

Share the Love

By Amy Culbertson Photos by Ralph Lauer

In American confectionary realms, the mantra that has long held sway is “the richer the better.” But frankly, after polishing off an elaborate meal, tucking into a big, gooey, elaborate, hyper-sweet dessert production is the last thing likely to make one feel amorous. European-style desserts — less rich, less sweet, simpler and more pettily portioned — are a much more sophisticated and altogether happier way to end a meal. Take, for example, the affogato. Technically “affogato al caffè,” or “drowned in coffee,” at its simplest is a shot of hot espresso poured over a scoop of vanilla gelato or ice cream in a cup. Sweet, bitter, creamy, aromatic, hot and cold, changing as you eat it, it is effortlessly elegant, and the perfect foil for savoring that last half-glass of red wine.

It’s such a lovable dessert, in fact, that extending the cute factor of desserts-in-a-cup to other confections seems a natural step for Valentine’s Day, or any special day.

The possibilities for cup sweets are endless, from a simple presentation of ice cream or sorbet topped with poached fruit or a chocolate or caramel sauce to mousses, puddings, pots de crème, mini-parfaits, dessert soups, curds and custards, and crèmes brûlées. The only finishing touch needed is a crunchy garnish for texture contrast, or a crisp little cookie, biscotto or tuile

tucked onto the saucer beneath.

This is the perfect time to liberate those delicate china teacups that may have been bidding on the shelf, or that set of coffee mugs your sister-in-law brought you from Ireland. Capacious cappuccino mugs will hold more generous servings or, should you be feeling particularly twee, you could assemble a trio of variously flavored custards or pots de crème in demitasse cups.

As you can see from the recipes we’ve collected from some of our favorite local chefs, cup sweets can be tailored to any taste. From simple to elaborate, from comforting to cutting-edge, they deliver that sweet message with elegance and charm.

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Molly McCook

Ellerbe Fine Foods, Fort Worth

Chef Molly McCook and general manager Richard King have made their airy restaurant the success story of the decade so far by offering a genuinely innovative menu with a real point of view — without ever veering into pretentiousness or seeming to try too hard. Here's McCook's take on a dessert classic that's both decadent and demure.



Chocolate Pots de Crème With Toasted Marshmallow Cream

Serves 10 (in 3-ounce demitasse cups)
or 5 (in 6-ounce coffee cups)

Chocolate Pots de Crème

- 2¼ cups heavy cream
- 6 ounces semisweet chocolate (Valrhona or Callebaut preferred), coarsely chopped (or use morsels)
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 5 egg yolks
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

Marshmallow Cream

- 2 cups light corn syrup
- 3 egg whites (preferably pasteurized)
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Graham crackers (for serving)

For Pots de Crème In the top of a double boiler over simmering water, combine the cream, chocolate, sugar and salt. Stir continuously until the ingredients are blended and smooth. In a small bowl, lightly whisk egg yolks. Gradually whisk the chocolate mixture into egg yolks to temper. Once chocolate mixture is incorporated, transfer contents of the bowl back into double boiler. Stir over medium heat until the mixture begins to thicken, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla extract. Divide the custard equally among oven-safe coffee cups (see note). Cool, uncovered, in the refrigerator until the steam is out, then cover with plastic wrap and chill before serving, up to 36 hours.

For Marshmallow Cream Using an electric mixer, whisk together corn syrup, egg whites and salt on high for about 6 minutes, or until mixture is thick and holds peaks. Gradually add powdered sugar to the mixture while whisking and whisk until incorporated. Turn mixer to low and add vanilla extract. (This makes about 1½ quarts and can hold for up to 48 hours refrigerated.)

Assembly Remove pots de crème cups from the refrigerator to allow them to lose their chill. Preheat oven broiler to high and place rack in the top position. Set the cups on a baking sheet. In each cup, mound the marshmallow cream to completely cover. Place the baking sheet in the oven, crack open the oven door, watch carefully and remove when the marshmallow cream is toasted to a golden brown. Depending on your broiler, this should take only a minute or two. (You may brown the cream with a hand torch instead of the broiler.)

Place the cups on saucers and serve with a demitasse spoon and graham crackers for dipping.

Notes This may not be the time to use your most delicate china cups, as the dessert must go under the broiler, but most coffee cups should be able to withstand the brief oven heat. Remove the cups from the refrigerator a half-hour or so before toasting the topping, so they don't go directly from fridge to oven.