



By Ann Quasarano

Let Them Eat Cake

If the Food Network's Duff Goldman is the Ace of Cakes, then Lovely Cakes' Renata Papadopoulos could be our local Queen. If you can dream it, she can bake it. From towering architectural masterpieces to whimsical three dimensional novelties, Renata's confectionary sculptures look almost too pretty to eat. Almost.

*W*ith her wide smile, Renata's cheerful disposition is as sweet as her cakes. "I love baking cakes because they make people happy," she says

enthusiastically. "When you think about each of the celebrations in life, a cake is always part of it."



This Norwalk-based baker specializes in creating one-of-a-kind, edible cake sculptures individually designed for each event. There is no limit to her creativity. She's designed cakes in the shape of a motorcycle, a basket of apples, a designer handbag, and even a rainbow trout. She also does classic wedding cakes.

To begin the design process, Papadopoulos meets with the client to work on a theme, taking inspiration from the event at which the cake will be served. "When I meet with clients, they often have a theme that they want to incorporate into the design and we start there," she explains. She then creates a cake that both addresses that theme and ensures personalization for the individual being celebrated.

Depending on the complexity of the design, it can take from three to as many as ten hours to prepare and assemble

Papadopoulos can create confections in virtually any shape. The shoe cake, left, shows her skill and versatility.



one of Papadopoulos' elaborate creations. Every element is hand-sculpted from fondant, an edible, Play-Doh-like substance made from sugar. She uses a wide range of tools to mold the fondant and give it texture, including a threaded rod from the hardware store, a pasta machine (to make thin ribbons), and an airbrush. "I use baking utensils, but I also have to be creative when finding tools to do each job. I look around and see what might work to produce a certain texture. It just happens."

Papadopoulos describes her cake baking technique as a blend of Brazilian and French. "I use the moister Brazilian style cake, but I also use French meringue buttercream." The result is that the cake itself is just as delectable as the

outside is beautiful. "It's taste that really sets my cakes apart from something that you can buy in a supermarket. Every cake is baked from scratch using the finest ingredients. I only use real vanilla and vanilla beans, imported chocolate, and Swiss preserves. It makes a big difference."

Lovely Cakes offers a wide variety of made-to-order cake flavors and fillings, but Papadopoulos will also create any custom flavor you desire. She says that brides generally choose traditional flavors, like vanilla cake with strawberry buttercream or chocolate cake with chocolate mousse, but she also offers more adventurous fillings such as rich chocolate truffle and tropical coconut pineapple. Other mouth-watering combinations have included dark chocolate cake with peanut butter filling, hazelnut cake with chocolate ganache, and banana cake with dulce de leche caramel and semisweet chocolate ganache.

Papadopoulos grew up in Brazil and she did not always aspire to be a baker. "I wanted to be a pilot!" she says. While in flight school in the U.S., Renata met her husband. They married, began a family, and settled in Norwalk, where she started baking cakes for her children's birthdays and other family celebrations. It was at her family's urging that she decided to start Lovely Cakes five years ago. "They really encouraged me. They said 'You have to do this!'"

To perfect her technique, she enrolled in a pastry program at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. The program gave her a strong foundation in baking and pastry making, but she says that in the end it was cooking in her grandmother's kitchen in Brazil that developed her true passion for the art form. "My grandmother was my best teacher and remains to this day my greatest inspiration."

Lovely Cakes' prices range from \$5 to \$10 per serving depending on the type of cake and complexity of design. She suggests that potential clients contact her at least two weeks before an event to allow her the proper preparation and scheduling time. She sees clients by appointment and can be reached at **203-842-0500** or through her website, **lovelycakes.net**.