



**Sweet Beat**

## Rouge Tomato Pastry Chef James DiStefano Uses Date Sugar and Quinoa Flour For His Desserts



Chocolate-banana trio at Rouge Tomato

We almost never want to know how much sugar, salt, or butter is in our dish when we're dining out (hint: a lot), and that goes double for dessert. Unless, that is, we're in the hands of **Rouge Tomato** (10 East 60th Street, 646-237-8977) pastry chef James Distefano.

The Michelin-starred Upper East Side restaurant works in tandem with a nutritionist to follow the guidelines of SPE (Sanitas Per Escam or "Health Through Food"), a program created to promote the partnership of culinary expertise and balanced nutrition, and one that extends to all aspects of the kitchen -- including pastry. "Each [dessert] that we do has to have about 80 grams -- about one serving -- of fruit," DiStefano notes. And while attention to the SPE is now engrained in DiStefano's work, he also ensures that his desserts -- like the chocolate icebox cake with housemade Greek coconut yogurt, or the beet "battered" red velvet cake with housemade cream cheese and blood orange -- are seasonally driven and texturally balanced, reflecting a gradually-calibrated style from kitchen experiences at Park

Avenue Café and davidburke & donatella. "[The fruit and its benefits are] in there; we just work it in in different ways because we don't want to give you a bunch of fruit on a plate," he says.

In this conversation, DiStefano reveals why health food as "spa food" is done for, what his pastry bin has that others don't, and why diners can "have their cake and eat it, too."



Chocolate icebox cake

### **How did you decide to enter the pastry field?**

I always felt that if you wanted to be well-respected as a chef and to lead a team, you had to know pastry. I always knew it was important. But actually, I came to realize I felt most comfortable doing pastry. There was less second-guessing, and I just had a knack for it.

### **How has the pastry world changed since you entered it, and has your style been impacted as a result?**

I remember a friend of mine I was working with at Park Avenue Café at the time; he was a teacher at the Natural Gourmet Institute, and he would tell us about vegan bacon and gluten free [ingredients], using apple butter as a replacement -- and this is going back about 17 years. And we were like, "What are you talking about? Why wouldn't you want to use white flour, sugar, and butter? It's just so much easier." We would razz him about it. Now, those are such integral ingredients to what we do here...My style has definitely changed as I've learned about these whole grain-based flours and how they work in recipes to be able to accommodate somebody who is gluten free or vegan. When I started in this industry 20 years ago, maybe 1 percent of the people who came in were like that, and now that percentage has grown. For us, it's great to be who we are and for people to recognize that they can come here and feel like they have options that aren't just a fruit plate or a simple dish. We're able to showcase this style in a Michelin-starred setting.

**What is the first thing you think about when conceptualizing a new dessert?**

[I think about] what fruits are coming into season. That's first and foremost -- what's good right now. And then, you want to have a nice, diverse menu. Right now, it's tropical fruits and citrus, but rhubarb is the first real sign of spring for us.

**According to the SPE's guidelines, the savory side of the kitchen doesn't have access to cream or butter -- but does the pastry kitchen get a little leeway in this area?**

The savory side of the kitchen does not use any cream or butter in any of its preparations. We do use some in some of the dough work that we do for pies and tart shells, and for certain cakes. We only use cream in a couple of ice creams. I think a little bit [of cream] is important because the fat is going to help carry the flavor of what you're showcasing. The pitfall is in using too much, and what happens is it begins to round out those flavors. And when you taste [the dessert] you wind up tasting richness, but you don't get the true essence of the fruit that you're eating. So we'll use [cream], but for accent.

**What do you use as substitutions?**

We use farm yogurt, Greek yogurt, buttermilk, or a little crème fraîche -- but we use it in ways to complement the fruit or the vegetable that we're showcasing; it's not the star of the dish.

**Do you miss using any ingredients -- or using any ingredients in abundance?**

I see all ingredients as paint on a painter's palette -- maybe s/he favors a certain color or shade of green or blue -- but I think they're all on an equal playing field. Sure, I like crème fraîche, but after working here for five and a half years, your palate and the way you eat definitely changes. In working with the ingredients that we do, in the style that we do it, you taste the flavors more cleanly -- because there is less fat to hide those flavors. By using less fat in a dish, you're able to focus in on the flavors a little more. So I don't mind having to use less butter or less cream; I'm totally good with that.

**Does the team follow nutritional studies or research about the latest superfoods?**

[Our nutritionist] just brought in some sprouted spelt flour that is going to inherently retain more nutrients. And chia is great because it can be used as an egg replacement in baking, and you can use it to thicken up a puree to give it a jam-like consistency. We certainly try to stay abreast of those things and incorporate them into what we do, when we can.

**Explain the process of working with a nutritionist in the kitchen.**

It's a very collaborative environment. In being here for five and a half years, you're able to

understand and able to navigate what's required of certain dishes. So I'm able to work on something with my sous chef, and I just know that I can look at the initial plate and say, "it needs more fruit" or "maybe we need to adjust this." We'll make some of those primary adjustments before we even bring it to [the nutritionist]. When we get it to a point where we're happy, we'll present it to her and to [chef] Jeremy and we'll all taste it and discuss it. If we get the green light, she will lay out each component of the dish, and we'll submit the recipes for those components to her. She has a program called NutriBase, where she plugs in these recipes with the weights, and it will either say, "OK, you're good" or "you'll have to make some adjustments in calories, fat, saturated fat, fiber." There are always 20 different nutrients that she'll look at in the recipe -- in addition to the balance of sodium and potassium. It's a lot of food for thought!

**What would you want the world's "dessert-skippers" to know about the pastry program at Rouge Tomato?**

We want people to think that they're getting something rich and decadent but to know at the end of the day that it's actually good for them. They can have their cake and eat it too, in a sense. They're still going to get a little something sweet at the end, but it's going to have a lot of fruit and nutrients and vitamins.

**What ingredients might we find in your pastry kitchen that we wouldn't find in that of another New York pastry chef?**

Maybe one of the grain flours that we're using -- amaranth or quinoa flour. Or maybe coconut sugar or date sugar.

**What are the benefits of these ingredients?**

[Those sugars] are not refined; they're coming from the coconut or date itself. Dates are naturally sweet, so you're getting some of the potassium or fiber that is found in the date, as well. In terms of the flours -- quinoa has a lot of nutrients in it -- it's a complete protein.

**Have your eating habits changed outside of work since working at Rouge Tomato?**

I was making that change six years ago. I had started being more conscious of my health. When I got the call for this job, Jeremy told me about it and the philosophy, and I was totally blown away by it. I was like, "I want in." So, yeah. I think ever since then I've been more conscious of how I eat and what I put into my body -- and what I eat at what time of the year. Just because I can buy strawberries now at the supermarket, or tomatoes, I'm not necessarily going to buy them.

**What do you see for the future of the pastry and nutrition convergence?**

I definitely think there's a place for nutrition in pastry and pastry in nutrition. People who have certain intolerances or allergies -- I think they still want to be able to have a cookie or have a piece of cake. I think people yearn for the things of their childhood. Do I expect every restaurant in the city to start making healthy desserts? No, because there's certainly a large population of people who still want to have that slice of seven layer chocolate cake with whipped cream and ice cream -- real over the top, rich things. I think we've really done well as a restaurant as a whole to carve out a niche and to do it well. We earned a Michelin star five years ago, and we've kept it -- and I think that's a great testament to the fact that you can do this mindful cooking in a Michelin-starred setting, and you're not giving off the impression that it's spa cuisine.

**What is your favorite part about your job?**

My favorite thing is working with the amount of different ingredients that we do, and the amount that I've learned about these different types of flours or even the hydrocolloids -- something that's normally associated with molecular gastronomy. By using things like agar-agar or carrageenan, you're able to emulate certain textures and mouth feels that maybe are normally associated with a really rich pudding -- but with no or minimal use of fat, such as egg yolk, butter, or cream. That quest for knowledge and wanting to work with new ingredients and incorporate them into my repertoire is still as strong as it was five and a half years ago.

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