

Sweetening the bottom line with milkshakes

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Food trends may come and go, but the American consumer's love affair with the sweet creaminess of milkshakes is one romance likely to go the distance.

By introducing a host of interesting takes on the classic cold beverage, creative culinarians are doing their part to ensure the passion stays red hot.

"Most customers use the word 'craving' when ordering a milkshake," says Donata Russell Ross, chief executive of Atlanta-based Concessions International.

Sherry Ostrowski, senior vice president of brand for 400-unit quick serve chain Potbelly in Chicago, agrees the vast majority of consumers love milkshakes.

"People have loved and always will love milkshakes. Milkshakes are the perfect treat to satisfy a sweet tooth," says Ostrowski. "At Potbelly we provide consumers with the option of a vanilla ice cream base or a vanilla yogurt base, both of which can be used in any milkshake we offer — Chocolate, Vanilla, OREO® and Coffee — as well as any of our real fruit smoothies."

Coffee-flavored shakes have proven to be wildly popular. "Our hand dipped coffee milkshake has been a customer favorite for years now," says Ostrowski. "People love coffee just as much as they love milkshakes."

Hala Habal, vice president of corporate communications for Which Wich Superior Sandwiches, the 400-unit fast casual sandwich chain based in Dallas, is of a like mind. "We love coffee flavors, and it's versatile because it complements both sweet and savory. People are fanatic about cold brews, frappés, etc., and it makes perfect sense to incorporate those flavors into a milkshake," Habal says.

Milkshakes are not only crowd pleasers, but they also are good for the bottom line. "Our data shows that shakes account for more than 40 percent of all beverage sales," says Natalie Anderson Liu, vice president of marketing for Plano, Texas-based MOOYAH Burgers, Fries & Shakes, a fast casual concept.

Anderson Liu says the frosty beverage also attracts a full range of guests. “While 15 percent of our shakes are ordered with kids' meals, we find that shakes appeal to guests of all ages,” she says.

At 53-unit Roy Rogers, based in Frederick, Md., a Salted Caramel Shake is currently menued as a limited time offer, in large measure because of the success of previous LTOs — Pumpkin and Mocha. The chain also offers its three standard flavors — Chocolate, Vanilla and Strawberry — year round.

Carrie Isabell, director of marketing for Roy Rogers Restaurants, says the time is right for experimenting with new flavors. “The more daring the trend, the better for the future of blended beverages,” she says. “While classic milkshake flavors never go out of style, there continues to be the rise of a full dessert you can sip through a straw.”

Quick service operators are not the only ones jumping on the milkshake bandwagon. At The Keystone, a full service restaurant in San Francisco's SoMa (South of Market) neighborhood, the Milk and Cookies is earning raves. It features a delicious duo — toffee oatmeal chocolate chip cookies served with a Vermont maple milkshake, which comes in a miniature milk bottle.

The creative beverage is the perfect ending to a dinner by executive chef Banks White, who is known for his take on “Southeast Asia meets American southern cuisine”.

At nearby One Market Restaurant a recent LTO celebrated PRIDE month with a Harvey Milk shake. The drink — which combined vanilla ice cream, Pinnacle Peach Vodka, Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur, strawberries, blueberries and Valrhona White Chocolate Pride Tuile — was the collaboration of bar manager Justin Blackwood and pastry chef Patti Dellamonica-Bauler.

Maeve Webster, president of Menu Matters and trends analyst, says One Market Restaurant is on trend. “Bars are trying to capitalize on nostalgia and indulgence by creating adult versions with spirits and/ or beer, though these can be very challenging to pull off without dairy curdling.”

Meanwhile, operators of all stripes continue to test the boundaries of milkshake making.

Which Wich offers a plethora of milkshake flavors as well as frequent LTOs. Banana, Chocolate, Vanilla, Strawberry, OREO® and Pineapple are chain staples while limited time offers have included Bacon, PB&J, Pumpkin, Chocolate Covered Strawberry and Red Velvet.

“Our Bacon shake was a huge hit with the millennial age demographic because of its extremely unique disparate flavors,” Habal says.

Some of those trends are taking milkshakes to a whole new dimension when it comes to the “milk” that flavors the shake.

“We’ve definitely noticed a lot of milkshakes and blended beverages being offered with options of using soy, almond or fat-free milk for customers who want to feel better about indulging in a frozen treat,” Isabell says.

Webster agrees and notes that almond milk is particularly in demand. “Alternative milk choices are definitely happening—more with almond milk than with soy, but both are showing up in greater numbers,” she says.

According to Amy Myrdal Miller, president of Farmer’s Daughter Consulting, a culinary and nutrition communication firm, anything goes when it comes to milk alternatives. “The sky’s the limit when it comes to the liquids added to milkshakes,” she says. “Almond milk, coconut milk, hemp milk—you name it.”