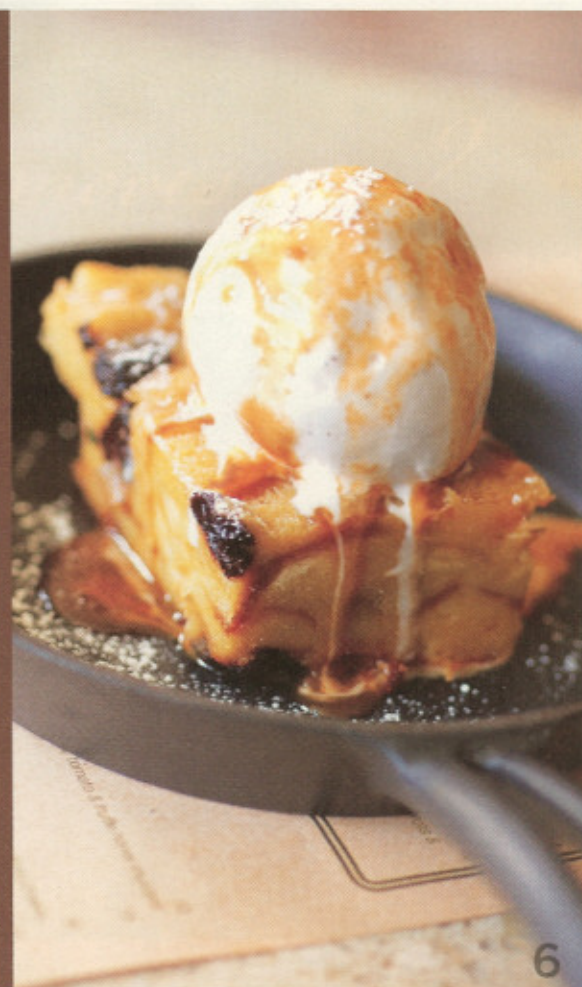


Just Desserts

A Dozen of Atlanta's Sweetest Indulgences

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK



Strong willpower is a key asset to any food writer—it's crucial in helping retain the same pant size. But an exceptional dessert melts resolve: I can swear I'll have just a taste but then find myself devouring the whole thing. These desserts have that bewitching lure where one bite elicits a contented sigh of, "This is the best!"

Atlanta's restaurant scene is rich in desserts, no doubt to pacify locals' sweet teeth—'round these parts we even prefer sweet in our tea, thank you very much. So coming up with a list of the city's top desserts was no simple task: Countless menus were inspected and calories consumed. For help we established certain guidelines. Yes, cheesecake, brownies à la mode and crème brûlée can be fabulous; but since they're standards on menus nationwide none made the list. A truly excellent dessert is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. It uniquely surprises. And whether it's elegant or rustic, creative or classic, it's a sublimely rewarding treat.

Making choices was tough. At times it seemed impossible. But the frontrunners became clear: These are the most irresistible desserts, the ones we find ourselves dreaming about and can't wait to taste again. In fact—even though all these restaurants also serve mighty fine meals—these concoctions are all so yummy that you may want to skip dinner and order just dessert.

1 > BAKED ALASKA

Nothing invites oohs and ahhs more than flaming desserts, and this nostalgic classic gets a seasonal update with autumn ice cream flavors like baked apple pie and pumpkin. The liqueur, ceremoniously drizzled and burned over the meringue topping, is carefully chosen to complement all the components, from the ice cream to the moist chocolate cake—awesome!

The Oceanaire: 1100 Peachtree St. NE, 404-475-2277, www.theoceanaire.com

2 > BUCKHEAD DELICE

The best things come in time and in small packages. This recipe, which Executive Pastry Chef James Satterwhite says has evolved over 14 years, arrives at the perfect halfway point between a cake and a candy bar. Layers of almond, hazelnut and milk chocolate combine in this petite yet satisfying dessert that's arguably the sweetest value in town.

The Café and The Lobby Lounge: The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead, 3434 Peachtree Rd., 404-237-2700, www.ritzcarlton.com

3 > CHOCOLATE STRATA

Rich and light. Soft and crunchy. Sweet and elegant. Opposites make an attractive combination in this scrumptious, layered presentation of chocolate mousse, chocolate cake, cocoa nibs, pecans and vanilla gelato. Scoot a spoon around to scoop up all the different textures, then close your eyes and savor it melting in your mouth. Mmmm.

Pacci Ristorante: 866 West Peachtree St. NW, 678-412-2402, www.pacciatlanta.com

4 > COCONUT PANNA COTTA

This light silky custard is topped with fresh fruit, passion fruit sorbet and lychee juice—then poured tableside for extra service and flair. The medley is refreshing and oh so much more: cool, tart, smooth, sweet, fresh, juicy and creamy. The pleasing flavor and texture combination manages to be both exciting and light.

Park 75: Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta, 75 14th St., 404-249-1580, www.fourseasons.com

5 > DI'S DELIGHT

Craving a home-baked treat from Mom? Okay, so Di may not be your mom, but she is the restaurateur's mom and she makes her



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popular moist, hearty sponge cake fresh each day. Di's spin on the traditional South African dessert malva pudding features tropical fruit, caramel, cake and ice cream. It's all good.

10 Degrees South: 4183 Roswell Rd., 404-705-8870, www.10degreessouth.com

6 > DRUNKEN CHERRY BREAD PUDDING

An updated Southern classic that's true to its comforting rustic roots, this sweet and savory treat showcases Jim Beam-soaked dried cherries in a dense yet moist brioche bread pudding base. Vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce add complex layers of flavor. In a word: Yum.

Rosebud: 1397 N. Highland Ave., 404-347-9747, www.rosebudatlanta.com

7 > PEAR AND BROWN BUTTER TART WITH PORT PEAR PUREE

In this seasonal creation, Pastry Chef Kathryn Wharton has managed to capture the essence of autumn with its brown and burgundy hues, plus scents and tastes of pear, brown sugar, butter and ruby port. The port sorbet, inspired by the mulled wine her parents serve at their holiday parties, is a perfect match to the crunchy tart.

Restaurant Eugene: 2277 Peachtree Rd. NE, 404-665-2158, www.restauranteeugene.com

8 > PHATTY CAKES

Is an ideal cookie chewy or crunchy? Both sides of that debate win when biting into the outside layers of this confection, since Pastry Chef Cynthia Wong's ginger cookies manage to achieve both textures simultaneously. The sweetened mascarpone center takes this upscale moon pie to an ethereal level.

Cakes & Ale: 254 W. Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur, 404-377-7994, www.cakesandalerestaurant.com



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9 > VALHRONA CHOCOLATE AND SALTED CARAMEL GROTTO

Love everything about chocolate truffles except their small size? Here's the solution. Inside this solid dark chocolate shell is a fabulous combination of salted caramel sauce, dark chocolate granache, milk chocolate mousse, hazelnut paste and fuillitine flakes—it's rich, decadent and a generous portion for two. Preparing these delicacies is a two-day process, but Pastry Chef Thomas Numprasong's labor is any chocolate lover's reward.

Canoe: 4199 Paces Ferry Rd. SE, 770-432-2663, www.canoeatl.com (Note: At press time, Canoe was closed because of flood damage)

10 > WARM POLENTA PINEAPPLE CAKE WITH PINEAPPLE COCONUT ICE CREAM

The classic combination of cake and ice cream gets a satisfying update here. Polenta gives the cake a sturdy crumb to withstand the melting ice cream and not turn mushy. Sweet and savory, hot and cold, the piña colada flavors linger into a spicy satisfying finish.

C & S Seafood & Oyster Bar: 3240 Cobb Pkwy., 770-272-0999, www.candsoysterbar.com

11 > WHITE CHOCOLATE BANANA CREAM PIE

Thick with banana slices and banana flavor, this James Beard Award winner boasts a flaky crust, decadent whipped cream and white chocolate shavings. One bite confirms that banana and chocolate is a match made in heaven.

Buckhead Diner: 3073 Piedmont Rd. NE, 404-262-3336, www.buckheadrestaurants.com

12 > ZUPPA AL CIOCCOLATO

This warm chocolate soup is denser than hot chocolate, richer than frosting, smoother than pudding. Each decadent spoonful so enchants, chocolate lovers will find themselves wishing they could dive right into this Willy Wonka's chocolate river. Sugar croutons add some crunch and hazelnut whipped cream—placed by oompa-loompas?—adds pizzazz and depth.

Sotto Sotto: 313 N. Highland Ave., 404-523-6685, www.sottosottorestaurant.com