

Just desserts

UTE JUNKER TAKES A SEAT AT RESTAURANTS WHERE DESSERT IS THE MAIN COURSE.
Words **Ute Junker**

They do things differently in Barcelona. This is, after all, the city where Antoni Gaudi created a cathedral that looked like an elaborate sugar sculpture left out in the rain. It's also where other celebrated artists such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro honed their unique visions.

However, not all of Barcelona's innovators have received the respect they deserve. Take Jordi Butron. Back in 2000, this pastry chef had a vision for a new kind of restaurant – one dedicated to all things dessert. Thirteen years on, Espaisucre continues to pull in the crowds. More importantly, it has launched a global trend.

Jordi wanted to do more than just satisfy his compatriots' sweet tooth. Espaisucre aims to make diners take their desserts more seriously. A trained chef, Jordi understands that cooking is about balance. His desserts are based around contrasting flavours and textures: salty and sweet, smooth and crunchy, hot and cold.

This dedicated Catalanian loves finding ways to marry unexpected ingredients. Among his unusual flavour combinations, he matches banana with sesame and lemon-sage sorbet, and chocolate with prune, oak, rum and tobacco.

Espaisucre's multi-course menus take diners on a culinary journey. The first course usually focuses on fresh, acidic flavours. The following courses hit the middle notes – perhaps a chocolate glaze, or spicy, smoky flavours – before the meal winds up with a darker, heavier dish. For instance, a first course fizzing with ginger and pineapple might be followed by a pear cake with tamarind jelly and salty nuts, before a final offering of praline butter truffle ice-cream with cacao.

Jordi also offers cheese and chocolate menus for dedicated fans of those foodstuffs. His most interesting innovation, however, is the creation of a range of 'savoury desserts', which hijack savoury ingredients and work them up using a dessert approach. These creative concoctions range from squid rice with saffron custard and passionfruit, to an Iberian pork rib with coffee and celery.

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One of Janice Wong's dessert creations – Chocolate H2O

GLOBAL TREND

Following the success of Espaisucre, dessert addicts around the world came out of the closet. From New York to Helsinki, dedicated dessert bars and restaurants have opened around the world. While they share a dedication to sweet stuff, each one offers its own take on what dessert can be.

In Singapore, Janice Wong's 2am Dessert Bar (which actually opens at 6pm, but does stay open until 2am) has become one of the city's most talked-about restaurants. It's a high-style experience. Customers can lounge on daybeds or perch at the bar, sipping on a glass of dessert wine while they enjoy Wong's high-concept desserts, works of art that are presented with haute couture flair.

The ever-changing menu includes some clever twists on old favourites, such as a red miso caramel bavaois with mustard crumble and chocolate ice cream. Other dishes resemble edible paintings, such as the so-called purple plate, which combines purple potato purée with blackberry parfait, lavender marshmallow and fruit of the forest sorbet.

"I love organic forms, dishes that look like a piece of rock or a leaf," Wong says. Her dishes celebrate "the imperfection of beauty", and use foams and crumbs, swirls and spatters to deconstruct the expectation of what a dessert should look like. As Wong says, "A cake doesn't have to be a rectangle."



Clockwise from top left: Sabor in the Hunter's Avela slice; Janice Wong's Zam Dessert Bar in Singapore; Sabor's mango and berry mousse; Epaisucre's chef Jordi Butron; Epaisucre's Empireumatico;

A career creating free-form desserts seems an odd choice for someone who originally studied finance before enrolling at Paris' Le Cordon Bleu, but Wong says she enjoys the precision involved in balancing textures and colours, ensuring each ingredient is present in just the right amount. On the other hand, she loves the fact that creating dessert is "pure imagination".

Most recently, Wong's imagination was inspired by a week she spent in Egypt. "I loved the spices, the herbs, the smells," she says. One result of the trip was a dessert featuring curry mango sorbet with a carrot sable, pumpkin gnocchi and turmeric jelly. "You have the flavours of the spices, balanced by the sweetness of the carrots and mangoes," she says.

HUNTER VALLEY SWEET TOOTH REJOICE

A free-ranging creativity appears to be a hallmark of dessert devotees. Sabor in the Hunter, a cosy dessert café in NSW's Hunter Valley, may have an entirely different approach to Janice Wong's stylish city outlet, but even here, a new dessert appears on the menu almost every week.

"We're always coming up with something new," says Fernando Antao, who runs Sabor with his wife, Renata. From banoffee

cheesecake and salted caramel mousse, to tasting plates featuring exotic tastes such as Turkish delight and Persian fairy floss, Sabor offers something for every palate.

Ironically, Sabor was born from a single dish: a Portuguese chocolate mousse made according to a recipe from Fernando's grandmother. Fernando introduced the mousse at the pizza parlour he was running, but soon realised that the dessert had a following of its own, with people coming in just to buy tubs.

When he and Renata were considering a tree change to the Hunter Valley, the idea of a dedicated dessert eatery seemed promising. Like any wine growing region, the Hunter Valley had plenty of restaurants; however, a dessert café seemed to fill a niche in the market.

Almost two years later, the Antaos have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. "We thought we'd be living a relaxed lifestyle, serving a couple of customers a day," Antao laughs. "We launched with a bang, and we haven't slowed down since."

For more details on the overseas restaurants visit esapaisucre.com and Zamdessertbar.com. Sweet Toths should seek out Sabor in the New South Wales Hunter Valley, 319 Wilderness Rd Lovedale. Ph 1300 958 850 saborinthehunter.com.au