



The sweetest stars

The last course plays a bright, starring role in the world of Michelin-starred desserts.

BY JOCELYN TAN



ICED BEETROOT FROM CODA. PHOTO: CLAUDIA GOEDKE

What if the final course became the main event? Imagine a world where desserts, complete with meticulously crafted textures and flavours, don't just cap a meal but takes centre stage.

This isn't a fantasy — it's happening in some of the most innovative kitchens around the globe. While dessert restaurants exist in many forms, only three have earned the coveted Michelin star: Yama in Tokyo, MINIMAL in Taichung, and CODA in Berlin. These trailblazing establishments have carved out a niche in the world of fine dining, where dessert doesn't just follow the meal — it is the meal.

MINIMAL transforms ice cream into an exploration

of sub-zero textures and Taiwanese terroir.

In 2024, it was the world's first and only ice cream establishment to receive a Michelin star. Yama, a sanctuary for fruit lovers, celebrates the fleeting beauty of each season; it also earned a Michelin star in the same year.

CODA, the only two-Michelin-starred dessert restaurant in the world, pushes boundaries even further. The restaurant in Berlin's trendy Neukölln neighbourhood creates a 15-course menu that is savoury, umami-rich, and entirely non-conformist.

Together, these restaurants represent a new frontier for luxury dining, where dessert is no longer an afterthought.



A new frontier for fine dining

Dessert holds a unique emotional power. It's indulgent, nostalgic, and often the most creative part of a meal. Yet for chefs like Arwin Wan of MINIMAL and René Frank of CODA, it's more than just a sweet treat: it's a medium for exploring complexity and crafting an entire dining experience.

Arwin's journey began with a question: "What could the future of ice cream shops look like?" Dissatisfied with the traditional approach to ice cream, he sought to elevate it into something artistic and thought-provoking. At MINIMAL, his seven-course tasting menu works with ingredients at mostly sub-zero temperatures. Some of the dishes include pine needles with Camellia seed oil, which evoke a botanical flavour profile, and Woodsorrel sorbet paired with shiso, green apple and fennel — a reimagining of "green" in a single scoop. Beyond a fresh aroma, this dish encompasses botanical nuances and woody fragrances. On the ground floor, guests can also enjoy takeaway ice creams — six unique flavours that are always updated.

MINIMAL IS THE WORLD'S FIRST ICE-CREAM ESTABLISHMENT TO RECEIVE A MICHELIN STAR

For René, dessert is a playground for breaking conventions. CODA's menu features dishes like the salty-sweet Caviar Popsicle, a daring combination of creamy ice cream and briny caviar. Then there's the Carrot & Green, where spiced carrot juice reduction, yoghurt foam, and finger lime mousse come together in a crisp, frozen shell to create a fresh, balanced dessert. Each dish is designed to challenge expectations and provoke curiosity.

These chefs are proving that dessert isn't just the end of a meal — it's a bold exploration of culinary artistry.

Beyond sweetness

What sets these dessert-focused concepts apart isn't just their focus on dessert but their radical reinvention of what dessert can be. At MINIMAL, ice cream serves as a gateway to uncovering the intricate interplay of temperatures, textures, and the essence of Taiwanese ingredients. Each course is painstakingly prepared to surprise diners. For instance, the banana oil shaved ice (香蕉油清冰) is a reimagining of a traditional Taiwanese treat using sake and wild ginger flowers. "I want guests to rediscover the joy of eating ice cream," Arwin says, describing how each dish is designed to evoke nostalgia while feeling entirely new. As of the time of writing, MINIMAL has gone back to its focus on only serving ice cream for takeout.

CODA's approach is even more radical. René's 15-course menu eliminates industrially processed ingredients like white sugar, focusing instead on natural sweetness derived from fermented rice, root vegetables, and unrefined cane sugar. His savoury Dike cheese tart showcases his philosophy: a dish that looks like a dessert but delivers layers of umami from its base of cheese, and bone marrow, balanced with peanut mousse flavoured with hazelnut butter. "We don't see CODA as a dessert restaurant," René explains. "It's a non-conformist dining experience."



CHEF ARWIN WAN OF MINIMAL

A TRIO OF MELON: BITTER MELON, WINTER MELON, AND CANTALOUPE COME TOGETHER WITH CHEESE AND FINGERED CITRON TO CREATE A WELL-BALANCED DESSERT AT MINIMAL



FOOD / MICHELIN-STARRED DESSERTS



CHEF AND CO-OWNER RENE FRANK WITH HEAD
CHEF JULIA LEITNER PHOTO: CLAUDIA GOEDKE



TOMATO FROM CODA. PHOTO: CLAUDIA GOEDKE

Earning a Michelin star is an extraordinary achievement for any restaurant, but for dessert-only establishments, it's almost unheard of. For Arwin, MINIMAL's star was a validation of years of experimentation and dedication. "It's not about fame or fortune," he reflects. "It's about the acknowledgement of our effort and passion from the world that we've devoted. To me, traditional ice cream shops feel more like fruit stores or ingredient shops, offering fixed, familiar flavours like chocolate, mango, or strawberry. People come in looking for these recognisable products. However, I believe ice cream is no different from cuisine or other forms of creative expression — the only difference is the medium used in the final presentation. I approach and design ice cream from the

perspective of cooking, but my ultimate form of presentation is ice cream."

René recalls the skepticism towards CODA's vision when it first opened. "People said no one needs a dessert restaurant," he says. Yet CODA has now held two Michelin stars since 2019, thanks to its consistent execution and daring menu. "Every dish must deliver balance and precision," he explains. "Whether it's for a first-time diner or a food critic, the experience must be identical." Michelin recognition also signals a shift in how dessert is perceived. These stars aren't just accolades — they're proof that dessert can stand shoulder to shoulder with savoury courses, earning its place at the forefront of fine dining.



EGGPLANT FROM CODA. PHOTO: CLAUDIA GOEDKE

As more diners seek unique and immersive culinary experiences, dessert-only restaurants may continue to grow in popularity. Chefs are paving the way, showing that dessert can be a medium for storytelling, nostalgia, and even cultural expression. Dessert has always been the final act, a sweet punctuation mark to conclude a meal. But what happens when the end transforms into the beginning? The rise of dessert-only dining flips the script, inviting us to reimagine the possibilities of the plate. These chefs aren't just creating desserts — they're creating experiences that linger, long after the last spoonful.

When dessert becomes the story's opening chapter rather than its epilogue, it challenges us to rethink our cravings, our expectations, and even our relationship with indulgence. Perhaps that's the magic of dessert: not just to finish a meal, but to spark something entirely new. **e**



GELATO WITH A BOTANICAL TWIST

Singapore's very own Birds of Paradise has earned its place in the Michelin Guide's selection, celebrated for its nature-inspired gelato that delights both the palate and the senses. Drawing from Southeast Asian herbs, flowers, and spices, the gelato offers a unique sensory journey that feels both refreshing and sophisticated. Founder Edwin Lim describes the brand as "inspired by nature," crafting gelato that reflects the region's rich biodiversity.

Standout creations include Pandan, Lemongrass Ginger, and White Chrysanthemum, each crafted to highlight the delicate balance between taste and aroma. These treats are complemented by handmade thyme-infused cones, which add an earthy, aromatic note to every scoop.