

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

THE CULINARY TRENDS OF

NORTH ASIA



American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

MARCH/APRIL 2020



DAIRY-FREE DESSERTS

How one pastry chef rises to the challenge of creating vegan-friendly treats // **By Lindsey Danis**

“Every time I go to a restaurant and ask for a vegan dessert because my husband is vegan, we get the famous fruit plate,” says Juan Gutierrez, executive pastry chef at Virgin Hotels Chicago.

The message was clear: vegans were an afterthought. Wanting every diner to feel valued, Gutierrez decided he’d always cater to vegans going forward.

While consumer demand for healthier sweets is increasing, notes Nina Curtis, director and executive chef at Adventist Health’s Vitaliz Café in Roseville, California, adapting recipes to be vegan-friendly can pose a challenge. “Ingredients need to be of the highest quality and there can be a learning curve working with some of the ingredients found in vegan desserts,” she says.

For example, chefs might not know that honey is actually not vegan, nor are some types of sugar, as granulated sugar can be filtered with bone char, according to Curtis. When successful, she says vegan desserts deliver the same flavor, texture, and taste

The vegan coconut cheesecake at Virgin Hotel Chicago with marcona almond sand and mango pink peppercorn sorbet.

as traditional desserts using minimally processed, plant-based ingredients.

For his vegan coconut cheesecake, Gutierrez struggled to find a balance between coconut and cashew milks. Too much coconut milk gave the dessert a thick, milkshake-like texture; however, one month of experimentation yielded a

creamy, moldable, no-bake cheesecake naturally thickened by cashews and coconut oil.

The cheesecake is topped with a meringue made with aquafaba, or drained chickpea liquid.

“Aquafaba looks like styrofoam,” Gutierrez admits. “It’s crunchy, but dissolves in your mouth, making for a really fun and textural experience for diners.” Gutierrez uses evaporated cane sugar, which is vegan, to stabilize the meringue.

To contrast the creamy, rich flavor, Gutierrez adds mango pink peppercorn sorbet, coconut dust and marcona almond sand. The coconut dust adds concentrated coconut flavor without texture, while the sand adds crunch.

Gutierrez credits his vegan husband with inspiring his focus on plant-based baking. “It has made me grow so much as a chef,” he says. “It’s not about the recipe, but it’s about learning how the ingredients work.” That means understanding how the pH, flavor, fat, and oil content of different nuts play out in a dish. Cashews have a high fat content and turn creamy when blended, which are two reasons why they work well in the cheesecake. Almonds are leaner, so they wouldn’t deliver the same rich mouthfeel.

“People tend to get scared by the words vegan or gluten-free,” says Gutierrez, who as a result, doesn’t advertise his desserts as ‘vegan’ on the menu, although he sometimes confesses after patrons indulge. “I find that people are surprised with how great vegan desserts can taste, which makes the value of the dessert even higher.”

Lindsey Danis is a Hudson Valley, N.Y.-based writer who covers food, travel and LGBTQ stories.