

Top Docs for Women / The Gov. The Boss & a New Medical School

The Star-Ledger

Inside Jersey

Meet
Jersey's
Best Home
Chefs

TOP PASTRY CHIEFS

+
Jersey & The Academy Awards



SWEET SUCCESS

Top Pastry Chefs 2012

By **TERESA POLITANO**
Photos by **JOHN O'BOYLE**

Pastry chefs, despite our national obsession with sugar, often toil in obscurity. That anonymity is changing, thanks, in part, to the Cake Boss, Buddy Valastro, and pastry challenges on food TV. But it may shock you to learn that most people don't order dessert at a restaurant. (We, of course, know of no such people, so we must trust industry research).

It's a fact that presents a sort of sugary Catch-22. Why bother with the luxury of a pastry chef if few people order dessert? And who is inclined to order dessert if it is just the same-old, same-old?

Yet, dessert is the experience you take out the door. An outstanding dessert cements the memory and smooths over any possible missteps during dinner.

Dessert, in other words, is critical, and the meticulous and patient people who create such signature sweets shall not remain nameless. Here, then, are five significant New Jersey pastry chefs you ought to know — our Top Pastry Chefs of 2012.

DONNA SARDELLA

Basilico

324 Millburn Ave., Millburn

(973) 379-7020

basilicomillburn.com

Amid the swirl of outrageousness that has become the world of modern pastry — the rock star chocolates, the astronaut cakes, the cirque de soleil confections — we have all but forgotten that quiet era of sugary elegance. Call it the era of Le Cirque and the Essex House, when pastry amazed, yes, but with delicacy, sophistication, refinement. It's the era of the Baked Alaska, a triumph of cold and warm developed centuries before the concept of molecular gastronomy entered and excited the modern kitchen.

At Basilico in Millburn, Baked Alaska still reigns, traveling to your table in a head-turning triumph of flame, brought to you by pastry chef Donna Sardella, who hails from the sophisticated and refined philosophies of Le Cirque and the Essex House.

Basilico is the rare modern restaurant that offers dozens of desserts; when she first began, Sardella was told her list was too big to fit on the menu. But people love choice, she insists, and the regulars like to try new things.

"Everybody's on a diet, but everybody orders dessert."

Basilico proves the idea that if you offer an excellent dessert, people will order it.

Sardella is one of those pastry chefs who manages to maintain a ballerina-like figure despite a day spent around chocolate and sugar.

She's also a walking Zen master for anyone with kitchen-envy. Her workspace is a tiny lopsided section of the Basilico basement, and she frequently unplugs and rearranges the portable freezer so she can maneuver from oven to counter top. It's in this remarkably tiny space that she makes the crisp Napoleon, the creamy ricotta cheesecake, the strudel, the zuppa inglese and a daily souffle.

As for fancy equipment? Sardella remembers some sage pastry advice she received long ago: "The hardware store will become your best friend." She frequents the one in Millburn for wooden dowels, for gardening shears, for X-acto knives. They're far less expensive — and far more useful — than the tricked-out gear available at high-end culinary shops or art supply stores.

When she goes out, she orders the most outrageous dessert on the menu, but when she's baking for the restaurant or making cakes for a client, she takes a more classic approach.

"Even if I make a crazy cake, I like to refine it." A lopsided topsy-turvy cake, for example, comes with pearl drops and sugar flowers, such as the one she has crafted for our cover this month.



She'll be busy on Valentine's Day, the sweetest day of the year, when the restaurant offers a complimentary box of truffles to its guests. But the very next day, she'll be on a plane for Puerto Rico. It's a poignant trip, a trip she had planned to take with her mother, who died of a rare cancer in October. Sardella's mom, the matriarch in a large Italian family who loved any excuse to bake, started the whole love affair with treats.

"We sneezed ... there was a party," says Sardella, whose childhood nickname was Sweet Tooth.