

Divine Inspirations

A swatch of carpeting, stacked light fixtures, bold buttresses—inspiration can come from anywhere. With that in mind, we asked four Chicago cake artists to put their skills to the test for confections stirred by our favorite hotel décor. The result? How sweet it is.

| By Lisa Shames | Photography by Jim White |

The Pick-Up Artist

After 11 years at her Near West Side bakeshop, Mary Winslow, owner of Take the Cake, still sticks to her guns: “Unique is nice, but my goal is to make beautiful cakes”—an objective that’s evident in her pretty, four-tiered dessert here that draws its inspiration from, among other elements, the plush carpeting found in the Grand Ballroom at The Peninsula Chicago. For the cake’s warm color palette, Winslow looked to the hotel’s earth-toned, floor-to-ceiling drapes. To give the illusion of the sheer folds and add some shimmer, she used a mixture of petal dust and vodka over the rolled fondant—“it evaporates quickly so the sugar doesn’t get sticky, and it doesn’t leave an odor,” reveals Winslow. For the second tier’s intricate piping, Winslow worked in the carpet’s 1920s-style pattern—adding six multi-petal fantasy flowers (made from gum paste) for softness and texture. Talk about paying attention to the details! 1635 W. Walnut St., 312.850.4530, takethecakeetc.com.



Left: The 1920s-chic carpeting in the Peninsula’s Grand Ballroom. Far left: Mary Winslow from Take the Cake embellished her four-tier creation with delicate piping to match the pattern.



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Design Within Reach

To some, the trial-and-error process that goes along with creating a truly special wedding cake can be tough. Not so for Bittersweet owner/pastry chef Judy Contino, who considers the interaction her team has with brides to be the best part of the creative process. To transform the Sofitel Chicago Water Tower into an edible work of art, Contino and her lead cake decorator, Mindy Gohr, worked together on the four-tiered masterpiece: The hotel's buttressed windows take shape courtesy of thin strips of sugar; the cityscape seen outside gets lovingly abstracted by scattered blocks of fondant; and, at its base, squares in maroon and gray pick up their bold coloring from the hotel's carpet. And even though the cake's an homage to strong architecture (the hotel was designed by French architect Jean-Paul Viguier in 2002), Contino felt it needed a personal touch, hence the cone-shaped toppers complete with petit bow tie and bouquet. "The toppers add that needed bit of romance." 1114 W. Belmont Ave., 773.929.1100, bittersweetpastry.com.



Above: The buttressed windows in the ballroom at the Sofitel Chicago. Right: Bittersweet's complex cake incorporates both literal (the modern architecture) and symbolic (the union of the bride and groom) elements.



The Sofitel's buttressed windows take shape courtesy of thin strips of sugar; the cityscape seen outside gets lovingly abstracted by scattered blocks of fondant; and at its base, squares of soft gold and gray pick up the bold coloring from the carpet.



Above: The cubic lamp on the mezzanine level at W Chicago-City Center. Left: Alliance Bakery turned out a striking cake that pays tribute to several of the hotel's eclectic design elements.

Let There Be Light!

Back in the '80s when he was an electronic engineer, Peter Rios never imagined his math skills would come in handy one day designing wedding cakes. But knowing about angles and dimensions definitely helped the award-winning pastry chef—Rios worked at the Fairmont, Art Institute of Chicago and Sofitel before opening his own Wicker Park shop—when creating this geometric wonder. With the W Chicago-City Center as his muse, Rios modeled the shape of his cake after a stacked-cube lamp that sits by the ballroom. Then, to incorporate some of the building's baroque details (it was once the historic Midland Hotel before it was restored in 2001), he embellished each tier with a soft "lace" fondant and worked in a Greek-style column at the center. "The column allows the cake to float and not appear too heavy." 1736 W. Division St., 773.278.0366, alliance-bakery.com.



Above: The cylindrical light fixtures that illuminate the ballroom at the Park Hyatt Chicago. Right: Keli Fayard at Vanille Pâtisserie chose gray for her confection because of its "modern look."



Sent From Above

Designing wedding cakes inspired by interior design elements is nothing new for Keli Fayard, who, along with her husband and fellow baker Dimitri (the two met while working at NYC's Payard Pâtisserie), owns Lincoln Park's Vanille Pâtisserie. So when assigned the Park Hyatt Chicago's chic light fixtures as a starting point, Fayard wasn't fazed. Rather, she immediately envisioned a bit of rouching on a wedding gown and got to baking. The pleated look finds its way onto two of the cake's tiers, each one studded with tiny fondant pearls for texture. For the remaining layers, Fayard keeps things simple with a pale pink outline of hibiscus flowers. As for the color—a pearl-dusted gray—she predicts it could be the "It" color for 2010. Says Fayard, "Gray goes well with everything and has a modern look without being overdone." 2229 N. Clybourn Ave., 773.868.4574, vanillepatisserie.com.