



Pictured this page: Chocolate Charlotte
facing page top right: Chocolate Mousse
bottom: Ladyfingers

HOLIDAY DESSERTS

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Holiday parties aren't complete without a few fancy-schmancy desserts and these chocolatey creations make a festive and decadent finale.

I'll explain how to make one showpiece dessert, and using the base same recipe, break it down into a couple of super simple desserts. I've also included a yummy cranberry compote that can be served with each component. Please, let's not call it "deconstructed" dessert, that's far too pretentious. This is all about mixing and matching and getting creative!

You don't have to be a pastry chef to create impressive looking desserts at home. You require only one tool from a chef's bag of tricks: a pastry bag. Okay, you need a bit of patience too, but not as much as you might think.

Chocolate Charlotte with Candied Cranberries

Dust off your cake platter and splurge on some Christmas ribbon; this Charlotte is a stand-alone diva destined for memorable holiday photos. Served plain or with a luscious cranberry compote, this dessert rings in the season with style.

This splendid Charlotte only looks challenging to make. It has but two components: a chocolate mousse and sponge ladyfingers. If you have the stamina to create a layered cake, then you've got what it takes to assemble a Charlotte. Best of all, it freezes beautifully so you can make it well before the holiday crunch.

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Ladyfingers

Freshly baked ladyfingers are soft and light and nothing like the hard, sugary, cello-wrapped store-bought variety. With only three ingredients; sugar, flour and eggs, they are surprisingly easy to prepare: no need to be intimidated. Ladyfingers were the very first thing I made at culinary school. I had never used a pastry bag before and my first dozen ladyfingers looked more like gnarly thumbs than elegant fingers, but by the time I was on to my second tray, I was piping like a seasoned pro. Who knew it could be so easy?

Ladyfingers are not just for Charlottes, they can be drenched with espresso for a decadent tiramisu, mixed with fruit and cream for an old fashioned trifle, slathered with jam, dusted with sugar, or served straight up, au naturel.

Chocolate Mousse

When chocolate and cream collide, something magical happens. Combine barely whipped cream with melted chocolate and *voilà!* you've created an exquisite dessert that will leave your guests wondering how you managed. Who would have guessed the two ingredients could cause such a sensation?

Chocolate mousse can be spooned, or decoratively piped, into any container; just be sure to keep it on the small side because this silky-smooth dessert is deceptively rich. Forget about the ubiquitous martini glass, it's far too large and, besides, there are so many other creative options available: think espresso mugs, tiny ramekins, egg cups, and miniature tea cups and such. Vintage and second-hand stores offer exceptional value for unconventional glassware and who says they all have to be the same anyway? An eclectic assortment of antique sherry or shot glasses make for inspired containers.

Dessert Garnishes

When it comes to desserts, it's all about showing-off so don't be tempted to skimp on the finishing touches. A unique container and a decorative garnish can turn a simple mousse into *la pièce de résistance*. Garnishes add drama, height and textural contrast to a fluffy mousse. Painting leaves with melted chocolate is an easy decorating trick and who doesn't like chocolate with their chocolate? With a little imagination, and a bit of sugar, you can transform paper-thin slices of apple or pear into delicate fruit chips, plain-Jane nuts into bejeweled brittle, and simple cranberries into edible ornaments. Of course, you don't have to make your own garnishes; your local grocer or chocolatier can provide plenty of options for dessert toppers: slender rolled wafers, chocolate coins, delicate thin cookies, elegant chocolate straws, and chocolate-dusted coffee beans to name a few.

Denise Marchessault, cooking instructor and proprietor of French Mint, is classically trained in French cuisine.



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