

How Sweet It Isn't!

Challenge what you think of sweet or savory

BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE

As a child I thought the best thing about being a grown-up was that I'd be able to eat anything I wanted, particularly all the sweets I could hold.

Confess. You thought that too, right? But then we grew up and discovered, most of us anyway, that we'd lost our taste for excessive sweetness. Sure, we might still enjoy dessert, the occasional trip for ice cream or a nostalgia-driven indulgence in a favorite childhood treat (Candy corn, anyone? I still like to tuck a couple of pieces beneath my upper lip to make vampire fangs!). But that all-consuming passion to have as many sweets as we could stuff into our sticky little maws seemed to diminish a few years after we put away our trick-or-treating gear.

While I realized at an early age that there seemed to be more to dessert than a sugar overload, I was still baffled by my parents sprinkling salt on their watermelon, cantaloupe and apple slices. As I grew, my taste buds began to crave combinations of diverse flavors, and the idea of "death by chocolate" which had once been so attractive, began to lose its appeal. It was replaced by something much more intriguing: the idea of mixing salt with sweet, beginning with my discovery around the age of eleven that when I stirred a spoonful of strawberry jam into my scrambled eggs. I enjoyed the combination more than I did the eggs or the jam by themselves.

Then came chocolate-covered pretzels. The crunch of those large grains of salt hidden beneath their chocolaty blanket was pure delight as the mixture sent my senses careening this way and that.

But sweet-and-salty as a natural combination didn't click for me until I visited an Italian estate that produced both its own Parmigiano-Reggiano and its own honey. My host cut a crumbly bite of cheese, topped it with a lazy drizzle of honey and presented it for me to try. I was amazed by how well the salt and umami of the cheese balanced the honey's sweetness. Since then I've never viewed dessert menus the same. In fact, given a cheese plate option, I'll usually forego dessert in favor of a well-composed plate of cheeses with some nuts and dried fruits or quince paste.

The sweet-and-salty combination is picking up steam these days as more people are starting to play with the idea of including bacon in desserts. I've been making bacon fudge for several years now, and it sells out quickly every Christmas. Beginning at Thanksgiving my

husband's colleagues start to follow him around the office like cats behind a milk truck, wanting to know when the bacon fudge will be forthcoming. (By the way, my bacon fudge predates the bacon-in-the-chocolate craze by several years. It began when I stuck a pork rib into a chocolate fountain at a party to see if it would approximate a good Mexican mole. It did, and I set about experimenting.)

While we lose at least some of our taste for intense sweetness as we grow older, that doesn't mean it completely goes away. We may be content with less, but we expect more from it.

Consider how satisfying a thoughtfully composed salad is with a well-rounded flavor profile: bitter greens tossed with a full-bodied balsamic dressing and topped with grapes, a few bits of salty, tangy blue cheese and some candied walnuts, or how crucial a little sweetness is in your barbecue, as a good barbecue sauce balances sweet, salty, hot and sour. It's easy to think of dessert only in terms of sweet. But sweet-and-savory and even completely savory desserts are growing in popularity, an especially welcome thing if you don't have much of a sweet tooth or if you're diabetic or trying to reduce or eliminate sugar for other reasons.

My latest experiment is with Parmigiano-Reggiano ice cream. It is not at all sweet, but its cool creaminess moderates the sweetness of a plate of fruit or a piece of apple pie. (It's also good stirred into a bowl of pasta or as a topping for a baked potato or a plate of steamed vegetables.)

I finally understand why my parents sprinkled a little salt on their fruit. And after all these years, this saying finally makes sense to me: "Apple pie without some cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze." *eM*

West Tennessee native Carol Penn-Romine is a chef and food writer based in Los Angeles. A finalist for the 2010 M.F.K. Fisher Award for Excellence in Culinary Writing, she is a contributor to *Leite's Culinaria*, *Gastronomica*, *Christian Science Monitor* and a number of magazines within Edible Communities, and has a forthcoming contribution to *Saveur*. She is currently working on her first book, a collection of essays on the food traditions of her childhood on her family's farm. You can read about her culinary adventures at www.hungrypassport.com.

PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO ICE CREAM

This cheesy, buttery non-confection is a great accent for both sweet and savory dishes. It will keep well in the freezer for a month.

- 1 heaping cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 3 cups fat-free or skim milk
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 4 egg yolks
- 1 pinch of salt
- a small grating of nutmeg

Combine grated cheese with 1 cup of milk and let sit for an hour. Line a mesh strainer with cheesecloth, place over a medium-sized bowl and set aside.

Heat the remaining 2 cups of milk in a heavy, medium-sized saucepan, and when the milk comes just to a boil, add the cheese-and-milk combination to it. Bring back up to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 2 minutes, stirring constantly to prevent the cheese from sticking to the bottom of the saucepan. Pour the mixture through the lined strainer. If it pools in the strainer, let it sit to drain. Discard the cheesecloth and its contents.

Whisk the egg yolks and salt in a medium-sized bowl, until the yolks lighten in color. Set aside.

Combine cheese mixture and heavy cream in a heavy, medium-sized saucepan, and bring just to a boil over medium heat, stirring. Temper about half of the hot mixture into the egg yolks, pouring very slowly, a few drops at a time to start, and whisking constantly until the yolks begin to heat up (pour it all in at once, and you'll cook the eggs!). Then temper the yolk mixture slowly into the remaining milk mixture in the saucepan, stirring constantly.

Cook over medium heat, stirring with a wooden spoon until the mixture thickens slightly, enough to coat the back of the spoon. Strain into a clean bowl and stir in a small grating of nutmeg. Set aside to cool for about an hour. When it is room temperature, chill it in the refrigerator for at least two hours, or overnight if you have time.

Churn the mixture in an ice cream maker for about 15 to 20 minutes, until it is of the desired consistency.



AM
ITALIAN KITCHEN

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE | ON TRADITIONAL ITALIAN

712 W BROOKHAVEN CIRCLE, MEMPHIS, 38117

Hours 5 PM UNTIL...
TUESDAY-SATURDAY (901)347.3569

ANDREWMICHAELITALIANKITCHEN.COM

Where local ingredients, inventive cooking methods
and a pinch of Memphis flare bring you quintessential
Italian cuisine with re-imagined Southern favorites



HOG & HOMINY
ESTD 2011

DANG THAT'S
Succulento!

OPENING THIS
SPRING

707 W BROOKHAVEN CIRCLE
HOGANDHOMINY.COM