

Chapter 1

Acquiring the Skills and Creativity

In This Chapter

- ▶ Linking baking skills with your creativity and tastes
- ▶ Working through the cake process
- ▶ Becoming a cake designer
- ▶ Embracing all cake opportunities

Cake decorating requires both skill and creativity . . . but you can do it for every occasion that calls for a celebration! With an understanding of some basic mechanics (and maybe a few secrets), you can create amazing, memorable cakes that impress and delight partygoers, event attendees, and families alike.

Truth be told, who needs an occasion to bake and decorate a cake? When you get wrapped up in the sheer enjoyment of dreaming up a cake's design, mixing batters and making frostings, selecting the perfect accompaniments and colors, and the tasty results that undoubtedly bring smiles aplenty, you don't need an occasion to create a delicious masterpiece.

If you peruse magazine pages or fancy bakery cases with cakes that you think your work can't possibly match up to, fear not! All you need is the instruction in this book, the inspiration provided by your family, friends, and events . . . and a love of cake!

Bridging Baking and Creativity

From a very young age, practically everyone loves to eat cake. (Do you have pictures of yourself on your first birthday with cake smeared all over your hands and face? I do.) For most people, the word "cake" conjures up images of sweet times, fun gatherings, and memorable celebrations.

On its own, a cake certainly can be beautiful and delicious. But a decorated cake, particularly one with well-executed flavors and designs that's stunning in its own right and appropriate for the occasion, takes the event to another

level, delights all those in attendance, and — perhaps most important — makes the celebrant or honoree feel even more special.

Chefs and bakers sometimes are referred to as *culinary artists* because, in many ways, food influences expression and creativity like more conventional art forms. There may be sweet ingredients you can't wait to try, an imported candy in the perfect color that inspires you to create a whole design around it, or a restaurant dessert that you're eager to recreate.

Cake decorating, as an art and activity, allows you to express yourself in so many ways. You build upon an array of talents such as baking, cooking, pairing flavors, thinking up and drawing designs, creating and assigning colors, mastering tip techniques, and modeling embellishments. In addition to executing the final cake design, you also infuse your personality and artistic expression into how the cake is showcased and served.

And cake decorating can be as simple or complex as you like. You can transform cake layers and sizes into a towering masterpiece, like a multitiered chocolate cake castle with edible stone walls and gum paste flowers climbing multiple stories, or a simple confection, like a double-layer round white cake with raspberry filling and swirls of buttercream frosting on the outside. You can elaborately script a message in chartreuse frosting or feature rows of different colored shredded coconut. You can top it with pink roses or festoon it with silver dragees. Experimenting with and practicing different techniques helps you swiftly take on more delicate or demanding decorations.

Gathering the Tools and Ingredients

Cake decorating requires that you acquire — and know how to use — a variety of tools and equipment. Some items are common enough that you're likely to have them on hand already, but others may require some Internet shopping or visits to stores that specialize in cake decorating. If you don't plan ahead and keep yourself organized, all the things you need and use in cake baking and decorating could take over your kitchen! Like many activities and hobbies, cake decorating needs a home base. One organization item I recommend you put together is a cake decorating kit that includes tips, flower nails, pastry bags, and other items. Although some apparatuses and goods, such as odd-sized baking pans and decorating turntables, may not fit in a kit, they do fit in with your endeavors, so you need to have them on hand as well. Further, cake baking and decorating relies on an assortment of typical ingredients, some of which all aspiring and practicing bakers are familiar with. Other ingredients, like food coloring gels and embellishments, are quite unique to cake decorating.



Cake decorating utilizes a space that doesn't have to be massive but does have to be efficiently appropriated and used. Trust me: You absolutely don't need a five-star kitchen to work on your masterpieces. Keen organization skills help you make the most out of your existing counter space for sufficient elbowroom.

Picking Up the Skills

The art of cake decorating breaks down into several skill sets, which you eventually combine (effortlessly, of course) to create your cakes. From the first hint of a desire to decorate cakes, it's important to remember that cake decorating is a process; you get to mix things up and get your hands dirty with decorations, but you also need to spend time thinking about your cake and planning your design and execution.

Baking the foundations

The foundation for your work — that is, moist and delicious cakes — means that you have to tackle baking with verve. And baking — believe it or not — has rules you should follow for ultimate success. For instance, to get the most out of your baking efforts, use key ingredients, line your pans, and take care to mix the perfect batters.

When your cakes come out of the oven, you must prepare them . . . much like an artist readies a canvas. From leveling to torting to crumb-coating, you depend on a host of strategies to create the optimal surface for decorating.



In Part II of this book, I provide some master cake recipes, such as Delicious Yellow Cake, A Most Excellent White Cake, and Cocoa Chocolate Cake. When you get these cakes under your belt, you can experiment with them in a variety of ways to create new and different flavors.

Spreading on the layers

Before segueing to decorate the outside of the cake with designs and embellishments, you may want to consider adding a filling other than frosting between the cake's layers. Fruit curd, whipped cream, and nut spreads can all complement the cake and frosting flavors while adding another flavor dimension.

After baking and filling your cake, you head into the favorite cake-covering domain of many: frosting . . . gobs and gobs of frosting. Buttercream, chocolate

ganache, and cream cheese (all of which I give you recipes for in Part III), are delicious standards. Of course, even though frostings are fun to mix and master, other cake coverings, including icing, fondant, and glaze, have their own distinct advantages, too.

Decorating with tips and embellishments

Oftentimes, when people dream of a tasty and perfectly decorated cake, they can't help but imagine frosting lined up in rosettes or stars, in ridges around a cake's circumference, spelling out names and greetings, or even forming complete pictures. These decorations are all made possible thanks to icing tips, of which there are many different kinds to use for cake decorating. You can almost certainly replicate in frosting any frill, design, or picture you have in mind thanks to the tips that you guide to outline and fill in designs. Because there are so many different tips available to you, and because the designs you create using them can range from simple to highly complex, Part III covers tips from all angles: the staggering array of available tips, the amazing effects they can produce, and how you can pick up tip skills with some guidance, instruction, and a little practice.

Icing tips unleash a veritable juggernaut of choices and effects, while embellishments also enhance cake designs. Embellishments are edible and inedible, common and uncommon, accoutrements, trimmings, frills, and figures. They range from fresh flowers you pick up or order from a nursery to candies you find on a grocery store aisle. An inedible embellishment may be a wedding cake topper made out of fine bone china or a car made out of pressed tin. Or you may choose to apply a few more techniques to craft embellishments out of frosting, as in roses or hyacinths; out of marzipan, as in miniature, realistic versions of fruits and vegetables; or out of gum paste, as in flowers.

Setting up, striking down

Your cake no doubt will be a stunning creation in its own right, but you should keep in mind how it will be presented just before it's served. You never want your amazing work of art just to be plopped down on a table next to a garbage can or in a dark corner surrounded by the wires of a nearby coffee pot! Set up your cake for success by placing it properly on a sturdy, decorated cake board and taking care with transportation, and showcase and serve your cake in a venue that does it — and cake eaters — justice.

After the lights dim on the big event, you (hopefully) won't have any leftovers because your cake will have been such a hit. But if you do find yourself with remaining cake, don't let it go to waste! Carefully storing, refrigerating, and freezing both just-baked cake layers and frosted finished cakes guarantees that your cake always tastes as good as its first outing.

Infusing Your Own Taste

After you master some basic recipes and techniques, a good deal of the fun of cake decorating lies in bringing your own tastes, talents, preferences, and personality to the proceedings. For your creation, you're part architect and part fashion designer . . . and the best part is that you actually get to eat your work of art.

When you're wearing the architect hat, you figure out your cake's structure and size and how the layers and embellishments will hold up. And much like a fashion designer working on apparel, you get to decide your own look, texture, and overall appearance using frostings, icings, and embellishments instead of fabrics. Draw upon your own preferences and palette while taking into account the celebration and the honoree being feted with cake.

For the most impressively decorated cake, you have to start with a plan, so hunker down and map out what your cake will look like. With only a vague image in mind, you're on the road to disaster if you take a stab at decorating willy-nilly with an icing bag filled with an arbitrarily colored frosting. Some people want to race right on to picking up that icing spatula and getting that frosting on the cake, but they're really missing out. Part of cake decorating's charm and allure definitely plays into laying out how your particular confection will look and how you plan to achieve it and then doing your best to follow that path or — if need be — improvising to get your desired result.

In putting your own creative spin on a cake, you need to consider several points regarding the event, party, or occasion, and the honoree (or honorees). To make sure that you devise the right cake plan for the occasion, your cake research entails finding out about the celebrant's likes and dislikes, the theme of the party, the colors involved, the feel of the location, and so on.



Your plan may involve deftly following a pattern, adapting a design from a template, or coming up with your own design from scratch. Whatever design route you decide to take, you'll be choosing colors, considering shapes and sizes, plotting out the design in the space available, and factoring in curves, lines, and outlines.

Calling All Occasions

With cake decorating, you quickly realize that opportunities for a wonderfully decorated cake are limitless. Consider making cakes for these special events:

- ✓ Kids' birthday parties
- ✓ Grown-up dinner parties
- ✓ Baby showers

- ✓ Bridal showers
- ✓ Weddings
- ✓ Anniversaries
- ✓ Graduations
- ✓ Housewarmings

And these holidays:

- ✓ Valentine's Day
- ✓ Easter
- ✓ The Fourth of July
- ✓ Halloween
- ✓ Thanksgiving
- ✓ Christmas
- ✓ New Year's Eve

Part IV of this book arms you with recipes and instructions for creating cakes for a variety of special occasions and a variety of honorees. From whimsical birthday cakes for boys, girls, or both, to themed creations that prove that cakes aren't just kids' stuff, baby and bridal shower cakes, to wedding and anniversary confections, and cakes for many holidays in between, your memorable creations add to the events and stand the test of time. Some of the designs I provide feature elements particular to the occasion, such as fondant, frosting flowers, or kid-friendly decorations. And each chapter in this part reviews considerations you should bear in mind when making cakes for kids (both boys and girls), men, and women.

Recognizing Possibilities

Your cake decorating ventures (and adventures) may be so entertaining, thrilling, and fulfilling that you decide to switch careers or make cake decorating a part-time job. Taking cake decorating to the next level isn't as simple as making cakes and selling them to friends and family. When starting a cake decorating business, you have goals to consider, a workspace to locate, equipment to get your hands on, and marketing strategies to implement.

So whether you decide to take it up as a career or simply enjoy it as a hobby, cake decorating will provide you — and countless others — constant opportunities to celebrate life's occasions . . . and eat cake!