

vanilla & more



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You don't *need* dessert. Not in the same way you need oxygen to breathe or that meaty main course you just ordered. It's pure excess—a blissful excuse to satisfy that aching sweet tooth. But let's not label it as just the latter half of a meal when it can bring the same amount of drama and beauty to the table as an entrée. Pastry chefs in today's dessert-driven society showcase just as much creativity as any seasoned chef de cuisine, melding modern techniques with unique flavor profiles and artful presentations. Some are doing it so well, in fact, they've opened up sweet-centric eateries where savory offerings come second.

At Vanillamore, they're elevating the dessert experience. There's no such thing as a single slice of cake but instead, Chef-Owner Risa Magid Boyer wanted her dessert kitchen to offer Montclair-goers an imaginative interpretation—think charcuterie boards with chocolate salamis, bite-size s'mores tapas, and three-course tasting flights. The CIA-trained pastry chef began her career as a graphic design student at Northeastern University but ultimately switched over to culinary school after spending time working in a Boston restaurant during college. Since, Boyer has cooked her way through professional and educational East Coast kitchens alike, but this newest venture is the first that's 100 percent owned and operated by her.

"There are tons of bakeries and restaurants in Montclair that have amazing desserts but we're unique in how we present our desserts and menu as a whole," Boyer explained. "You can come and have something savory that's going to be lighter, fresher, and healthier but also really indulge in dessert at the same time. "The people here [in Montclair] embrace something that's a little bit different."

As an NJ-native herself, Boyer took advantage of Montclair's restaurant-rich downtown area which, until this past September, was vacant of a dessert-focused destination. And as Vanillamore's "Sweet.Savory.Social" tagline suggests, they're also serving lunch, brunch, and dinner offerings which include larger plates such as a roasted half-chicken, red wine braised short ribs, or a skirt steak with brussels sprouts and house-made rosemary focaccia. But make no mistake, Boyer's emphasis is on her show-stopping confections.

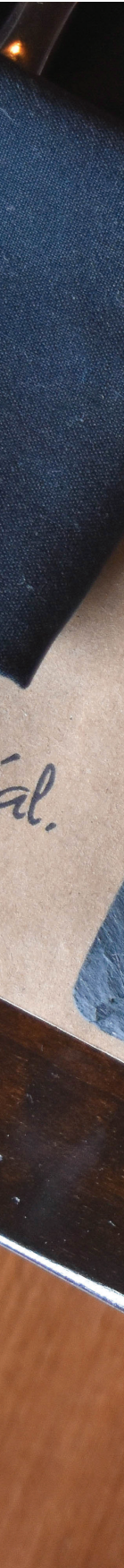
Visual appeal, taste and texture are the three main components you'll find at the forefront of any Vanillamore dessert. And Boyer's food philosophy? To "always have a twist on what's already known." Their menu playfully nods to nostalgic childhood classics we know and love, but with the finesse of a fine-dining restaurant. Take, for instance, the s'mores tapas — a mix of assorted chocolate, vanilla, and graham cracker shortbread cookies artfully arranged and served open-faced, topped with toasted homemade vanilla bean marshmallows and an accoutrement of caramel sauces. (The espresso is our favorite.) Acting as the chocolate, the dish is served with a side of spicy, decadent Aztec hot chocolate made with a blend of cinnamon, chili powder, and cayenne pepper.

When it came to structuring the menu, Boyer knew they needed to give guests more than just one way of experiencing dessert. After countless trips to restaurants across the river, they were able to narrow down their brand and vision by presentation style. She explained, "We explored just doing dessert flights at one point. We also explored doing just dessert tapas but I think those two things are already known and understood by people, but not necessarily in the dessert world."

Just like you would order, say, a wine or beer flight, Vanillamore is serving three small bites of different desserts based on a common theme or flavor. Along with a few seasonal offerings like their Ginger & Spice and Winter Citrus flights, guests can

indulge in the Crazy for Caramel or Chocolate Obsession which features a dark chocolate cake with almond cream and espresso caramel; spicy chocolate ganache tart with hazelnuts and sea salt; and the chocolate chip cookie sandwich served with a cold glass of malted milk.

While admittedly their dessert "charcuterie" boards come with a bit of a learning curve, Boyer doesn't want that to intimidate you. Inside Vanillamore's pastry display case, guests can find both the chocolate and vanilla charcuterie boards layed out with note cards that characterize what's what. Each board comes with two of their "salamis" which are not actually made of meat, but rather dried fruit and either dark, milk, or white chocolate. There's also cookies, doughnuts, and slices of cake mimicking toast; some sort of macerated or candied fruits; caramel sauces and mousse that act as the spreads; and accents to bump up flavor and texture such as sprinkles of fleur de sel, olive oil, candied nuts clusters, sesame seeds, and lemon peel.







As far as coming up with new and original ideas, it's important for Boyer to keep up with what's trending, as well as turn to her fellow co-workers for inspiration. "Something I think always surprises people are our flavor combinations. I really depend on my staff and my team to throw different ideas at me. It's nice to be able to rely on other people's creativity but still remain on-brand. The Ginger & Spice flight, for example, was one of our pastry cook's brainchildren."

You'll find different iterations of desserts at Vanillamore that balance both sweet and savory components, including grapefruit and mint sorbet; an espresso tartlet with ginger caramel sauce and sesame brittle; and their red wine and cherry glazed doughnuts which are just one element of their seasonal dessert kebabs.

But at the core of everything they do is vanilla, not only as Boyer's favorite flavor but as part of their aptly named dessert kitchen. "It's more about using vanilla in the way that savory food uses salt," Boyer explained. To be specific, they're using Nielsen-Massey vanilla bean paste to wake up all other surrounding flavors and help push them forward. Boyer intended for the name to be twofold, a way of referencing their versatility and translating literally to mean "the love of vanilla."

Take a seat at any table throughout their fully-opened kitchen and you'll catch glimpses of tart shells being filled, finishes of flaky sea salt being sprinkled high, and food-inspired artwork displays with aromas of toasted marshmallows wafting through the air. Without straying too far from tradition, they're celebrating all that dessert can be from sweet and savory to vanilla and more.