



Is it live or is it a confection? Chef Ron Ben-Israel's flowers are life-like down to the smallest details of shading and ribbing. Flowers form loose bouquets that fill layers and cascade over the edges of work-of-art cakes.

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THE ART OF LIVING A CREATIVE LIFE



A Piece of Cake

From the moment I step out of the elevator for an appointment at Ron Ben-Israel's SoHo studio and receive an initial greeting from Ron himself—clad in white starched chef's shirt, peeking through a blue-tinted glass door, and wearing a mischievous grin—

I know instantly that I am in the presence of someone essentially playful, impressively multifaceted, and deftly orchestrated. As I watch him choreograph his kitchen, his past life as a dancer becomes clear. Ron Ben-Israel has balanced atop many fields, but he found his calling with wedding cakes.

Before we begin this story, shed all preconceptions you have of the confection that a newly married couple traditionally slices because Ron has redefined wedding cakes. Unless you have been a guest at an event where one of his cakes has starred (and a Ron Ben-Israel cake, by definition, is the climax of the menu), you are probably unable to imagine the visual feasts he creates. Beyond their

beguiling outward display, his cakes tantalize the palate and awaken taste buds to new, exciting sensations. They are so sensual that they verge on sinful.

Today Ron may whip up fantasies from butter, sugar, and air, but the story of his culinary prowess started with matzo balls. Admittedly, strudel dough also had something to do with it, but matzo balls, with their unique unleavened chemistry, their definitive texture, and their ritualistic creation was what first stirred Ron's fascination with baking. Growing up in Israel, he was always aware of—almost in awe of—the techniques, choreography, magic, and mystery involved in the culinary

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between the tiers, and separate the levels.
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morning glories, lisianthus—all are so lifelike.

arts: “It was like watching a miracle to see cakes rise,” he says. Strudel dough held the same fascination for him. He was struck at an early age by the marvel of a buttery dough, rolled out paper thin, and transformed in the oven into a crisp, melt-in-the-mouth richness. These early experiences became the first layers of a lifelong fascination with flour, yeast, and air, but years would come and go before the ingredients would be blended into a successful career as a baker/pastry chef.

First, Ron attended art school, and then after serving in the Israeli army, he gravitated toward the stage. Designing theatre sets opened a window into the world of dance for him. Warned that he was starting too late, he nevertheless pursued a career in folk dancing, then ballet and modern dance. After fifteen years on the performance circuit, he was forced to retire after an injury. Seeking another outlet for his substantial energies (“I was, in fact, searching to find other venues for expression”), he fell in love with a chocolate maker while on a Canadian tour, and that is how he was seduced back into the world of desserts. The relationship did not last, but his love for baking lingered as a permanent affair. Wedding cakes would never be the same.

When Ron discovered the art a dozen years ago, it was diffracted. There were bakers who whipped up delicious batters made

into mouthwatering cakes, but they did little to dazzle the eye. Then there were the decorators: the sugar artisans who designed beautifully adorned concoctions that failed to create a taste sensation. Ron Ben-Israel married the two disciplines, and he did it with such culinary and artistic skill and with such an infusion of personal style and fervor that he immediately became legendary.

This brings me back to the point when I first meet Ron peeking through the door with that twinkle in his eye and spring to his gait as he beckons me into the studio. After being conducted through the door like visiting royalty or Ron’s newest playmate in a world of sugar-frosted sand castles, I enter a bright sky-lit office/consultation room where Ron can scrutinize colors by natural sunbeams. Everything is white, from the walls to the glistening computers and furniture, a bit of staging that allows the cakes—in every shape, size, configuration, and color combination—to star. Sealed in gossamer icing, they seem smooth enough to skate on. Some are patterned or overlaid with sugarcoated lacework; most are glazed in daring hues, but these frostings play second fiddle to the floral trimmings. Spun of sugar and playfulness, these blossoms are so real, they could fool both bumblebee and botanist.

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The truth is in the tasting. Though Ron's flowers are one hundred percent edible, most clients prefer to preserve their beauty, which unlike their real counterparts, can last for years if properly handled.





Under his stewardship, Ron's SoHo kitchen is a baking station, botany lab, and artists' studio. Using a variety of tools and talents from several disciplines, Ron and his staff capture the shapes, textures, and colors of the flowers they form from sugary paste.





Each part of the flower is created meticulously and individually—one artist might work only on dendrobium lips, another might be spending the morning on lily anthers. Volumes of florist books, nursery catalogs, and loose-leaf binders with flower close-ups lay ready for reference.

nolias, mophead hydrangeas, morning glories, lisianthus—all are so lifelike, from the sepals on the rose to the subtle coloration (the “dusting” Ron calls it) that differentiates the tips of a lily’s petals from the hues at mid rib. Every detail is botanically correct, right down to the pistils and stamens. “We work with illusion,” he explains. “The sugar flowers are inspired by nature, and the details pay homage to the growing parts.”

Ron strives for a singular and sumptuous finished product, but along the way, he relishes the processes of creation and the finer points of technique. “Maybe that’s the clue to what moves me,” he reflects in the midst of a tour. “I try to find order in the world through techniques. Somehow you shape sugar into rosebuds; I’m fascinated by the process.” Then he pauses, thinks, and continues in his resonant, honeyed Israeli accent, “But I never dwell on the finished product.” Instead, he skips immediately to the next challenge. While that often means sculpting flowers of sugar or whipping egg whites into a divinely delicious meringue, it might also mean shaping insects, birds, race cars, playing cards, or whatever else happens to strike a client’s fancy or suits an event. Many of these decorations are too artful to eat, and if preserved and kept away from light, they will last for years.

Helping Ron to make these edible masterpieces is his staff of

chef-artisans, many once his students at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. A few graduates, chosen on the basis of their broad interests, are selected by Ron, their master pastry instructor, to complete a rigorous internship at his establishment. Some are former potters; others have botanical art in their background. In the workroom, this troupe of dedicated chefs and artists, patiently, meticulously cuts the clefts at the tip of peony petals with cookie cutters and employs tweezers, needle tools, pallet knives, pizza cutters, and ball tools to sculpt flowers. Each part of the flower is individually crafted: one artist works only on dendrobium lips, while another staff member spends the morning on lily anthers. Volumes of florist books, nursery catalogs, and loose-leaf binders with flower close-ups lay ready for reference. When an item is finished, it is stored until the cake it is to crown is baked. One wall of the studio is stacked with shelves of bins holding blossoms so specific that they are designated by cultivar name—Black Magic roses, Leonidas rosebuds, and so on. Stockpiles of fern fiddleheads, morning glories, callas, freesias, or whatever is needed are made early in the week to synchronize with the cakes coming out of the oven.

Foliage is also poised for action, often formed from foam molds of frequently used leaves, such as ivy, hydrangea, and sweet pea. Tendrils and branches are matched faithfully with their coin-



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cluding flowers. A Ron Ben-Israel cake is like a botany lesson.

Every day in the kitchen is choreographed, and each event has a rhythm and schedule, much like a dance. But the result is more than spectacle. Beneath the frosting is a memorable experience. Although he offers both the traditional vanilla and chocolate cakes, these basic flavors are just the beginning. The vanilla cake might be enhanced with cinnamon-cappuccino, passion fruit with a touch of lime, wild strawberry, Carolina peach, or a long list of other delicious and daring highlights. Similarly, chocolate cake might be accented by hazelnut praline, blackberry, banana with pecan brittle, or other ambrosial complements. Each tier might feature its own theme. Ron's kosher kitchen continually experiments with new combinations.

The concept for every cake comes from Ron's singular vision and his sense of humor, combined with an elevated, cultivated style. He is acutely aware of the symbolism of the shared cake and of the fact that his dessert is the culmination of the event. He likes to think that he has just crafted the last morsel that will be eaten by friends and family before a

honeymoon or at the end of a commemorative celebration. He also likes to ponder the lifespan of each element. Although the sugary flowers can last indefinitely, the cakes are perishable and baked just before the event. There is a symbolism to that as well. "It's alive, like yeast," he says to visitors in the cake-baking section of his SoHo studio.

Feeling like the dancer he once was, he tingles to the excitement of a performance, the energy rising as he pulls together all the components of an ultimate dessert. And like the guiding principle of the dancer or the stage actor, the precept that inspires the creativity of every employee who arrives at 42 Greene Street is, "We're only as good as our last cake."

After explaining his motto, told with a mischievous, flirtatious grin, Ron sends me home with a few samples of cakes. His smile brightens when he concludes with a final request: "You might mention that I'm still single," he teases, adding with a flourish, "and I come with a cake." ☺

If Ron, a former dancer, choreographs the many hands that contribute to the finished product, then the cake is the actual performance. Sweet to the eye, the cakes are more than show. Their flavors go boldly beyond basic vanilla and chocolate, creating taste memories through surprising combinations.

