



OPINION • FOOD

HOW RESTAURANTS CAN MAKE THEIR POST-HOLIDAY MENUS MORE FRUITFUL

State of the Plate: Chefs have a long runway of opportunity to use more fruit in their cold-weather menus, in both sweet and savory dishes.

By **Nancy Kruse** on Jan. 06, 2023



The Caramel Apple Pancakes from The Cheesecake Factory. / Photo courtesy of The Cheesecake Factory.



From the menu POV, few things are as predictable and consistent as the post-holiday demand for healthful, or at least perceived healthful, food and beverage. Consumers guilt themselves into a sin-and-repent mindset, in which they firmly resolve to make up for their holiday follies, if not for longer-running dietary overindulgence.

Chefs rev up menus with whole grains and seasonal salads, enhanced protein and reduced sugar, but it's interesting to note that fruit is rarely a headliner in these offerings. This is puzzling, given not only the ready availability and affordability of fruits of all kinds, but also the fact that fruit doesn't evoke the polarizing reaction among many diners of, say, Brussels sprouts, broccoli or beets. This suggests a long runway of opportunity for restaurants to build items around fruit, which, especially in the cold-weather months, brightens both dishes and days.

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Applied Technique. Spoiler alert: Much of the creativity lavished on fruit is in the service of indulgence not health, with knock-out dishes designed to dazzle through the application of culinary technique. That's certainly true at Blue Duck Tavern in Washington, D.C., where the Vanilla Crème Brûlée constitutes a sophisticated triple threat with orange-blossom meringue, charred tangerine and aerated yuzu. The latter Japanese citrus is having a moment in the menu sun. According to RE's sister company Technomic, it's one of the five fastest-growing fruits on menus, where its appearance jumped 4% in the past year.

Il Piatto, also in D.C., burnishes its Italian image with Pera in Camicia, poached pear with radicchio, toasted walnuts and goat cheese; while in Indianapolis, the seasonal menu at Spoke & Steele has included Butternut Squash Hummus with poached apricot and a nectarine reduction.

Michelin-recognized Noreetuh in New York City delivers on its modern-Hawaiian positioning with a nifty Pineapple Upside Down Cake, in which the title ingredient has been caramelized and plated with cherry compote and coconut ice cream. On a simpler though no less tropical note, the Brûléed Hawaiian Pineapple is picture-perfect and perfectly finished with lime zest and a hint of sea salt.

and aiiea sai, a prized sea salt from Kauai.

Independents don't have a monopoly on transforming with technique. In June, The Habit Burger Grill introduced a limited-time Chargrilled Peach Salad, which gave the fruit an appealing caramelization and underscored the brand's chargrilling expertise. Last summer, Miller's Ale House added an equally cool Chicken & Pear Salad with brown-sugar roasted pears and candied pecans. The Caramel Apple Pancakes at The Cheesecake Factory are topped with glazed apples and crispy caramel pecans, and at Hash Kitchen in Phoenix, caramelized bananas enhance the Coconut & Almond Encrusted French Toast.



The Bruleed Hawaiian Pineapple from Noreetuh. / Photo by Evan Sung.

Bananarama. This last dish provides a nice segue to a look at how chefs are using our most popular fruit. Mostly, they are not. Despite the fact that we consumed around 15 pounds per capita last year according to the USDA, bananas don't make Technomic's top-five list of most-menued fruits. Lately, though, there have been some sparks flying that may be a harbinger of change.

In winter 2022, Eater's San Francisco newsletter extolled the appearance of bananas in savory delicacies like Bananas and Caviar at award-winning Californios, where the "perfect little plate" consists of grilled baby banana, savory caramel and caviar. The story also gave a shout-out to Abacá, the lauded Filipino operation, where Banana Heart Salad with smoked coconut vinaigrette takes pride of place on the bill of fare.

On the opposite coast in Washington, D.C., Rasika's take on contemporary Indian cuisine includes Avocado Banana Chaat spiked with cumin and red chili powder, with date chutney on the side. Speaking of condiments, banana ketchup figures prominently in Filipino cuisine, and customers at Max's Restaurants, operating throughout the Philippines, the Western U.S. and Canada, can take home bottles of the popular house version.

On the sweet side, Smokey Bones updates a Southern classic with Roasted Banana Pudding with the requisite cookie wafers. Less classic but no less attractive are the Banana Pudding Tiramisu at Cento in Los Angeles and the Roasted Banana Zeppole at Compère Lapin in New Orleans. The latter Italianate doughnut is right in line with other glamorous doughnut options, like the wonderful Roasted Banana Doughnut with chocolate glaze and candied popcorn at Fan-Fan Doughnuts in New York City.



Noreetuh's Pineapple Upside Down Cake. / Photo courtesy of Noreetuh.

Apple Varietals. Technomic reports that apples are the second most popular fruit on the menu after lemons, and savvy operators have taken to promoting their use by specific variety, just as wine lists indicate grape varietals. This provides a patina of authenticity and adds a bit of cachet.

Grimaldi's Pizzeria recently introduced a Fruit 'N Nut Spinach Salad that uses Granny Smith apples that also appear with meats and cheeses on the Winter Bridge Board—the chain's answer to the ubiquitous charcuterie board. Chicken Salad Chick's Seasonal Spinach Salad last fall used Fuji apples, while daytime cafe operator Turning Point offers an original twist with Winter Toast made with Golden Delicious apples and goat cheese, along with walnuts, cranberries and honey.

Vedge, the celebrated vegetable-centric restaurant in Philadelphia, makes already trendy Sticky Toffee Pudding even trendier with Honeycrisp apple alongside black walnut ice cream. In Indianapolis, local favorite Milktooth takes a different tack and features local apples from County Line Orchard in the Farmers Salad.

Fruitful future. One of the most extraordinary success stories in the produce category over the past couple of decades has been the meteoric rise of the avocado. While the fruit got an early boost thanks to its "good" fats, the real key to its rising popularity is its combination of

appealing color, texture and nonstop versatility.

This last attribute is opening the door to Avocados 2.0 on menus that will take greater advantage of its potential in beverages. The drink list at Pushing Daisies, a Mexican hacienda-influenced tequila bar in Nashville, includes El Aguacate, which combines artisanal mezcal and cold-pressed avocado juice. At La Cava del Tequila, a hacienda-themed bar at Epcot in Orlando, La Cava Avocado is a crafty combination of tequila, melon liqueur, lime juice and fresh avocado. But there's nothing truly new about avocado as an ingredient in margaritas: Texans regularly weigh in on their favorites at establishments like Curra's Grill, which claims to be the home of the original avocado margarita in Austin.

Avocado is also making the scene in nonalcoholic quaffs like the Avocado Smoothie at iPho in Minneapolis, where it can be topped with tapioca or lychee-coconut jelly, and Tropical Smoothie Cafe's Avocolada, which is a vibrant blend of avocado and pineapple, spinach and kale and coconut and lime.

And that mirage hovering on the horizon is not an illusion. It is actually dates, the sweet fruit with a storied history that has been cultivated for millennia and mentioned in the Bible and Koran. With the growth of Mediterranean cuisine and widening availability of products from California, we can expect to see more examples like the Brussels Sprouts, Date and Parmesan Marketplace Side with Medjool dates, which debuted recently at fast-casual Lemonade in Los Angeles.

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TASTE TRACKER: STARBUCKS, POPEYES AND HABIT BURGER GRILL DOUBLE UP ON FLAVOR

IHOP turns fruity; Pokeworks gets toasty; Donatos goes smoky; Red Lobster pairs up; and a bunch of new menu items rush out of the pipeline this week.

By [Patricia Cobe](#) on Jan. 09, 2023



Photographs courtesy of the brands

