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piece of cake

Star pastry chefs serve up tips, trends and tastes for modern wedding cakes. **BY ERIKA HUENEKE**

Not only is the wedding cake a time-honored tradition, but it's also a focal point of your reception and the final taste your guests will experience. To ensure that yours is a sweet success, we looked to three veteran pastry chefs for their expert advice on common cake concerns, from the look to the logistics.

THE EXPERTS

■ **RON BEN-ISRAEL** Ben-Israel, chef/owner of Ron Ben-Israel Cakes in New York City, works regularly with hotel brands such as Waldorf=Astoria and Mandarin Oriental and has been featured in a number of books, TV shows (including *Oprah*) and magazines like *Town & Country*, *In Style* and *Vogue*, which named him number-one best baker in 2004. He also serves as master pastry instructor at the French Culinary Institute in NYC.

■ **RÉMY FÜNFROCK** After holding positions at Café Boulud, Restaurant Daniel and the Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach, Fünfrock joined the team at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs as executive restaurant pastry chef. He has appeared in TV shows including Food Network's *Sugar Rush* and publications like *Martha Stewart Living*.

■ **MELISSA KARASEK** Karasek began her career as a pastry-chef specialist at Walt Disney World, where she performed at Epcot International Food & Wine Festivals alongside celebrity chefs such as Julia Child. She joined The Ritz-Carlton staff in 2005 after teaching for three years at the Orlando Culinary Academy, Le Cordon Bleu, and currently serves as pastry chef at The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman. She has participated in numerous competitions and has earned several medals from the American Culinary Federation.

What are the best ways to find a pastry chef at a remote location?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** There are a lot of wonderful pastry chefs around, especially in resorts — that's where I'd start looking. Find out what they've done and ask to see photographs. I would look for what original material they've produced as opposed to variations on someone else's work.

■ **FÜNFROCK** Check with the hotel where the wedding is taking place to find out if there's a pastry chef onsite or if the hotel recommends any in the area. Then search the Web for reviews.

■ **KARASEK** The most stress-free way is to use a wedding coordinator. At our hotel, I work closely with the coordinators and couples during the process so we can make a cake uniquely their own.

Taste the bling — every detail of this cake, from the "jewels" to the "pearls," is made of edible sugar.



Where should a couple look for inspiration for their cake design?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** You can research magazines, books, TV shows and websites to get ideas about styles and possibilities. You gather ideas, but ultimately, I want each couple to have their own cake. We don't do the same cake twice, ever.

■ **FÜNFROCK** Many magazines offer inspiration, and most pastry chefs have a catalog. Couples can also look for ideas with a Google image search.

■ **KARASEK** For the flavor, I always suggest the couple take inspiration from their favorite dessert. Whether it's simple chocolate, a creamy cheesecake or a dense rum cake, the flavor is hugely important and essentially the final taste guests are left with. In terms of design, it's totally a clean slate. We find most of our destination-wedding couples get inspired by the island's atmosphere and tropical surroundings.



Use flowers — either real or sugar, like these — to reflect the flora in your locale.

What factors should brides keep in mind when making decisions about their cake designs?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** First of all you have to pay for it; then you have to find somebody who can do it; and you have to be realistic in terms of size. A good pastry chef should be able to guide brides and

present them with options. You also have to be aware of the conditions. I've traveled with cakes to Mexico, and they required changing my formulas because of the moisture in the air.

■ **FÜNFROCK** First they should consider chef capabilities; if the pastry chef doesn't have much experience, it will show on the cake itself. Also think about which kind of cake goes best with the weather at the location. For example, it's hard to manage a whipped-cream frosting on a cake that will be displayed outside on a sunny day in Florida.

■ **KARASEK** One of the biggest factors is the location of the reception — is it outdoors on the beach, or inside in a ballroom or restaurant? While we make every effort to ensure the cake is displayed flawlessly, direct sunlight and heat can pose a problem for particular ingredients and adornments. Also consider the



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size of the cake in relation to the number of guests attending. A cake should make a statement to the guests and be a welcoming focal point at the reception. An overpowering seven-tier cake at an intimate gathering of 20 guests can look out of place.

How can a cake reflect the destination?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** The surroundings will provide the feel, whether it's exotic or colorful. In terms of sugar flowers, I'd rather model them after native flowers. We had a cake that was flown to the Bahamas last year, and the space was so lush with exotic flowers, the last thing I wanted to bring was something that looked like an English garden! Flavor-wise, if it's an exotic location, we do things like passion fruit and guava — flavors that are natural to the location.

■ **FÜNFROCK** The cake can reflect the

destination by following the seasons — for example, using seasonal fruits that grow in the region for the trim. Couples could also use typical elements of the area to decorate or shape the cake — for a mountain area, use pine cones, specific flowers and so on.

■ **KARASEK** There are limitless possibilities! On Grand Cayman, the sun, sand and sea always prove to be popular design ingredients for embracing the island spirit.

What's more important — the look or taste of the wedding cake?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** I can't separate it. You get to see the cake throughout the event, but then the cake is the finale; it's the last thing the guests actually savor. It should be an ultimate dessert; otherwise it's a big disappointment.

■ **FÜNFROCK** For me, both are important, especially if the cake is the only dessert

being served. Too many times, you have a beautiful cake with a nasty taste. While some guests are food people, others think bigger and showier is better. That's why delicious *and* beautiful is the key.

■ **KARASEK** Couples are always looking for ways to really wow their guests. When deciding what's more important, there really can be no comparison — flavor and design are both integral components, and one doesn't go well without the other.

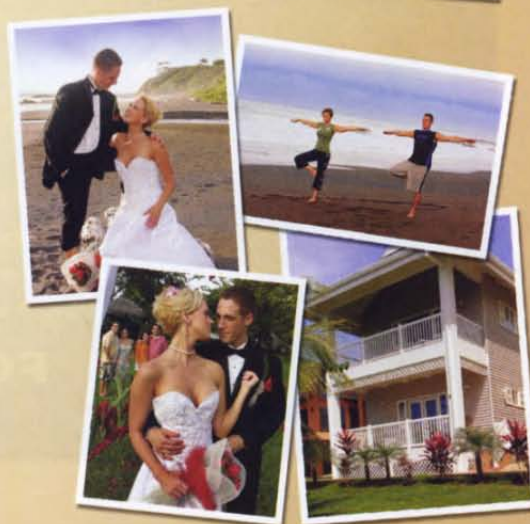
What unique materials have you used to garnish your cakes?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** We don't use materials; everything on our cakes is edible. So if you see any of our cakes decorated with crystals, they're sugar crystals; the flowers are all made out of sugar. Everything — every ribbon, every detail — is frosting. We also have a very strong fashion influence; a lot of our cakes

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have featured lace and beading made of confectionary materials. We've also been featuring bling, and the cakes will have what looks like diamonds, crystals, pearls and gemstones.

■ **FÜNFROCK** I've decorated cakes with fresh flowers, crystallized fresh fruit, sugar flowers, gum-paste design, and pull-and-blow sugar decorations such as ribbons, butterflies, bubbles and birds.

■ **KARASEK** Rhinestones and pearls are popular embellishments. I love to use fresh flowers and herbs to add texture and depth. Rather than the traditional white columns, using champagne glasses filled with flowers or seashells gives leverage and height to a cake, as well as a unique adornment.

What are the hottest cake trends?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** Along with bling, what's really hot right now is a very strong color statement. It will be monochromatic —



Colored cakes, like this bold pink creation, are a hot trend.

it could be black and white; it could be just shades of pink, or pink and green, or brown and blue. Another influence is architecture. We fashion architectural molding out of our icing, which is especially suitable for old-world locations like mansions or hotel ballrooms.

■ **FÜNFROCK** It often depends on the location. In Colorado Springs, brides want flowers, flowers, flowers — fresh, sugar,

chocolate, etc. Rolling fondant and buttercream are still big hits in any locale.

■ **KARASEK** Couples are looking for a unique sense of place and want to take advantage of the elements and beauty of the destination. I'm noticing a lot more experimentation and a stray from the traditional.

How are brides topping their cakes?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** I don't feel that the top of the cake should be separate in style from the rest of the cake. We like to present a whole synergy of style, so the top of the cake is part of the overall design. The exception is if people bring us an heirloom ornament that belonged to the family; then we would clean it up, sometimes enhance it a little with edible materials and place it on top of the cake because it means so much to the family. But I'm really not fond of somebody bringing inedible material. If they love a monogram,

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I'd rather make it out of edible sugar. And I'm not very fond of small people on cakes — it looks to me like voodoo!

■ **FÜNFROCK** Seventy percent of couples top their cakes with flowers, 15 percent with nothing and 10 percent with more creative items such as a bride and groom made of sugar, chocolate or plastic; hearts, rings, birds, etc.; or a specific interest of the couple like golf clubs, cars, musical instruments and so on. The last percentage is the most exciting for me — couples who want something nobody has seen before. As a pastry chef, besides the flavor of the cake, this is where I can help the couple make their cake look special. It gives me the opportunity to be creative and step away from the traditional flower ribbon!

■ **KARASEK** Fresh tropical florals are a hugely popular cake topping right now. They give a beautiful burst of color and a new dimension of texture and flair to the design of the cake.

Do you need a dessert besides cake?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** People are getting very health-conscious. I would suggest having a great cake and maybe some kind of complementary dessert such as sorbet or fruit that refreshes the palate.

■ **FÜNFROCK** Some clients want ice cream to be served with the cake; others ask for an actual plated dessert before the cake. But it's a shame to have a full meal with dessert and not have room for the cake!

■ **KARASEK** Many couples opt for ornamental chocolate displays or mini petit fours. We've also noticed a trend toward savory cheeses as an added option.

How much should you expect to pay, and where can you save money?

■ **BEN-ISRAEL** Prices vary. The average is \$15 per serving. Of course, it depends on the expertise, level of exposure (you'll pay more for a well-known designer than someone who's just starting out) and location; in large cities, everything is more costly to produce. A couple could save money by choosing simpler decoration. The more complex the cake, the more costly it is.

■ **FÜNFROCK** A cake made by an experienced pastry chef can cost from \$9 to \$20 per serving and up. Most of the time hotels have packages. Couples can save money by only serving the cake for dessert and not ordering additional ones.

■ **KARASEK** The price of the cake varies depending on numerous factors, from size to detail. A less-complicated design is an easy way to save money on a cake. ■

FOR MORE INFO, SEE THE 411 ON PAGE 134.



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