

# Nuts to you

Forget the humble sandwich, peanut butter is now a top-end dessert ingredient, writes **Samantha Selinger-Morris**.

IT IS an unlikely glamour item but somehow peanut butter has become the latest ingredient for haute dessert makers around town.

"It's funny isn't it?" Jeremy Strode says. Strode's Surry Hills restaurant, Bistrot, has served peanut butter ice-cream alongside his wife Jane's famous honey tart for the past year. Strode admits he "can't stand" plain peanut butter and would never have it on toast "but I love the ice-cream".

So, too, does Martino Piccolo, owner of Art of Gelato Michelangelo in Fairfield – who debuted his peanut-choc gelato at last year's Royal Easter Show – and Flying Fish's pastry chef Aymee Slaviero, whose

teeth. So just how has something with such a low-rent past pulled a Pygmalion?

There are as many theories as varieties of the legume family from which the peanut stems. Produce suppliers such as Lynne Tietzel, of Australia On A Plate, muse that a sudden popularity of any ingredient can stem from a glut, a lifting of previous import bans (as with jamon) or the nous of a good marketer pushing it to various restaurants (as with finger limes). Of the chefs interviewed, only Machin says some of his peanut-based desserts stem from being offered in-season, fresh peanuts.

Jane Strode was inspired by the peanut butter and honey sandwiches she ate as a child. Her husband links the peanut butter craze to the wider nostalgia food trend of the past few years.

Upscale eateries around the world have elevated old-time family favourites. Until recently, Bilson's in the city served mini-milkshakes as amuses bouches, while in the US the Repast restaurant in Atlanta used to offer homemade hot dogs topped with foie gras and three-onion tomato sauce. This also fits for Piccolo, who created his gelato to taste like the Scorched Peanut Bars of his childhood.

It is Katrina Kanetani, dessert chef at Pier, whose hypothesis embodies the scrappy spirit of the schoolyard where, pre-allergy anxiety, the delicacy once thrived: she believes it's the simple art of the copycat.

"People put something on a menu and all of a sudden it starts appearing everywhere," she says, likening the trend to the corn fritter rage of the late 1990s.

She first put a peanut butter ice-cream ball on the Rose Bay restaurant's menu in 2006 and recently reinstated it after including it in her and owner Greg Doyle's new cookbook, *Pier*.

She believes the initial inspiration for the local flood of high end chocolate-and-peanut-butter desserts comes from the United States. Peanut butter is revered there and more and more Australian chefs



Smooth ... (above) Katrina Kanetani from Pier with her milk chocolate and vanilla peanut ball and (left) Bistrot's honey tart with peanut butter ice-cream. Photos: Marco Del Grande



toffee peanut semifreddo did a roaring trade when it was on the menu last year. "One regular would request a double helping every two to three days," she says.

Kym Machin, of Brisbane's Urbane, slathers his peanut butter-flavoured ice-cream into a truffle and chocolate-festooned sphere as well as his take on the peanut butter and jam sandwich (ice-cream, brioche and raspberry jelly). Both dishes were introduced a year ago.

Peanut butter first appeared as a paste consumed by the Cuban underclass in the 1840s, then reappeared in the 1890s as a protein supplement for people with bad

are heading to the US for work experience. Every year, according to one estimate, Americans consume enough peanut butter to cover the floor of the Grand Canyon.

Kanetani's creation resulted from an addiction to Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, which began during a 2005 stint in New York City. Dishes aping those flavours have been offered by such pioneering chefs as WD-50's Sam Mason – who makes peanut butter-infused foie gras – and Laurent Tourondel, of BLT Steak, who likes to whip up a peanut butter chocolate mousse.

"A lot of the pastry books we get here are American," Kanetani says. "We don't have a lot here." Last year alone, two American cookbooks released here, *The Art Of Dessert* and *Dessert Bible*, feature, respectively, peanut butter cream truffles and peanut butter brownies.

Unintended culinary poaching or not, the former lunchbox staple's rise from the gastronomic ashes has had the unexpected

effect of bringing about a reversal of fortune for its devotees.

Once associated with a quinella of undesirables – bloated rock stars and poor students – peanut butter lovers are now ascribed far more favourable, even elitist, virtues.

When asked how fans of the peanut butter Lindt ball respond when their selection is sold out at the Lindt Chocolat Cafes, marketing manager John Candi is swift to answer that "they're very disgruntled". Hardly surprising given that peanut butter is third in popularity – behind only milk and white chocolate – among the 11 varieties of Lindt balls at Sydney's three cafes.

And then there are those who choose Piccolo's peanut-choc gelato.

"People that are looking for traditional Italian flavours won't have it," he sniffs. "People who are broadminded like it. And those who like peanuts."