



Diver Chevy Stays!

Colossus among cakes

By PATRICIA TALORICO The News Journal
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Making a cake that, well, takes the cake means much more than icing layers of Devil's food with buttercream frosting or piping on whipped cream rosettes.

Customers these days want luscious, spectacular, custom-made confections that astound the eye as well as tempt the taste buds.

"Is that really cake?" is one of the greatest compliments a specialty baker can receive after creating a sugary objet d'art.

Pastry chefs Liz Marden and Kim Tavani chalk up the current trend for bigger, complex layer cakes to the "Ace of Cakes" phenomenon.

Ever since the Food Network TV series showcasing Baltimore chef Duff Goldman, owner of Charm City Cakes, and his fantasy creations premiered in 2006, the chefs say the demand for off-the-wall and innovative pastries has risen faster than a chocolate souffle.

Marden, owner of Liz Marden Gourmet Cakes and Desserts, a European-style patisserie in Hockessin, is already well-known for constructing multi-tiered, mousse-filled wedding cakes. But, recently, she and her staff were asked to bake and build a replica of the Delaware Theatre Company -- complete with stage, lights and rising seats -- as part of its 30th anniversary celebration.

"It's probably the biggest shape cake that I've done," Marden says of the nearly 300-pound carrot and vanilla buttercream cake that was showcased at the theater company's 20th annual Wine Feast & Auction.

The cost for elaborate, one-of-a-kind cakes varies. At Charm City Cakes, in Baltimore, the minimum is \$1,000, not including delivery.

Marden says her cost "depends on the complexity of the cake. Ours generally range from \$7 to \$10 a slice."

For the Feb. 6 festivities at Wilmington's Center on the Riverfront, Marden's staff also baked 30 smaller cakes, one to celebrate each year of the theater's existence. Each was decorated and topped with a playbill made out of rice paper. Another cake was made to resemble a wine bottle and decorated with hand-rolled grapes and vines made out of sugar.

But well before the bakers even began creaming together 46 pounds of sugar and 144 pounds of butter, Marden and her team toured the Water Street theater in Wilmington and studied numerous interior and exterior photographs taken by Marden's son Matt.

"We all went to a play just to see the theater in action," Marden says.

Then, the team sat down and discussed what they needed to do to build the 14-inch-tall structure and the other cakes that would feed 700 people.

Assistant pastry chef Tavani, a culinary arts graduate of Johnson & Wales University who has the most experience creating sculpture cakes, helped lay out logistics for the pastry's components. Marden, classically trained in French pastry at the Hotel du Pont, refused to cut corners when it came to taste. The inside of the cake had to be as good as the outside. And everything had to be edible -- no iced Styrofoam was used.

"I'm old school," Marden said. The staff spent one day peeling and grating 50 pounds of carrots for the cake batter.

"We also used fresh ginger and it had to be microplaned by hand," says Liz's daughter Kat Marden, a pastry cook at the shop who is accustomed to her mother's high standards. "It was pretty labor intensive. My wrists were killing me when we finished."

Another day was devoted to mixing 144 eggs and 41 pounds of flour for the batters. Thirty cakes, baked in heavy 17-by-25-inch pans, would make up the backbone of the theater. Another 30 vanilla, chocolate, lemon and spice cakes were required to create the playbills.

Then, each of the folded seats, the lights decorating the stage and a microphone had to be molded by hand with fondant, a pliable sugar paste often used in cake and candy decorating.

"It's like Play-Doh for chefs," says Marden.

Pastillage, a sugar paste that dries hard and can be cut into shapes, was used for the arm rests on the seats.

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