

Quirky cakes tell their own stories

Mary Whitehouse loves it when people approach her and ask: "Are you the cake lady"? Usually the question is followed by "have I got a challenge for you". For 10 years Mary has been decorating cakes for weddings, birthdays and anniversaries. However her willingness to accept a challenge has given her designs a quirky edge, which sets her apart from others who take a more traditional approach.

Her "can I eat this" file of photographs showcasing some of her cakes is evidence of Mary's ability to think outside the square. A bucket filled with cleaning products including a bottle of Jif, rubber gloves and a cleaning cloth is one example. She's also made cakes that look like hard hats, coffee cups, a pool table, cello, running shoes, and even a laptop computer.

One of her creations, a women's handbag, looked so realistic on display at one function that someone tried to pick it up. They realised it wasn't real when the handle came off and left a sticky piece of cake in their hand!

Mary says the initial consultation with a person ordering a cake is crucial. She prefers to visit clients in their own homes because there they are surrounded by objects, which tell a story, and she can use them to design the cake.

For example Mary could be asked to make a cake in the shape of a pet and meeting the animal can help her see what the end product should look like.

Brides wanting wedding cakes usually come to Mary with a theme or an idea already formulated but birthday celebrations and anniversaries often allow for more of a story to be told, she says.

For example, Mary's 'can I eat this'

file includes a cake in the shape of a hand basin with a small horse swimming in the water with a life preserver around its neck. The recipient of the cake sold bathroom ware, rode horses and enjoyed boating.

"I'm usually not doing it for the person who is the recipient. It is usually a relative who is organising it. It's a matter of choosing something suitable for

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Mary Whitehouse with the tools of her cake decorating trade.

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the person that can be the basis for the cake," Mary explains.

Once the concept has been decided, Mary sketches the cake for the client to ensure her vision aligns with theirs.

Mary often turns to the Internet to make sure her cakes look realistic. She once made a huge truck with enormous wheels, which is used in mining. She was able to get the correct dimensions from the Internet and measure the cake to scale.

Mary's cake baking started when she was knee high to her mum.

"I used to make deserts for Sunday lunch - puddings they were then," she says. "Later on I did family birthday cakes and Christmas cakes. As years went on, the Christmas cakes got highly elaborate and more and more so."

Mary was previously an aeronautical engineer selling aeroplanes for British Aerospace. Later she worked selling

flight simulators in which pilots are trained. She came to New Zealand in 1991 where she did consulting work in the aviation field and studied for her MBA but she was looking for something more creative to do.

Cake decorating was very much a hobby until the number of people asking Mary to make cakes increased and it became a business, which has grown in the last five years.

Now Mary has a licensed kitchen at her Clevedon property so no longer needs to lease a kitchen for her cake decorating.

Most of the cakes take two days to complete and Mary's clients are always happy with the finished product.

"I don't think I've ever seen one where someone has opened the box and said 'that's not what I was thinking of'," she says.

A trained cordon bleu cook who has also completed a two-day course in

cake decorating, Mary still has the occasional disaster in the kitchen where cakes have turned out to be "flops".

"You get times when the cake has sunk but unfortunately that's a baker's life," she shrugs.

Most major disasters happen in transit when delivering the cake either to the client or to a party venue. One time Mary had carefully placed the bride and groom on top of the cake and heard one fall over as she went over a bump entering a driveway. The damage wasn't too terrible and Mary was able to replace the happy couple without anyone noticing.

As a member of the New Zealand Cake Decorators Guild, Mary is able to share ideas with other cake decorators. While she has many books with instructions for making various flowers and other decorations, Mary enjoys her craft far more when she has to come up with an object for which she has no

instructions.

Mary's favourite kind of cake is an un-iced simnel cake. It is a fruit cake with a layer of marzipan in the middle and balls of marzipan on top.

"It is a traditional Easter and Mothering Sunday cake," Mary explains. "Traditionally the balls of marzipan on top represent the 12 apostles. Some people only use 11 because of Judas."

This is the type of cake Mary bakes for her own birthday but she would never let anyone else bake it for her.

"It would never be the same," she says.

However, if someone was to ice a cake for Mary it's likely to have decorations relating to her involvement on the Clevedon Cares group which opposes the Papakura District Council plan change for the Wairoa River Maritime Village which Mary calls the canal house development. Perhaps it would feature some fireworks or a Christmas parade reflecting her involvement with the Clevedon Residents' Association events or a tennis racket acknowledging her time as secretary and then president of the Clevedon tennis club.

By Helen Tatham



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One of the first fruit cakes baked in Mary Whitehouse's new commercial kitchen.

