passion and Mango Crème Brûlée

The Rattlesnake Club, Detroit

## Saffron Panna Cotta with Peaches, Peach Sorbetto and Lemon Balm

Babbo, New York City

## Candied Guava Panna Cotta with Pineapple-Ginger Infusion

Norman's, Miami

chilled in individual portions, then allowed to come back up to temperature on top of the convection oven during the dinner hour. To order, the puddings are warmed in the oven and then served with house-made black-walnut ice cream.

“Thirty seconds in the oven, and boom! You’ve got a dessert that most Americans have never tasted — very rustic but with an awesome texture,” Carmichael says.

It seems more Americans will be getting a taste of this English treat. Last July, Häagen-Dazs premiered its limited-edition sticky toffee pudding ice cream flavor — a vanilla base with sticky toffee sauces and chunks of brown sugar cake — and plans to make it available until January 2007.

would eclipse both chocolate and bread pudding.

“The butterscotch kills them both,” Selby says, “I think because it’s just a little bit different than what Mom made.”

Especially if Mom didn’t make it so painstakingly, starting with dark brown sugar in a stainless-steel pot, toasting it just a bit to develop color and flavor before adding butter, and melting it slowly, until it’s time to add the heavy cream and start whisking.

“I know by now, from the feeling in my whisk, when it’s ready,” Selby says. “You’ve got to smell, taste, watch — and make sure you don’t have anything else going on when you’re making butterscotch pudding.”

Equal thought goes into the presentation.

“I wanted to serve it in a parfait glass, but a skin forms on the top unless you cover it, and the surface gets spoiled if you remove plastic wrap,” he laments. Some messing about followed, and now the crew packs the finished pudding into large pastry bags stored in a bowl in the walk-in. They pipe it to order into a chilled parfait glass, then drift fresh vanilla whipped cream across the top with a pair of Nilla Wafers for crunch.

“This is serious food, but we’re finding the fun,” Selby concludes, summing up the appeal of these age-old, rich and creamy treats. ☺

JOAN LANG, founder and editorial director of Full Plate Communications in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, can be e-mailed at [klang@full-plate.com](mailto:klang@full-plate.com).

### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

► **WHY NOT PANNA COTTA?** This creamy Italian number just might be the next crème brûlée

► **PILE IT ON:** Pudding, layered with cake, cookies, nuts or sticky sauce, makes a signature parfait

## KILLER BUTTERSCOTCH

Even the simplest pudding benefits from extra care. Take the butterscotch pudding at Steuben’s. Selby and partner Josh Wolkon wanted the menu at their new restaurant to reverberate with American childhood favorites in updated guises. For savories, that means specialties like braised short ribs with mashed potatoes and baby carrots, deviled eggs and green-chile cheeseburgers. On the dessert list, pudding was a natural, but little did Selby suspect the butterscotch