

A brief history of wedding cake

Written by By CINDY WELCH, News-Telegram Food Columnist
Monday, 29 June 2009 09:39



As I sit here tonight and write, I am up to my elbows in icing. My kitchen has the smell of a bakery and we haven't eaten supper in the kitchen in a week.

I have the privilege of making my first three-tiered bride and groom cakes this week. It is an exciting challenge, but a daunting responsibility when you consider all of the symbolism, planning and anxiety wrapped up in all of that flour, fat and sugar.

Wedding cakes have a spotty history. Some researchers claim that the tradition began as far back as ancient Rome when the people would stack oat cakes and break them over the head of the bride. Others claim that the Victorians made up the traditions to give their traditions some credence. Either way, it is interesting how much of the wedding is centered on the cake in today's society.

Wedding cake styles abound and change just like fashion. In fact, many cakes are based on the fashion worn by the bride and attendants. It is coordinated to match the style of the clothes and flowers. Some cakes are decorated with real flowers. Others are covered in silk or edible sugar-paste flowers.

The fillings have changed also. No longer satisfied with just white cake and white filling, bakeries offer everything from Italian cream cake with pecan filling to lemon cake with mango filling.

If the icing is buttercream, it can be flavored with everything from almond to coconut to white chocolate. Or, it can be the fastest growing trend in icing, rolled fondant. Rolled fondant is a thick royal icing (sugar and egg whites only) to which glycerin and flavorings are added. It takes on the consistency of clay and can be rolled, shaped and molded like clay.

Fondant is the icing used by bakers on the food shows and competitions seen on TV. It makes a beautifully smooth and sculpted texture and can be dyed any color with food color paste. It

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also accepts other mediums well such as painting with food dyes and dusting with edible glitter called petal dust. It came to America from Europe, particularly the British Isles where fondant style cakes have been prepared for ages. In England, they use heavier cakes such as fruit cake and first cover the cake with marzipan and then the fondant.

Fondant is an acquired taste. It reminds most people of marshmallow candy.

In America, the cake is usually a regular cake covered with a thin layer of buttercream called the crumb layer.

While this is still moist, the fondant is rolled and placed over the cake to adhere to the buttercream. It is then smoothed and molded to fit the cake.

If you are trying to decide between fondant and buttercream, it is usually a matter of taste versus the look you want. And it can be a matter of cost. A fondant cake can be more expensive.

How do you determine which cake, how much cake and how to make it fit your budget? Begin by researching cakes online. There are thousands of bakery websites from across the country that have tons of pictures, price listings and flavor ideas.

Pay careful note to the cost of any decorated cake these days. People love the cakes they see on *Ace of Cakes* and the baking challenges on the *Food Network*, but they don't tell you that most of the birthday cakes cost several hundred dollars and the wedding cakes are above \$1000.

Cakes prices are calculated by several things; number of tiers, number of servings, type of filling, type of icing and difficulty of prep and decorations.

Most three-tier cakes at three layers per tier take several hours just to bake and fill. Then a

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crumb layer must be applied to seal in moisture and flavor and to provide a smooth surface for the final layer of icing.

After the icing is applied, decorations are added. If edible flowers or figures have been pre-prepped, those add to the time element. All of this labor must be paid for along with the cost of the ingredients.

Most decorated cakes, with good texture and flavor, run from \$1 per slice up to \$6 per slice depending on the previous factors. If your decorator is in high demand, time and economics will also play a part. Most wedding cakes start at \$2 per slice for just a basic buttercream cake.

How can you have your cake, at a decent price, and eat it too?

Research and ask around about home cake decorators. Like me, they may have a less expensive cost because you are willing to take the risk of letting them try their wings. Do look for someone with decorating experience. By the time they are willing to sell their wares, they have usually done lots of cakes for family and friends.

The newest fad for saving money is the faux or dummy layer added to a cake. Styrofoam is iced to match the cake and is used below or interspersed with the real cake layers. Some brides even have a complete faux cake on the table and serve pieces from sheet cakes from the kitchen.

Here are some interesting facts (or myths) about wedding cake history:

At medieval wedding feasts the sweet cakes were stacked and the bride and groom tried to kiss each other across the stack. If the stack didn't fall, the wedding would be blessed.

The tradition of the bride and groom cutting the first piece came from the bride originally serving the cake to her new in-laws as a part of joining the family.

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The tradition of the bride and groom feeding each other a slice of cake came from breaking the cake over the bride's head as a symbol of fertility.

The “white” wedding cake symbolizes the purity of the bride and in the Victorian era reflected on the wealth of the family because the whitest cakes were made from the most refined sugar.

Most groom's cakes are found in the South. They are often not served at weddings in the northern United States.

The groom's cake is reported to have been created to be served with a glass of wine to the bride and bridesmaids by the groom.

Cakes mark many important beginnings and endings in our lives. We celebrate birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, births, graduations, retirements and many other accomplishments with a piece of cake.

Even though I know there is much debate about whether she even said it and exactly what she might have meant by it, but maybe Marie Antoinette's adage to “Let them eat cake” wasn't all a bad thing.

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For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is “providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs.”