

# How To Prepare Gourmet Desserts

By Curt Hagedorn

If, like a growing number of us, you're addicted to the cooking shows on The Food Network or PBS or The Discovery or Learning Channels (or the Home and Garden Network, or Fine Living.... or....) you've probably seen one of those "Dessert Challenge" shows where the nation's top chefs create fantasies of sugar and chocolate that seem to owe more to architecture than they do to cuisine. And of course, if you're a dessert aficionado, you've got a long list of favorites from that fudgesicle bought off a truck on a hot summer day to the always satisfying magic of cracking the hard caramel shell on top of a creamy crème brûlée to the perfect chocolate truffle or two from your local chocolatier (or that precious Godiva gold ballotin or beribboned box from Maison du Chocolat.)

But to create gourmet desserts at home is a matter of picking your battles. As much as you might want to emulate Jacques Torres and create elaborate structures of your very own design out of chocolate and a few simple tools (a sharp knife, a vat of hot water, some plastic molds, a bit of cellophane) be aware that, even if you have a knack, the two foot high white chocolate fantasy is not for amateurs. But if you use high quality ingredients, take advantage of what's available for purchase and maybe even take a class or two, you can add some "gourmet" selections to your repertoire – and remember, even if it doesn't look like the dessert of your dreams, it's still going to taste divine.

If you're faced with the sad knowledge that you're really not much of a cook or baker, don't despair; a lot of "gourmet" in dessert category is really about assembly. For example, the now ubiquitous tiramisu is really just a lot of bought ingredients put together – purchased ladyfingers soaked in espresso and/or liqueur, mascarpone cheese, sugar, some whipped cream and shaved chocolate – construct this classic in a gorgeous trifle bowl and stand back for applause. Or trifle, for that matter – you can make a gorgeous custard and your own sponge cake, or purchase some all natural vanilla pudding and a versatile angel food or pound cake and layer with fresh fruit tossed with a bit of sugar and liqueur or marsala and top with some liqueur sweetened whipped cream for another spectacular creation. And remember, gourmet can often just mean "garnish."

Keep a brick of good chocolate like Vahrlona or Scharfenberger around to make luxurious curls with your vegetable peeler, and remember an egg white whipped up with cold water makes the perfect varnish for dipping flowers and fruits and leaves which you then can dust with superfine sugar for gorgeous edible decorations. A basic bakery cake – or even a frozen Sara Lee pound cake – can be the beginning of a spectacular gourmet dessert– slice it into layers, moisten with

rum or Cointreau, layer it with good orange marmalade and raspberry jam and frost with flavored whipped cream, or even decorate with whipped cream from a can (if you must.) Also, remember dessert doesn't have to be overpowering to be gourmet – some perfect crisp apples or mellow pears, seedless grapes that almost every market has in green, red or deep purple, plus a couple of cheeses – a Parmigiano Reggiano and a perfectly ripened triple crème Brie, for example, some nuts in a bowl and a good dessert wine – a Sauternes, for example – can be a perfect dessert after a rustic meal, and not a bit of chocolate or spun sugar in sight.

Check your local magazine or newspaper for the best in local bakeries and chocolatiers. There may be a truffle master living just down the street from you who can provide spectacular creations which, when served one or two on a tiny plate with a Pepperidge Farm cookie and garnished with a candied violet, makes a great little after brunch treat. Finally, master one simple, comforting recipe from scratch – apple tart or cheesecake or chocolate mousse – something that's not very difficult to make, and easy to make your own by tweaking flavors with liqueurs or other ingredients and let that be your signature dessert: the "best apple pie you've ever tasted" is always gourmet (and you can always dress it up with a little Haagen-Dazs Rum Raisin.)

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