



America's Favorite

Diner Desserts

We couldn't possibly name the country's best diner desserts, but we definitely found four of the most beloved.

When you step into a proper diner, you usually encounter the sweets first: glass display cases filled with cream-topped pies and mile-high layer cakes. For decades, diner owners have put desserts near the entrance to tempt customers, explains Matthew Britt, a culinary instructor at Johnson & Wales University in Providence. "Diner food isn't always light," he says, "but people remember the cheesecake they saw on the way in and think, 'I *have* to get that.'" We can thank America's

first diner, a Providence lunch wagon built in 1872, for suggesting that every meal end with dessert, says diner historian Richard J. S. Gutman. It sold five kinds of pie, and other diners followed suit, advertising their own versions and setting the standard for decades to come. We set out recently to find the most popular diner desserts in the country, and our search led us to an irresistible final four. Here's hoping that you can taste them at the source someday—but if you can't, these recipes will take you there in spirit.



Strawberry Icebox Pie

STRAWN'S EAT SHOP
Shreveport, LA

Since opening in 1944, Strawn's has received tons of attention for its signature icebox pie, and you probably won't get out of the place without trying one. Reminders are everywhere: Cream-topped, fruit-filled pies are painted on the walls and plastered on the front of the menu, and the staff shirts say #PIE. The recipe itself isn't complicated. In the 1920s and '30s, icebox pies were a practical choice for home cooks, who could prebake the shell and then keep the whipped filling cool in an icebox until it was time for dessert. Lemon versions are common in the South, but Strawn's made a name for itself with this fresh strawberry one.



REPORTING BY TIANA KENNELL



Coconut Cream Pie

THE RED ARROW DINER
Manchester, NH

The original Red Arrow Diner looks humble from the outside, but the walls inside tell a different story. They're lined with photos of campaigning politicians and celebs who have visited, including Matthew McConaughey, Diane Sawyer and Adam Sandler. "When Martha Stewart came, she said, 'I'm here for dessert,'" says owner Carol Lawrence-Erickson. "How intimidating is that?" In fact, many people come to the diner just for dessert: There are more than 35 cakes and pies in rotation. The Red Arrow's coconut cream pie is an all-around favorite: It's topped with about four inches of whipped cream!



REPORTING BY KATE MCQUAID COTE
RED ARROW DINER, ALABAMA



Black Forest Cake

LADYBIRD DINER
Lawrence, KS

Ladybird Diner was built to be a pie destination. When self-proclaimed pie lady Meg Heriford opened it five years ago, fans lined up for slabs of her cherry and banana cream pies. Then one day Meg whipped up a hazelnut cake with brown-butter caramel buttercream and a dark chocolate drizzle. "I don't know what came over me," she says. Soon Meg and her team were experimenting with elevated versions of coconut, German chocolate and red velvet cakes, and lines formed for the cakes just as quickly as they had for the pies. The diner's signature Black Forest cake, topped with Italian black cherries, usually sells out in less than an hour.



REPORTING BY DYLAN LYSEN.
LADYBIRD DINER: FALLY AFANI.

Chocolate Pie

MONUMENT CAFE
Georgetown, TX

Monument Cafe lives up to its name: It's a pillar of the Georgetown community and a tribute to all the Texas roadside eateries that have vanished over the years. After it opened in 1995, the restaurant became known for its Monument Chocolate Pie, a recipe passed down to owner Rusty Winkstern from a friend. Rusty credits its popularity to the balance of flavors: bitter from the chocolate mousse, sweet from the whipped cream and salty from the toasted pecan crust. "There's something crave-worthy about it," he says. The recipe remains a closely guarded secret, but Rusty shared a version for us to try at home. Put on some Hank Williams and it'll feel almost like you're sitting at the diner, eating the real thing.



REPORTING BY CHARLOTTE KOVALCHUK.
MONUMENT CAFE: LIZ CLAYMAN.

STRAWN'S EAT SHOP'S STRAWBERRY ICEBOX PIE

ACTIVE: 1 hr 10 min | TOTAL: 5 hr 20 min | SERVES: 6 to 8

FOR THE CRUST

- 1½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup cold vegetable shortening
- 3 tablespoons ice water

FOR THE GLAZE AND FILLING

- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- ¾ cup whole milk
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted
- 1 drop red gel food coloring
- 2 cups sliced strawberries
- Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

FOR THE TOPPING

- 2 cups cold heavy cream
- ¼ cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 strawberry half, for topping

1. Make the crust: Pulse the flour and salt in a food processor until combined. Add the shortening and pulse until the mixture looks like coarse cornmeal. Add the ice water, then continue to pulse until the mixture becomes a shaggy dough. Form the dough into a disk, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.
2. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface into an 11-inch round (about ⅛ inch thick), then fit into a 9-inch pie dish. Trim away any excess dough, crimp the edges and prick the bottom all over with a fork. Refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.
3. Preheat the oven to 350°. Line the bottom of the pie with foil or parchment paper and fill with pie weights or dried beans. Bake until the bottom is just starting to set and the edges are just starting to brown, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the foil and weights and continue to bake until the crust is golden brown and cooked through, about 10 more minutes. Transfer to a rack and let cool completely.
4. Meanwhile, make the glaze: Whisk the eggs with the granulated sugar in a medium bowl until smooth. In a separate bowl, whisk the cornstarch with 2 tablespoons milk until smooth, then whisk into the egg mixture. Warm the remaining ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons milk and the melted butter in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat until steaming, 2 minutes. Slowly whisk the warm milk mixture into the egg mixture, whisking constantly, then return the entire mixture to the saucepan. Reduce the heat to medium and cook, whisking constantly, until thickened, about 4 minutes. Whisk in the red food coloring.
5. Spoon the glaze into the pie crust and spread over the bottom and up the sides. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until set, 2 hours.
6. Spread the berries in the glazed crust. Dust with confectioners' sugar.
7. Make the topping: Beat the heavy cream, confectioners' sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with a mixer on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form. Spread over the pie and top with the strawberry half.



THE RED ARROW DINER'S COCONUT CREAM PIE

ACTIVE: 1 hr | TOTAL: 2 hr 45 min | SERVES: 6 to 8

FOR THE CRUST

- 1½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup cold vegetable shortening
- 3 tablespoons ice water

FOR THE FILLING

- 2½ cups sweetened shredded coconut
- 4 cups cold heavy cream
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ¾ cup instant vanilla pudding mix (from two 3-ounce boxes)
- 1¼ teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

FOR THE TOPPING

- 2 cups cold heavy cream
- ¼ cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1. Make the crust: Pulse the flour and salt in a food processor until combined. Add the shortening and pulse until the mixture looks like coarse cornmeal. Add the ice water, then continue to pulse until the mixture becomes a shaggy dough. Form the dough into a disk, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.
2. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface into an 11-inch round (about ⅛ inch thick), then fit into a 9-inch pie dish. Fold under any excess dough and prick the bottom all over with a fork. Refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.
3. Preheat the oven to 350°. Line the bottom of the pie with foil or parchment paper and fill with pie weights or dried beans. Bake until the bottom is just starting to set and the edges are just starting to brown, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the foil and weights and continue to bake until the crust is golden brown and cooked through, about 10 more minutes. Transfer to a rack and let cool completely.
4. Meanwhile, make the filling: Spread 1 cup coconut on a baking sheet and bake, stirring halfway through, until toasted, about 20 minutes; let cool.
5. Beat the heavy cream, granulated sugar, pudding mix, vanilla and salt in a large bowl with a mixer on medium speed until thick and creamy, 2 to 4 minutes. Fold in ¾ cup of the toasted coconut and the remaining 1½ cups untoasted coconut; set aside the remaining ¾ cup toasted coconut for topping. Spread the filling in the crust and refrigerate until set, about 1 hour.
6. Make the topping: Beat the heavy cream, confectioners' sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with a mixer on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form. Spread over the pie and top with the reserved toasted coconut.



LADYBIRD DINER'S BLACK FOREST CAKE

ACTIVE: 1 hr 35 min | TOTAL: 2½ hr | SERVES: 16

FOR THE CAKE

- Cooking spray
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ cup almond flour
- 1½ cups unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 tablespoon baking soda
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 teaspoons vanilla bean paste
- 2 sticks unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 4 cups sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 2 cups strong hot coffee

FOR THE GANACHE

- 2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
- 2 cups heavy cream
- ½ cup chopped Luxardo or Amarena cherries

FOR THE BUTTERCREAM

- 6 large egg whites
- 1½ cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon cream of tartar
- 5 sticks unsalted butter, cut into pieces, at room temperature
- 1 tablespoon cherry liqueur or a few drops of cherry extract
- Luxardo or Amarena cherries (syrup reserved), for garnish

1. Make the cake: Position racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven and preheat to 350°. Coat three 10-inch round cake pans with cooking spray and line the bottoms with parchment paper; set aside. Combine the all-purpose flour, almond flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a medium bowl. Whisk the milk and vanilla in a small bowl. Beat the butter and sugar in a large bowl with a mixer on medium speed until fluffy, 3 minutes. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Reduce the speed to low; beat in the flour mixture in three batches, alternating with the milk mixture, until combined.
2. Stir in the hot coffee (the batter will be thin). Divide among the prepared pans. Bake, switching the pans halfway through, until a toothpick inserted in the centers comes out mostly clean, 30 to 45 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes in the pans, then turn out onto racks to cool completely.
3. Meanwhile, make the ganache: Melt the chocolate chips with the heavy cream in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of simmering water (do not let the bowl touch the water). Let cool slightly. Add the cherries and let cool.
4. Make the buttercream: Combine the egg whites, sugar, salt and cream of tartar in the heatproof bowl of a mixer set over the pan of simmering water (do not let the bowl touch the water). Heat, whisking, until a candy thermometer reaches 185°, 5 minutes. Transfer the bowl to the mixer and beat on medium-high speed until the egg whites are stiff and glossy and the bowl is cool to the touch, 10 minutes. Beat in the butter 1 tablespoon at a time. Add the cherry liqueur and continue to beat until smooth. Beat in cherry syrup, 1 teaspoon at a time, to tint the frosting pink.
5. Spread half of the ganache on one cake and top with a second cake. Repeat with another layer of ganache and the remaining cake. Trim the sides of the cake with a serrated knife to make them even; crumble the trimmings. Frost the cake with the buttercream and pipe some around the top. Top with cherries and the reserved cake crumbs.



MONUMENT CAFE'S CHOCOLATE PIE

ACTIVE: 1 hr 15 min | TOTAL: 5 hr 15 min | SERVES: 6 to 8

FOR THE CRUST

- 1½ cup pecans, roughly chopped
- 4 tablespoons salted butter
- ¼ cup packed light brown sugar

FOR THE FILLING

- 3 cups heavy cream
- 6 ounces semisweet chocolate chips
- 6 ounces unsweetened chocolate, grated
- Pinch of salt
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

FOR THE TOPPING

- 1 cup cold heavy cream
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Shaved unsweetened chocolate, for topping

1. Preheat the oven to 350°. Make the crust: Spread the pecans on a baking sheet and bake, stirring once, until lightly browned, about 10 minutes. Let cool.
2. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan, then stir in the brown sugar and toasted pecans. Press the mixture into a 9-inch pie plate. Refrigerate until set, about 1 hour.
3. Make the filling: Bring 1 cup heavy cream to a boil in a medium saucepan. Remove from the heat and add the chocolate chips, unsweetened chocolate and salt. Let sit 5 minutes, then stir until smooth. Transfer to a medium bowl and let cool.
4. Beat the remaining 2 cups heavy cream, the granulated sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with a mixer on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form. Fold into the chocolate mixture. Spread the filling in the crust and refrigerate until set, about 4 hours.
5. Make the topping: Beat the heavy cream, granulated sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with a mixer on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form. Spread over the pie and top with chocolate shavings.

