

Pastry & baking

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Ron Ben-Israel

**Christie's
Mayfair Bakery**

The King of Cakes Resists His Crown



The humble Ron Ben-Israel invites us into his Manhattan studio for a candid look at the man behind America's couture cakes.

By Michelle Duda
Photos Courtesy of Ron Ben-Israel Cakes



Manhattan is rife with compelling characters. Still, it's not everyday you meet a soldier, professional dancer, child entrepreneur, pizza maker, teacher, television personality and master cake baker in the span of an hour. It's even more unusual if they're all the same person.

Ron Ben-Israel is the charismatic chef-owner of one of the nation's finest couture cake studios. To see his confectionary masterpieces is fascinating. To hear the story behind the man the New York Times' called the "Manolo Blahnik of Cakes" is even more so.

Born in Tel Aviv to artisan parents, Ron had early exposure to fine craftsmanship. His father specialized in color separations for printing. His mother was a cartographer. Ron wiled away hours watching the giant offset printers spit out colorful pages and maps skillfully sketched by hand. Perhaps the only place he found more intriguing than his parents' workshops, was the kitchen.

Ron's mother hailed from Vienna and the family had Hungarian friends aplenty. That made for an ever-present array of heavenly meringues, tortes, jellies and strudels. It also made for Ron's early interest in the culinary world. In fact, it fostered his first business venture at the age of 9.

While Ron's parents were away at work, he decided to build a falafel shack. He commissioned the neighborhood kids to assist, and with the tenacity of a Boy Scout seeking his first merit badge, constructed a free-standing falafel hut. But an entrepreneurial spirit doesn't compensate for electrical know-how. A burner overturned and the wooden shack caught fire. Ron emerged unscathed, but it was a fitting display of his determination and embrace of hard work.

At 11, Ron found a safer way to express his culinary enthusiasm by way of a job at the local pizzeria. But an interesting thing happened when he flung dough into the air... People watched. It was Ron's first taste of performing and as he recounts the experience, a puckish grin spreads across his lips. He liked it.

As a teen, Ron toured Europe in a folk dancing troop. And then, the self-proclaimed ham went off to art school. He back-burnered cooking and honed his talents in visual and performance arts. Then, like every Israeli young adult, upon graduation, he had to fulfill a three-year term in the army.



Ron noticed that one of his fellow soldiers would disappear on nights off. When pressed, his buddy confided that he was secretly taking ballet classes. Ron accompanied him one night. And before long, amidst the pixies in pink tutus, stood two Israeli soldiers instead of one.

"I became obsessed," Ron said. He continued to study at the school under the tutelage of a Russian dancer. Upon discharge from the army, he began auditioning. A tad late to embark on a career in dance? Perhaps. But Ron had the maturity, discipline and strength he'd acquired as an adult and soldier, and those proved to be a useful advantage.

"I was never a big star, but I made a living," Ron downplayed. He made that living for 15 years dancing with such prominent companies as Batsheva: the Israeli Ballet Company, and the Bat Dor Dance Company. But at 30, his body began to betray him. He went to New York City for knee surgery and danced with smaller companies for shorter runs. To supplement his income, Ron did the "only thing he knew how to"...cook.

He coyly admits padding his resume to get work. While that helped him get his Capezio in the door, he proved he'd never lost his zeal in the kitchen. But after three days in one restaurant, his tenure as a line cook was cut short. The chef pulled him aside and said he wasn't cut out for the line but should instead focus on baking. "Getting feedback is something you want and respect. I didn't have much to lose, so I took his direction and started working in bakeries."



His dancer's discipline also proved valuable in terms of practice. "I'd do one cake again and again and again until it was perfect," Ron said. And then destiny stepped in. In 1996, a visual artist friend was designing store windows for Mikimoto on Fifth Avenue. He asked Ron to create two wedding cakes to accompany the jewelry display. Consequently, passersby would step into the store and ask who created the confections. One such individual was a woman by the name of Martha Stewart.

"She called and I thought it was a joke!" Ron laughed. "She invited me to breakfast, said she was going to start a wedding magazine and asked if I'd be interested in creating a few cakes for the first issue." But Martha did more than feature Ron's cakes. She featured Ron.

With the positive press and his Fifth Avenue display, commissions came in from Baccarat, DeBeer's, Bloomingdale's and Bergdorf-Goodman, not to mention the public. Around the same time, another fortuitous event occurred. While shopping for baking supplies, Ron saw a woman carrying a cake with sugar flowers of a sophistication he'd not seen before. She was Betty Van Norstand, a culinary Olympic competitor and teacher at the Culinary Institute of America. She became Ron's mentor in the meticulous craft of sugar décor, an art he is known for today.

Ron traveled upstate weekly for private instruction with Betty. She encouraged him to enroll in competitions. As his talent and credits grew, so did his professional circle. He met chefs and cookbook authors and became part of the culinary community, a feeling he likened to his days with dance companies. "I needed the community," he professed. "That's what I like about the culinary industry. You have peers. You

can compete with them, but you can also be friends and appreciate them."

Ron had studied with artisans who focused primarily on the decorative exterior of the cake, but now he was working alongside chefs concerned principally with taste and freshness. Ron said he'd "danced between both camps" but wanted to find a way to unite the two. Unfortunately, refrigerating finished wedding cakes is a no-no. "People kept telling me you can't refrigerate sugar decorations or a cake covered in fondant. They'll sweat and melt," he said. But like any performer, Ron was only motivated by the critics. He sought to customize a refrigeration system that balanced moisture and temperature so the cakes would be fresh and decorations in tact. But that was something he couldn't do in other chefs' bakeries. So in 1999, he decided to establish his own.

Without credit or a major bankroll, Ron had to be frugal in choosing a Manhattan locale. The lofts in Soho were once home to garment workers, sweat shops and storage spaces. No one wanted to rent them and thus, they were just Ron's price. But what started as a decision driven by budget proved to be quite savvy. The hardwood floors in the older building had give, so it was easier on the knees for standing hours on end. The top floor space provided privacy, and allowed for skylights so sunshine could make repetitive tasks – like crafting hundreds of sugar petals – more palatable.

Ron was able to get cheap supplies and services from the local merchants, too. A builder on the bottom floor supplied the marble on which to roll out fondant. An electrician from Chinatown custom wired the space. Again, Ron was part of a creative community. And they were as generous as his culinary colleagues.



Fueled by press and client endorsements, Ron's business gained even more momentum and he found himself performing again. He was asked to give demonstrations to students and faculty at the Culinary Institute of America and French Culinary Institute. "I loved it!" he beamed. "I had an hour and a half, people came and watched, and I had to perform. Of course, not everything would go the way it did in rehearsal and I had to improvise. My adrenaline would rush and I'd end with a bow."

Dorothy Cann Hamilton, the founder and CEO of The French Culinary Institute in New York City, had lured him to the school with the title of Visiting Master Pastry-Chef Instructor. Thus the mentored became the mentor. But while he was giving back to the culinary community, Ron is quick to add that he was getting just as much in return. With students, he had a pool of talent from which to draw interns and future employees. Some of the individuals he taught are now part of his 11-member staff, guest artists or friendly competition, all of whom he respectfully praises.

Ron had come a long way from his first cake and first delivery which incidentally, was held on his lap in the back of a cab. And the man who confessed he couldn't balance a checkbook at one time, was now savvy about contracts, insurance, worker's compensation, zoning, health codes and more. Ron stresses that while his business is in making extraordinary cakes, it's still a business. And it's been a lot of hard work.



In 2001, the 9/11 tragedy compelled many New Yorkers to flee the city. Ron stayed put. And because many rented lofts emptied, he was able to expand his studio into the neighboring space. But again, practicality took precedence. Ron installed a second custom refrigerator, as well as duplicates of critical equipment. If one fails, you need an understudy, no?

Eight years later, Ron's bakery and studio hasn't changed much. It could be chock full of shiny bells and whistles. He's certainly had the high profile clients and success. But it still reflects his humble sensibilities. Ron's hard-won medals are in a tiny case atop a cabinet, hidden in a corner. And from the temperature controlled rooms and ergonomically designed tables for staff's comfort, to the carts that are the exact height of the refrigerators for cake transport, everything is about organization and functionality. There are precise systems in place based on years of experience applied from being a dancer, a businessman, a teacher and a baker.

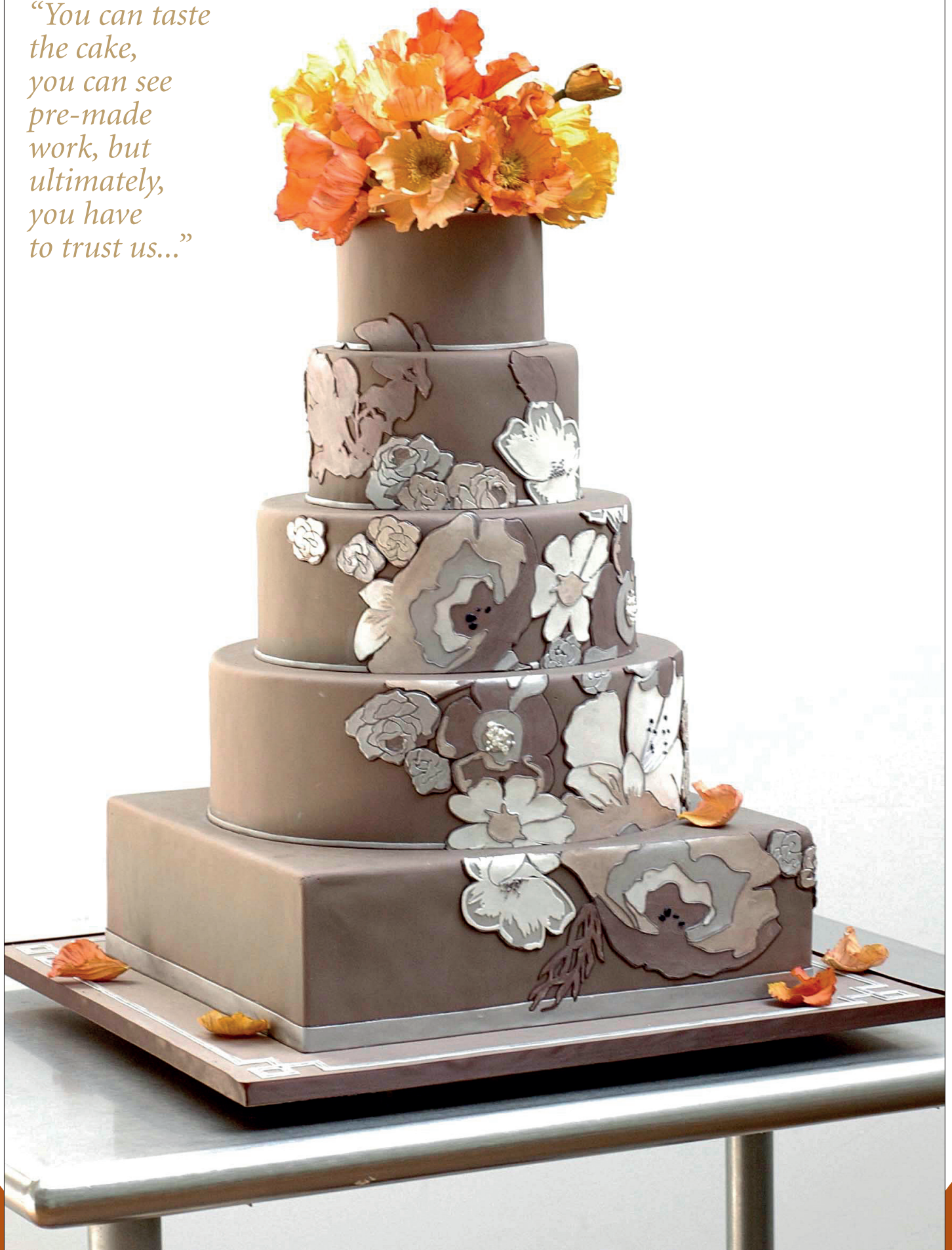
Perhaps the only thing showy is Ron's insistence on spoiling clients. When brides arrive for a meeting, they enjoy coffee and tea service on fine china direct from the St. Regis Hotel. They are presented with elegant slices of vanilla and chocolate cake, each spotlighting layers of gossamer fillings such as blood orange, pistachio and cookies and cream. And they will meet with the owner himself. While the age of celebrity chefs is in its prime, Ron still bakes cakes, crafts sugar flowers and makes intricate silicone molds. And he meets with nearly every client.

"You can taste the cake, you can see pre-made work, but ultimately, you have to trust us," he said. So it's imperative to spend one-on-one time with each bride, establishing rapport, ensuring a good fit, and building trust.

So what about the recession? Has this year of economic unrest impacted Ron's business? Yes and no. People are still



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getting married. There are still special events. The number of cakes hasn't changed, but the size has. They've become smaller. Of course, that doesn't connote less work, only less profit. And then there's the psychological challenge that accompanies. Clients are nervous about spending, so there are additional rounds of decisions, dialogue and counseling. But the creative challenge is one Ron has welcomed. Instead of dozens of decorative flowers that require more artists, hours and expense, Ron encourages clients to explore a singular bold component. It can break the traditional mold without breaking the bank.

And what about Ron's advertising budget... Has it been impacted? No, because there never was one. Fifteen years from his baking beginnings, Ron's advertising still consists of what's been written and spoken about him. "I know better than to

advertise," he says matter-of-factly. "One day I can do four pirouettes and another day I can fall on my ass. And you can quote me on that! Even the greatest dancers fall down." Let others claim they're the best and have the freshest ingredients. Ron prefers you visit his bakery, taste his cakes and decide for yourself.

Many have. And they heartily agree that Ron's confections are nothing short of otherworldly. Be it wedding photographers, musicians and event planners, New York socialites and high society, or The New York Times, InStyle, Modern Bride, Glamour, Vogue and Martha Stewart Living. Ron has also been promoted in best-selling books like Vera Wang on Weddings, and he's appeared on The View, The Today Show, Good Morning America, Oprah and The Late Show with David Letterman, to name but a few. Ron has also assumed a place at the helm of Wedding Cake Wars on the WE channel, mentoring young bakers and pastry artists. Where you won't find him, however, is at the center of a reality show. While he greatly appreciates what popular programs such as Ace of Cakes have done for the promotion and popularity of his craft, drama is the last thing this performer wants in his bakery.

Ron Ben-Israel considers himself a baker rather than an artist. He views his work as performing versus producing. Whether he's serving on the Chef Counsel for charities like City Harvest, coaching an intern on the fine art of crafting sugar monograms, or welcoming a bride with a knowing smile, he does it with heart and authenticity. And as he walks me around his studio, pausing to share anecdotes with passion and laughter, he is the epitome of grace. Like a dancer, he makes operating one of the most esteemed cake studios in all of America appear utterly effortless. And like any fine arts performance, I left in awe.

