

**A Conversation with Karen Barker**

Author of *SWEET STUFF: KAREN BARKER'S AMERICAN DESSERTS*

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**Q: You're an award-winning pastry chef, but *SWEET STUFF* is a cookbook for the home cook. What distinguishes restaurant desserts from homemade desserts?**

**A:** I think that restaurant desserts tend to be a bit more elaborate than those that people tackle at home. And it's not that the base recipes are difficult—it's just that there are more components on a plate and more attention is paid to textural and temperature contrasts. In other words, a restaurant dessert might include a slice of cake with an accompanying sauce and an ice cream or a fruit garnish.

Chefs also consider what a dessert will look like when it's individually plated and put down in front of somebody. At home, a cake might be brought to the table on a platter and sliced and served in front of the guests. It's just a different way of thinking about presentation.

**Q: What makes *SWEET STUFF* unique among the many dessert cookbooks that are available?**

**A:** These are some of my favorite recipes for restaurant-quality desserts that can be made at home. I've been baking for over twenty years, so I had a large body of work to choose from. It's a conglomeration of things that I love, things that make me happy, and hopefully will make other people smile.

The recipes are very easy to follow, very user-friendly, and very detailed. And the book is full of information over and above the recipes themselves. It's a book for both experienced bakers and those who bake on a more novice level. I'd like everybody to feel comfortable trying these recipes. It includes a little bit of everything—something for every occasion.

**Q: Is there a story behind the name *SWEET STUFF*?**

**A:** I work with my husband Ben Barker at our restaurant Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina. We've co-owned it for 17 years, but we've been cooking together ever since we've known each other, which has been about 22 years. Ben's a chef, and we've always said that he takes care of the savory side of the menu. Because I'm involved with the dessert course and baking, we've always said that I take care of the sweet stuff. Ben says that my job is easy because sweet stuff always makes people happy. I think there's a lot of truth to that. In the introduction, I discuss the whole relationship between feeling good, nurturing, and sharing sweet things with others. I think it's something that everybody can relate to.

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**Q: You're originally from Brooklyn, but your baking style has a decidedly southern twist. How does your New York sensibility complement your southern kitchen?**

**A:** My New York background gave me a love of sweets from very early on. The bakery culture in New York is huge. Some people baked a little bit at home, but there were so many terrific neighborhood bakeries that it was really easy to purchase great baked goods. The southern baking scene is much more centered around the home. Many of my desserts are based on memories from childhood—things like the Blackout Cake, which is an incredibly famous cake in New York baking lore, and Brooklyn Black and Whites, or My Cousin Steve's Cheesecake. The southern influence comes into play with my use of regional ingredients such as cornmeal, buttermilk, molasses, and pecans.

**Q: You've said that it's one of your goals to encourage people to bake more at home. How can the busy person find time to prepare dessert?**

**A:** Preplanning is everything when it comes to efficiency in the kitchen. I don't think people realize how much can be done in advance. It's a matter of having certain staples around, and then thinking, maybe the day before you want to serve something, "tomorrow I'm going to do this." Thinking ahead expedites the process. Instead of having to do three distinct steps for a recipe, you might do only one or two.

Pastry dough freezes incredibly well. If you already have your pastry dough made, you can remove it from the freezer, and put it into the refrigerator to defrost overnight rather than having to make it that day and let it chill. You can even freeze it already rolled.

Many cookie doughs freeze really well, too. You can keep some types of cookies in your freezer already rolled out so that you can have freshly baked cookies within a half hour of deciding that you want them. A lot of sauces can be broken down into smaller batches and put in the freezer. Crisp toppings and fruit compotes can be made and refrigerated. Many desserts are designed to be prepared in advance. A refrigerator and freezer can be a baker's best friends.

**Q: Do you have any shortcuts for those of us who are really pressed for time?**

**A:** There's nothing wrong with taking a shortcut by using store-bought ingredients. If you need a really quick dessert, you can buy a great pound cake from the bakery or even from the supermarket and make an easy sauce to pair it with. You can get perfectly good premium ice cream in the supermarket, and then make fresh baked cookies and a sauce to go with it. If you do that, then you've got a mostly homemade dessert that tastes great and is really memorable.

I think sundaes are fabulous for any occasion—they're not just a kid's dessert. They can be served at the fanciest of dinner parties, people love them, and it really doesn't take that much work or effort to put them together.

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**Q: What makes a dessert American?**

**A:** American desserts are often home-based, at least in terms of how people relate to them. The primary emphasis is on flavor rather than looks. It's not that the stuff doesn't look great, but it's definitely simpler in appearance than most European-style baking. American desserts tend to be pretty punchy in flavor and solid rather than ethereally light, light, light and full of air and sugar. The flavors of some of these recipes are almost explosive, and definitely memorable. They're often seasonally based, and are ingredient-driven. I include recipes for both summer and winter season, as well as things that are non-seasonal and can be done at any time of year.

**Q: What kinds of techniques or desserts are most difficult for the home cook to master?**

**A:** I've often said that one of the harder things is pie dough. Now some people have what people in the South call "The Gift." It's an innate ability to become one with the dough. Others need to work at it a little bit. It's not a terribly difficult process, especially if you can observe it being done by someone who's fairly experienced. If you've never done it before though, it can be a little problematic. There's a whole pie primer in the book that gives step-by-step instructions for what to look for. Honestly, the more you do it, the better you get at it. I think that with a truly good recipe, most baking is doable if you read the recipe and pay attention to the details.

The Chocolate Chestnut Cream Roll is probably the biggest production in the book. It's an Americanized Buche de Noel kind of thing. If someone's not baked before, it shouldn't be the first recipe that they try. It's one of my fancier recipes, and it's amazingly impressive to bring to the holiday table. I do it for the family at Christmastime.

**Q: Do you have any favorite flavor combinations?**

**A:** I go with things that naturally pair well together. I tend to use combinations like peanut butter and chocolate, pecans and bourbon, caramel and bananas, cornmeal and vanilla, and certain fruit combinations like blackberries and peaches, strawberries and rhubarb, and the list goes on and on and on!

It's more interesting to eat a layering of flavors in a dessert so that it's not one-dimensional. When you sit down to a plate of something, it's nice not to have every bite taste exactly the same. I'm always very concerned that things "eat interestingly" all the way through. There should be flavor contrasts, temperature contrasts, and textural contrasts. Sometimes just adding a sauce can really highlight the flavors of the main dessert, like raspberry sauce paired with Key Lime Custard.

**Q: Is there any special equipment required?**

**A:** I use very little in the way of special equipment or ingredients. I occasionally use a few things that the average person might not have at home, but they're handy items, like ceramic  
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ramekins, for individual small cakes or warm custards or puddings. They're terrific for both sweet and savory things, and there's a multitude of uses for them in the kitchen. But if you don't have a particular item, I've often given alternatives. I also include an appendix with an equivalent pan size chart.

If you have a food processor and a standing mixer, that certainly makes baking much easier, and if you bake a lot, I would definitely recommend having them. But a handheld mixer also works great. And everything in this book can be done with a little elbow grease. People baked for hundreds of years before electrical appliances.

**Q: Any final words of advice?**

**A:** Baking should be a little break from your busy schedule. It shouldn't be a chore—it should be fun. If you approach it in a relaxed mode, and read the recipe ahead of time, and make sure that everything is out and in front of you, with all the right ingredients measured out correctly, you should come out with a really great product without too much muss and fuss.

Desserts can bring people together, and make any occasion more special. When you bring in a cake to the office, it's a people magnet. Everybody gravitates towards sweet stuff.

Karen Barker is the 2003 winner of the Best Pastry Chef Award from the James Beard Foundation and 1999 winner of *Bon Appétit's* American Food and Entertaining Award for Best Pastry Chef. She and husband Ben Barker own and operate Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina, and are coauthors of *Not Afraid of Flavor: Recipes from Magnolia Grill*.

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