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Sweet Retreats

PASTRY CHEFS FROM LOS ANGELES TO ATLANTIC CITY are opting out of others' kitchens in favor of their own sweet retreats. Can America's sweet tooth sustain the wave of dessert-driven concepts?

"I don't think you ever know when you're ready; you just do it," says Mindy Segal, who spent the last five years as pastry chef at mk in Chicago, of her February debut, HOTCHOCOLATE. In addition to desserts, the casual spot's menu includes appetizers, sandwiches and seasonal entrées and sides at dinner.

Self-taught baker Steve Himelfarb followed a different path to his 5-month-old New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery. He opened the specialty shop—selling light lunch fare as well as slices of fresh cake, cupcakes, tarts and other desserts—after years of baking chocolate cakes and selling them door-to-door for \$3 a slice.

Other fresh-from-the-oven, dessert-themed eateries include:

● **Brûlée: The Dessert Experience**, part of a \$280 million expansion of Atlantic City's Tropicana Casino and Resort, opened in November 2004 with Tavern on the Green and Four Seasons San Francisco alum Jemal Edwards at the helm.

● **Almondine**, an October 2004 debut from Hervé Poussot, former pastry chef at Le Bernardin and Windows on the World in New York



City, and Jacques Torres, owner of Jacques Torres Chocolate Haven across the street. Fresh-baked organic breads join a lineup of French and American pastries.

- ✦ ● **Angel Food Bakery** (above), Chicago, where Stephanie Samuels ✦ specializes in plays on familiar treats such as Twinkies, whoopie pies ✦ and s'mores. Ultra-rich European-style hot chocolate also is a draw. ✦
- ✦ Samuels, ex-pastry chef at Erwin Dreschler's Metropolis and a food ✦ stylist, also sells custom cakes, pastries and cookies. ✦
- **Jean-Philippe Pâtisserie** in Las Vegas' Bellagio Hotel & Casino's ✦ new Spa Tower bears the name and showcases the talents of the ✦ resort's executive pastry chef, Jean-Philippe Maury.

Independents Combine to Conquer Rising Food Costs