

CakeCentral

magazine

The 2010 Wedding Cake Issue

diamonds are a cake's
best friend

Ron Ben-Israel
*The Wedding Cake
Master*

bouquets *pretty*
enough to eat

extra sweet
wedding invitations
cakes *laced* with style



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Ron Ben-Israel
the *Wedding Cake*
master

Sugar flowers created by the renowned Ron Ben-Israel are so realistic, if you saw them in a garden, you would mistake them as real. Every day in his studio, Ron Ben-Israel makes multitudes of sugar-paste flowers with the exact details of the flower's veining and characteristics, down to the formation of the orchid's throat. They are perfect replicas.



Surrounded by beautiful creations at his bakery and studio in SoHo, New York, Ron graciously took the time to answer some of Cake Central Magazine's questions about his personal philosophies, inspiration for his designs, and his views on the balance between mentorship and cake making.

As opposed to a cake connoisseur or even a professional decorator, Ron refers to himself simply as a baker. That's a bit like calling the Tiffany & Co. master artists just jewelry makers, but Ron insists that there is nothing that can replace real bakery work; the prestige he enjoys rests on solid grunt work. "You need practice to get it in your bones, in your muscles. In the art of cake design, there is no substitute for repetitive work," says Ron. "It is only after an individual has knowledge of each and every part of the bakery business that they receive the privilege of performing independent parts of the job."



Within the bakery, the renowned and intricate flowers Ron creates out of sugar-paste are only a small fraction of his favorite tasks. According to Ron, sitting and making sugar flowers is certainly the most relaxing portion of the job. "The sugar flowers are the most calming process I get to do," he says. Not surprisingly, Ron believes his flowers are the ultimate study in patience. This has indeed taken some practice, for while his sugar flowers turn out nearly perfect, Ron says he "still struggles with the type of daily discipline needed to make them."

Despite his love of creating those beautiful flowers, Ron resists singling out any one part of his business as his favorite. When describing the parts of his job that he enjoys the most, from whipping the buttercream to even balancing the checkbook, each seems to be rewarding. In terms of the popular flavors, and even Ron's favorite flavor, it is difficult to recommend one, two, or even three! "We start with maybe 12 different suggestions. We talk to the clients...My personal favorite flavor? I like them all."

So what are some of the delicacies hidden underneath the perfectly smooth fondant and sculpted sugar confections? At the Ron Ben-Israel bakery, there are no limits to the flavors that can be produced. "We have a whole line of nostalgic cakes for adults; childish, fun cakes...we do things like chunky peanut butter filling with dark chocolate ganache. It's an adult version of a peanut butter cup. We do a

sticky coconut filling with chocolate-dipped, roasted almonds, as well as crunchy things like Heath® bar and crushed malt balls as fillings."

In the beginning, the inspiration for Ron's designs comes from his correspondence with the bride, the groom, and their associate wedding vendors. The cake design is a fashion statement, he says, and the bakery tries to incorporate all elements of the wedding, from the bride's dress to the reception location. "The fabrics, cut of the dress and elements like lace and beading can all be very influential. Stationery, programs – anything that provides an idea or expression of the reception will help me come up with ideas for the cake." Additionally, Ron's staff tries to reference the floral arrangements or venue color theme in the cake's décor, as well as a flavor that balances with the catering menu. "I like to know the chef who is catering dinner so I can make suggestions about the flavors... of course the florist is a major inspiration, because we like to work with colors mixed in with the design."

Other creations are influenced by the ethnicities and cultures of the wedding party. Ron pays intimate attention to the specific details surrounding each wedding when creating the cake, including cultural heritage. "For Asian weddings we have done ginger and green tea cake flavors. For those of Indian heritage, we work with mango, orange, or rose water." The flavor, furthermore, is in no way secondary

to the outer beauty of the Ron Ben-Israel creations. Ron is adamant about neither taste nor design trumping the overall product; the entirety of the design is given particular and special attention. "It's never been an option for me not to focus on both cake flavor and design. I'm very surprised when people say they don't care if the cake doesn't taste good. It absolutely shouldn't be that way." It gives his staff great pleasure when the awe-inspiring visual imagery of their wedding cakes is met by equally delighted taste buds.

The presentation of these stunning, intricate, and striking cakes can be compared to a performance: creativity and imagination are embedded into a final product of beauty and grandeur. "I bring the cake to one of the most important days of the couple's lives and I have to have the confidence to perform. It's the accumulation of the grand finale...it's very dramatic."

Such professional artistry is rooted in Ron's background in the fine arts. Ron was a ballet dancer for the Israeli Ballet, Batsheva Dance Company, and specifically Bat Dor for several years before embarking on a culinary career. In several ways, he believes that practicing ballet is similar to the way he develops his decorating skills. "I have to rehearse, train, and get comfortable with the material. It comes from repetition...and the ability to absorb so many instructions." A former ballet partner of Ron's noted that, "He is still practicing art in the same way as ballet," just that he manifests that art in his culinary and baking techniques.



“cake design is a
fashion statement”







In any performance, confidence is the key, and presenting a beautifully dramatic cake for the “grand finale” of any wedding is the pinnacle of Ron’s self-assurance. Such a level of confidence, however, is accumulated through dedication and practice. As a master pastry-chef instructor of classical French pastry with the French Culinary Institute in New York, Ron constantly emphasizes to his students the importance of practicing all different techniques. “Modern design is misleading in the sense that some people may think that they don’t need to know classic techniques in order to do contemporary; however, anyone needs to be well versed in all aspects of classical techniques.” Ron’s advice is something that any cake maker can apply to their own work, certainly.

Ron has worked exceptionally hard at practicing, and he continues to practice all the skills and techniques that have built the reputation of his work and his bakery. Such a level of dedication is necessary, as he works very hard to keep his bakery up to the high level of artistry and creativity under which it operates. The work done in the bakery is balanced among the staff, Ron included. “Some of my employees have definitely become better than me at certain tasks because they can concentrate on their specific jobs, be it administrative, culinary, or artistic duties,”





and those who work with Ron bring their collective contributions from their varied backgrounds in the baking and decorating field.

Ron, along with operating and creating, maintains a strong mentorship within the bakery in order to train his staff effectively. He takes great responsibility in developing the skills of his students and staff, as well as encouraging their own creativity and insight. "I provide an environment to grow; having employees is a little like being a parent. It's about experimentation and improvisation. I bring ideas and I like to get them going, then to see how they come up with their own ideas in cake."

It is fitting that Ron should view his employees and students at the FCI as children of sorts, as once upon a time he was the student of two great women in the cake industry. Betty Van Norstrand and Martha Stewart both played roles in Ron's arrival at his current career. Betty and Martha taught Ron that a cake maker should never stop being a student. Martha is always asking Ron, "How do you do that? How do you do that?", which is the type of attitude he wants to uphold and see in his own protégés.

"People should try to better themselves. That's where the spiritual part comes in – you are always a work in progress."

Ultimately, Ron is involved in all aspects of the business. The quality of every detail for his cakes demonstrates his commitment to each facet of running a wedding cake business with uniqueness and flair. Under his tutelage, Ron has seen all of his employees and apprentices grow into amazing adults, both artistically and as human beings. The work ethic and artistry that Ron instills in his students mirrors the standards that he holds himself to. The overall success of Ron's bakery, and the royalty-worthy cakes he creates, are a true testament to his dedication to getting as close to perfection as possible.











“I think in all careers,
you have to put your
skills to practice.
You have to be able to
give them a chance
to be perfected.”

