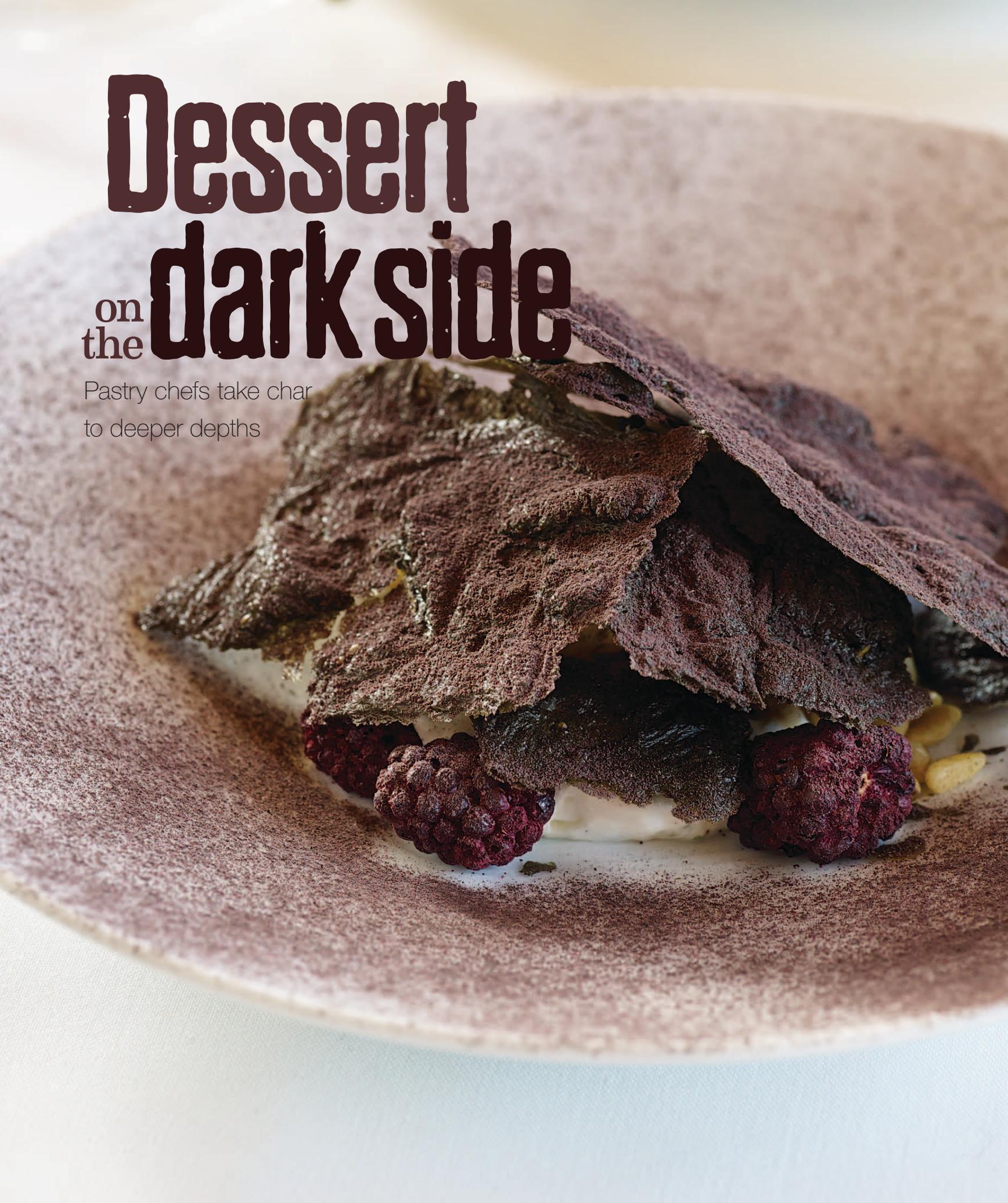


Dessert on the dark side

Pastry chefs take char
to deeper depths



by Amber Gibson

For classics like crème brûlée and bananas Foster, the final hit of flame only scorches the surface. But some pastry chefs are adding fuel to the fire by burning spices, aromatics, sugar and even artichokes to add subtly charred layers to ice cream, cupcakes, truffles and more.

At Chicago's Blackbird, pastry chef Dana Cree has included charred artichoke in one of her more unusual desserts. Cree chars artichoke leaves and infuses them into ice cream to amplify the vegetable's aroma. "It's less about an artichoke heart; it tastes more like how a steamed artichoke smells," Cree says. "By charring, we're able to capture the steamed leaf flavor. It reminds me of eating corn on the cob."

The burnt artichoke ice cream accompanies artichoke fromage, blackberry powder and gel and burnt cinnamon oat crisps (recipe, plateonline.com). "When we started blackening the artichoke, we wanted to look at other flavors that embody the soul of a fire," Cree says. After playing around with ingredients, the cinnamon, blackberry and artichoke trifecta won.

"I like to use bridge flavors," says Cree. "It may not seem like cinnamon and artichoke go together, but cinnamon and blackberry do and so do blackberry and artichoke."

Adding another dark layer of flavor and color on the plate is a sprinkling of hay ash, achieved by scorching dry hay until burned completely black. It's then ground and sifted.

"Hay was incorporated into a dish at Noma, and I loved the flavor. Toasted and infused, it's reminiscent of green tea, which to me makes a lot of sense in

desserts," says Cree. "We incorporated the ash as both a lightly smoky flavor and a striking visual effect. It lightly tints the blackberry powder, making it a truly black berry."

SINGED SPICES

For the burnt cinnamon oat crisps, Cree places cinnamon sticks on the grill until they flatten and carbonize. Upon cooling, they curl up again, but are brittle enough to pulverize into a powder. "Burning mutes all the cinnamon heat and gives you a very aromatic floral quality," Cree explains. "You don't realize how intertwined the two flavors are until you remove one of them, and then it's very striking how floral it is."

Cree isn't the only one burning spices. Chris Ford of Range in Washington, D.C., uses a light touch when burning cinnamon to capture the flavor of the spice for

his burnt cinnamon truffles (\$3, recipe, p. 88). "Everyone fears burning when cooking, but lightly burning something enhances its flavor," he says.

To make the truffles, Ford uses a torch to lightly burn cinnamon sticks and dried vanilla beans, keeping the seam facing up so they open slightly, releasing the oils. He then adds the sticks and beans to heavy cream, brings it to a boil and

lets it steep for an hour.

"More burning equals more intensity," Ford says. He's also experimented with burning vanilla beans to make marshmallows. "It brings those same s'mores elements," he says, although the marshmallows themselves aren't actually charred. Instead, the burnt vanilla beans create that familiar smoky flavor.

"Everyone fears burning when cooking, but lightly burning something enhances its flavor."

— Chris Ford

Burnt artichoke, blackberry, pine nut, oats, \$12, Dana Cree, Blackbird, Chicago. RECIPE, plateonline.com.

BITTERSWEET BURN

Burning also tones down the sweetness of ingredients like honey in David Guas' honey bee cupcakes at Bayou Bakery in Arlington, Va. A simple vanilla cake allows the burnt honey frosting to shine (\$3, recipe, plateonline.com).

Guas cautions that honey is sensitive, so burning it ever so slightly is a delicate balance. "You'll see a little bit of smoke come from the edge of the pot in one corner," Guas says. "And you'll smell it. The aromatics totally change."

He has more than 40 bottles of honey in his personal collection, but Guas sticks to tupelo or wildflower honey for this dessert. "I look at these like the amber ales of honey—good flavor, well balanced, some color, but not too robust," he says. "Scorching a honey that's stronger and darker would destroy the flavor and lose its uniqueness."

In Los Angeles, Andy Jin is also burning honey, to make ice cream at Patina. After serving burnt caramel ice cream, Jin experimented with burning honey, which produced more complex flavors than sugar. "The flavor completely changes," he says. "It becomes more floral with a little tannic mouthfeel." Jin burns golden lavender honey until it's dark amber. "Just don't let it turn black," he warns.

Jin prefers creamy lavender honey to complement the lavender *chiboust* served with his warm fig compote and hazelnut financier (\$12, recipe, plateonline.com). "Lavender can be a hard thing to pair with food," he admits. "I associate it with soap." However, here, honey bridges the gap between hazelnut, fig and lavender. Like indulgent and creative metalsmiths, Jin and other pastry chefs are using fire to shape and meld ingredients in unexpectedly delicious ways.

Amber Gibson sometimes burns the marshmallows for her s'mores, but she eats them anyway.



Burnt cinnamon truffles

Pastry Chef Chris Ford, Range, Washington, D.C.

Yield: 121 truffles

Menu price: \$3; food cost/serving: 23%

Cinnamon sticks	50 g
Vanilla bean, dried	1 each
Cinnamon, ground	4 g
Heavy cream	400 g, plus as needed
Trimoline	90 g
Chocolate, 70% cacao	500 g
Butter	100 g
Cocoa powder	as needed
Red food coloring powder	as needed

1. Place cinnamon sticks and dried vanilla bean on a trivet with seams facing up. Using a torch, lightly burn sticks to release oils and slightly open sticks.

2. Place sticks, vanilla bean and ground

cinnamon in cream and bring to a boil; steep uncovered for 1 hour.

3. Strain cream and re-weigh, if needed, to bring cream back to 400 grams.

4. Combine cream and trimoline and bring to a simmer.

5. Strain hot cream over chocolate and let stand for 1 minute.

6. Using an immersion blender, emulsify cream and chocolate into a ganache.

7. Once ganache has sat at room temperature for 10 minutes, emulsify butter into ganache.

8. Leave ganache at room temperature until it is cool enough to fill into molds. Fill molds and leave overnight to fully set. Cap or enrobe following day.

9. Once enrobed, dust truffles in cocoa powder and red food coloring powder, then shake off any excess by rolling truffles in a fine-mesh sieve (this will polish them as well).

10. Store up to a week in a cool dry space.



Burning desires

by Amber Gibson

After working with Michael Mina at The Four Seasons Baltimore and at Thomas Keller's restaurants in Los Angeles, Chris Ford took over as corporate pastry chef for all six of Bryan Voltaggio's restaurants. We talked to Ford about his early memories in the kitchen, his love of charred milk and why he loves the challenge of what doesn't make sense.

When did you first start baking?

My very first smell was yeast. I would bake next to my grandmother on a step stool, and I was amazed by what yeast was and how it worked. Watching

my grandmother take a liquid and dry product and make it into a sticky batter, then punch it down and watch it double in size. Wow!

Who has been your most influential mentor?

Chika Tillman of ChikaLicious Dessert Bar in New York City. I moved to Brooklyn when I was 21 and became her sous chef. She taught me a lot about life and about becoming a chef. A lot of people say when they have my stuff that it's very light and not too sweet. I learned both French and Japanese techniques from her. It was a very big inspiration for my career.

Do you have a signature dessert?

I don't like to make anything twice. If I revisit something I want to reinvent it and make it better than before. I don't want to be known for one thing.

Tell us about your charred milk ice cream.

Milk is one of my favorite items to burn. You get a little bit of milk and take a torch that creates a skin very quickly. You brown it and then it chars. It tastes like toasted marshmallow meets brown butter. Then you do the next layer. I love making charred milk ice cream. The flavor is so interesting and beautiful. You get the milkiness in the dairy, the nuttiness from browned milk solids and this char. It's something I do by hand, so I haven't found a way to make a lot of it at once.

How do you achieve the perfect burnt flavor?

Lay whatever you want to burn over a cooling rack and go slowly over it with a torch, slow enough to give a good burn but not long enough to overdo it.

Have you tried charring fruit?

Not more than a simple brûlée, but I wonder what charred fruit skins would be like, because they have so much flavor. I've tried burning apple skins, but it was just too bitter. But I do wonder what apple-skin ice cream would taste like. I wonder if folding ice cream in would soften the bitterness. It's those things that inspire me—where the idea doesn't maybe make sense, but then it becomes a challenge.