

THE SWEET Life

Across San Diego, new pastry and dessert shops are offering a sweeter way to socialize.

By Casey Hatfield-Chiotti



On a Saturday afternoon at Minou in the East Village, a chic couple installs themselves at a marble bistro table by the window. He orders a crepe with ham and Gruyere, while she settles on an iced mocha and a whipped goat cheese crepe with apricot compote. A pair of young women take a seat next to the bluish-gray wall with intricate molding to share a crepe filled with housemade hazelnut butter topped with a scoop of salted caramel ice cream.

"Our partners were in Europe a couple of summers ago, and they sent us a picture of their girls peeking into the window of a creperie," says Alison McGrath, who in addition to Minou co-owns beloved French bistro Café Chloe. "We thought, We should do that."

The charming creperie opened late last year. Well-placed antiques, bought at French flea markets, and 100-year-old globe-shaped lights that once hung from Parisian street lamps lend a feeling of having slipped into the belle époque. Bentwood bistro chairs with an art nouveau floral pattern are made by Thonet, the European company that invented the Vienna coffeehouse chair in the 1800s. Customers can pick up fresh almond croissants in the morning, eat them *sur place* with a frothy cappuccino and, of course, order crepes that can be enjoyed as a full meal or as a refined afternoon



Clockwise from top: A leisurely bite at Minou; the creperie's decor is made for lingering; maple pecan flan with candied walnuts and cranberry at Provisional Kitchen.



snack paired with a glass of sparkling rosé. “When you go to a restaurant, there’s a set of expectations. Here, you can linger as long as you want,” McGrath says.

Throughout San Diego, new dessert-focused shops are offering refined treats and convivial atmospheres. Neither bars nor restaurants, they’re redefining what a local gathering place can be, offering, dare we say, a more demure and civilized way to socialize. “We don’t really want to set limits,” says Pop Pie Co. owner Steven Torres. The gourmet sweet and savory pie shop is located in a sleek, modern space on a corner in University Heights. Businesspeople come for meetings, and couples and friends sit and catch up over slices of coconut cream, and a honey bourbon pecan with orange zest and Henebery spiced whiskey. “We want to expand people’s palates,” Torres says. While craft beer is on the menu, you’re more likely to see people sipping from the obsessively researched coffee and tea program that includes coffee from Heart Coffee Roasters in Portland, Ore., and single-origin matcha from the Uji region of Japan. Pair a matcha latte with a guava and cream cheese hand pie for a new take on afternoon tea.

The year-old Provisional Kitchen, Café & Mercantile, a wine bar, bakery and café in Pendry San Diego with soaring ceilings and art deco chandeliers, is the perfect spot for ladies to lunch or for a break in the afternoon. Slices of chocolate mousse cake topped with raspberries and gluten-free strawberry

Champagne macarons can be enjoyed with loose-leaf teas or a mini bottle of Moët from one of the only Champagne vending machines in the country.

Across town, Crafted Baked Goods in Liberty Public Market offers a slightly more casual but no less delicious experience. Lori Sauer, who worked at The Lodge at Torrey Pines and George’s at the Cove, has earned her reputation as cake queen for stunning custom creations, from a cake that looks like a Gucci handbag to a “grown-up” sprinkle cake made with smudges of bright fondant and gold leaf. At the new Little Italy outpost of Portland’s Salt & Straw, ice cream is a vehicle for co-founder Tyler Malek to creatively interpret the city via ice cream. Through local partnerships, Malek is creating an unhurried experience with a selection of San Diego-specific flavors. “James Coffee is close to our store, so I was already going there. I love their philosophy of sourcing: They’ve been working with a farm in Honduras, and the owner has grown with this farm. Both businesses are small enough to have an individualized impact on each other. My dream is that our ice cream is the focal point for the stories we tell,” he says.

Back at Minou, McGrath attributes the proliferation of elevated sweet spots to San Diego’s evolving sophistication. She hopes guests will sit for hours with friends, or come solo with a good book, as people do in Europe. “Having a glass of wine and a crepe can be restorative to your soul,” she says. ■



« “When you go to a restaurant, there’s a set of expectations. Here, you can linger as long as you want.” —ALISON MCGRATH »



Clockwise from top: A variety of sophisticated hand pies from Pop Pie Co.; Minou executive chef Theo Dimitriou with a whipped goat cheese crepe; James Coffee & Bourbon ice cream from Salt & Straw combines James Coffee with L.A.’s Greenbar Distillery Slow Hand Whiskey.