

Getting the sweet returns

Like to be able to convince more of your diners to go the final step at the end of a meal? Here are Ken Burgin's top tips for boosting dessert sales at your place.



'Have choices ready for people who may be 'too full' or feel their friends would not approve—one dessert with three spoons is better than no sale at all.'

THE LACK of dessert sales in most restaurants and cafes is positively un-Australian. Considering how profitable they can be, this poor result needs to be fixed quickly. It's usually the result of unattractive choices, poor sales skills or prices that are too high relative to main course items.

Desserts create the final impression, and there's money to be made when you mix sugar, air and water with flavouring. Here's an action list

for improving dessert profits:

Improve the range you offer. Make sure you are covering more tastes and cravings—chocolate, fruit, ice cream, citrus, creamy, pudding, non-dairy, pastry, an Asian flavour (like coconut), liqueur, hot, cold or frozen.

Smaller options. Design sweet mouthfuls for treats and mid-meal breaks. Many cafes still offer big hunks of cake or hefty muffins, and the result is no sale at all.

'Almost healthy' desserts. Think of those customers who want treats but have a diet to consider. But they should be interesting enough for everyone to want. Good desserts can be made without gluten and sugar.

Cocktail 'desserts'. Put these on your menu when the time is right—Mudslides, Chocolate Martinis and a host of other creamy, sweet beverages. Try offering petit-fours as a dessert option to share for the business lunch trade.

Better menu design and layout. If dessert prices are more than 40-50 per cent of the main course prices there will be price resistance and sales will fall. For example if main meals are \$25, don't price desserts at more than \$12.

Use 'words that sell'. Golden caramel, Grand Marnier cream, dark chocolate, toffee crunch, toasted almonds, flaky pastry, juicy melon, tangy lemon, seven-layer espresso cake—the right words add colour and promote hunger. Create some desserts with your own name—Café Troppo's 'Troppo Trifle' sounds much more exotic than just trifle. Be careful of terms like 'bitter' chocolate or 'sour' cherries, and foreign terms that may not be understood.

A sable and a *tuille* are delicious, but do your customers understand French?

Serve desserts tall instead of flat. It creates more excitement and visual interest. Chocolate mousse in a martini glass looks much better than spread in a traditional bowl, or par-faits in small, thin lager glasses.

Serve puddings in individual dishes when possible. Use ramekins or offer the custard, chocolate sauce or caramel in a small jug for the customer to pour themselves.

Make your plates and bowls interesting. Coloured plates and bowls can add interest. All sorts of shapes can be found at the two-dollar shops and Asian suppliers.

Watch garnish costs and avoid clichés. Fresh strawberries and mint leaves look great, but how much do they cost? Make your own strawberry coulis with frozen berries, sugar and a blender.

Boost staff selling skills. Staff should have tasted all the desserts and be able to recommend their own favourite and the best-selling item. The more product knowledge they have, the more they will sell. Short training sessions can cover chocolate, gelato and ice-cream making, how a cake rises, meringue—the chemistry and wizardry of what the cooks create. Planned sales scripts and action will help those less confident—like offering dessert before suggesting coffee, and having choices ready for people who may be 'too full' or feel their friends would not approve—one dessert with three spoons is better than no sale at all.

Keep desserts top of mind. Remind customers about your treats from the first moment. Make sure

they are mentioned on the main menu (with large tempting photos), and on the blackboard menu, and are on display in a cabinet. Quality food photography is well worth the investment.

Then watch the sales results by tracking five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

Strike rate: The number of sales compared to the number of customers. Lunch time will be more difficult, but you should be aiming for at least one in three customers ordering dessert or a sweet treat.

Per-head spend on desserts: related to the strike rate. Your POS or cash register should have a separate Dessert department, then divide total sales by the number of customers.

Individual food cost percentage and margin for each dessert: Set a benchmark figure and keep track of it with a recipe card or recipe software. Try to keep the cost percentage for each item and across the range below 20 per cent. This will usually be better if you make them in-house. For a quick figure, work out the total cost of a week's dessert supplies and divide this by the dessert sales. Ideally, it should be less than the 20 per cent cost target.

Sales per staff member: This will reveal who has the talent but most importantly who could do with a bit of coaching. Consider a bonus scheme offering a reward for the number sold—it really works

Ken Burgin is a leading hospitality industry consultant. For more information visit profitablehospitality.com or call 1800 001 353.



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