



Ultimate Cakes

The confections that come out of Owen Dyer's kitchen in York can almost steal the show at a wedding. By Virginia L. Woodwell.

WHEN Jason Pithe and Renee Brochu were looking for a site for their wedding last fall, they hit upon the picturesque York Golf and Tennis Club, and then they found—*mirabile dictu*—master wedding-cake maker Owen Dyer. Renee now says without the slightest hesitation or qualification—“He was, without a doubt, the best part of our entire wedding!” Not only, she explains, did Dyer craft for them an exquisitely conceived and executed three-tiered cake that incorporated Scottish motifs into its decor (to match a ceremony in which all the men wore kilts), but Dyer himself, in his energy and enthusiasm, became an imaginative spark plug, an accommodating trouble-shooter, and a comforting friend during the whole wedding-planning process. “You want somebody to be as excited about your wedding as you are,” Renee summarizes, “and he certainly was.”

Owen Dyer is forty-one, but he has the exuberance and energy of someone half his age. Genial and of slight stature but high drive, Dyer frequently breaks out in a fast-

flashed grin that is as broad as his stare is intense. So you believe him when he says, “My mind never stops. I’m constantly, constantly creating.”

His cakes, as a result, are as varied as can be. Their short lives are recorded in photo albums. Dyer takes the professional-quality photos himself. And the desserts are meticulously crafted with respect to every detail, each cake unique and custom-designed. The batters are made from scratch, following tested recipes of Dyer’s own devising. Styles range from elegant and traditional to, well, goofy. Among the latter, for example, was a multi-tiered creation replicating a sandcastle, replete with pail and diminutive shells, for a couple who became engaged on a beach. Another cake, two feet high and prepared for eighty-five members of a groom’s party, was a to-scale copy of a pint of Ben & Jerry’s, complete with a napkin and a scoop, because when the groom proposed he had hidden the engagement ring in the ice cream the bride-to-be was about to devour.

Much more common in Dyer’s baking

experience, however, are the conventional challenges in which confectionery replicas of fabrics or flowers dominate the customizing. The cake ordered by Jason Pithe and Renee Brochu is a good example. Dyer “wove” a Black Watch tartan into a “fabric” at the base of the cake, and he included four tiny carved images of the claddagh symbol of love on its sides, adding a crest monogrammed with the couple’s initials. But cascading down the tiers of the cake from a crown of blue hydrangeas were a tumble of yellow roses, each, like all the rest of the cake’s decoration—and like the shells in the sandcastle (and the sand itself) and the scoop with the mock ice cream—entirely edible.

Dyer laughs when he describes how people are often fooled by the realism in his cakes. He personally hand-delivers each, and on one occasion a florist arriving at the same time asked where he got his flowers. When he said he had made them, she looked a little more closely at his cake and said, “Oh, I see. They’re silk.” No, Dyer had to explain, they were

of chocolate, sculpted and painted to look like petals.

All of his cakes, Dyer says, revealing some of the secrets of his craft, are covered in a Swiss meringue butter cream. The chocolate "clay" from which he shapes items like the ice cream scoop is a mixture of melted chocolate and corn syrup. Gum paste, also called sugar paste, which hardens into the consistency of ceramics, can be used to painstakingly sculpt items like a spray of baby's breath, or the gold piping and flowing fringes and tassels on a Victorian antique ivory "pillow." Dyer floods the surface of the boards on which he rests his cakes — these "boards" are actually of half-inch-thick, leather-light foam core — with royal icing, made up of meringue powder, confectioner's sugar, and water, a substance that can also, he points out, be turned into opalescent, glistening "pearls."

OWEN Dyer has had no formal training in the baking business, but he has had training — and a lifelong interest — in art. The cake-making business that he runs out of his York home is called confectionArt, a name that just about sums up the enterprise. A Gouldsboro native, he earned an associate's degree in art, with a focus on drawing and sculpture, in 1979 from the University of Maine at Augusta, and spent the following year studying graphic design at the University of Delaware. For the next five years he was in Boston, working for two years as a security guard at the Museum of Fine



Arts, where, he confesses now, he used to spirit in a tiny notebook to make forbidden sketches of great works. Then, for nine years, he put his artistic bent to work as a window dresser, traveling up and down the eastern seaboard for Designs, Inc.

Laid off from that job last year, he was encouraged by friends to turn to cake-making full-time, but he's resisted that temptation. He's now managing a collectibles shop on weekdays and baking on weekends. "If I set a goal," he says, illustrating some of the pertinacity he applies to his cake-decorating, "I accomplish it." And he's not ready — not just yet — for the big switch.

Meanwhile, he's continued to study cake-making — though not at cooking school. Some of his cooking skills he gained long ago from his mother. ("She's a great cook. When all the other kids were out playing, I was in the kitchen with my mother. I was always at her elbow. I thought it was more interesting.") Many skills, tricks, and techniques have also come from books, from Julia Child's

to James Beard's and Martha Stewart's. "But," Dyer says of the latter — and he grins guilelessly as he speaks — "a lot of the things she does, I can do better."

As for the relationships he establishes with his clients, he says, "I put a lot of effort in and I make them involved." His success is in the accommodation and in the details. He'll study a given wedding gown to reproduce an embroidery pattern on that bride's cake, he'll track down florists to make sure his cake's flowers match the real thing, and, in all this process and more, he'll communicate, constantly, back and forth, with the bride and groom right up until the wedding day and the moment he delivers his masterpiece. Then, he says, "They have to be happy with it — and I'm disappointed if they're not amazed with it."

Amazed they are.

The measure?

Jason Pithe and Renee Brochu have vowed to come back to Owen Dyer for a cake just as soon as they have a daughter ready to marry.

Owen Dyer and his cakes, are both, says the happy bride: "awesome." □

Owen Dyer's business is called "confectionArt," and he works for customers across northern New England and south into Massachusetts. He charges \$4.50 per serving as a base price, and most cakes, to date, have averaged between \$900 and \$1,200 in final price. It takes Dyer between twenty and seventy hours to make one of his cakes and weeks to plan it, it's best, therefore, to contact him well in advance. 207-363-2793.

Let Them Eat Cake?

Bakeries the length and breadth of Maine will cook you up a cake for the big day. A few, though, make inventive, custom cakes their specialty.

Pastry Gallery, Saco, 207-284-9266
Spanish, Vanilla, Marble, Almond, Lemon. The staff at the Pastry Gallery are ready to make just about any flavor for you (they'll even bake you up a carrot cake), and they're open to any design. Prices range from \$2.25 per serving for a cake with vanilla-butter creme frosting to \$2.75 for one topped by the Martha-Stewart-favored rolled fondant.

Sweet Sensations, Rockport, 207-230-0955
Better known for his macaroons, Steven Watts is also a cake-making artist. Call ahead, though, because he's a popular guy in his Rockport neighborhood, making desserts for many area clients.

Cakes by Sue, Lewiston, 207-786-5509
Sue Herrick has been baking wedding cakes since 1987, and she specializes in custom design. She'll even deliver within

a sixty-mile radius of Lewiston, and she offers free sample cakes with every order for a cake of 100 slices or more.

Frank's Bake Shop, Bangor, 207-947-4594
A local baking institution, Frank's has its own "wedding cake center," and they'll make any sort of confection you desire. The price is nice, too. For \$175 you can have a four-tier, vanilla or chocolate cake that will serve 200.