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Lynnette Drake's commitment to quality ingredients and enchanting, creative style is guaranteed to please both the palate and the eye.

Jamie Haverkamp Photo



It's all about
the

Cake

Flour. Sugar. Eggs. To some people, these are just common ingredients. To Lynnette Drake, cake decorator extraordinaire, they're the beginning of a masterpiece.

by NICHOLAS ADDISON THOMAS



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very great artist needs a muse. For Lynnette Drake, her inspiration is found in the form of ingredients. As one of the region's preeminent cake decorators, Lynnette's success is measured not by tablespoons or cups, but by the reactions her custom cakes produce. In many respects, she is a culinary cupid, wielding a spatula as her bow and arrow and uniting people over dessert.

Like a cake, there are many layers to Lynnette. The long-time North Stafford resident is a devoted mother to two sons, Ethan and Aidan; a loving wife to Stu, her husband of eight years; an innovative business owner; and an expert on all-things confection. She is, by all accounts, living proof that following a dream can create immeasurable success. And yet, her rise from a student of the culinary arts to a renowned cake decorator has been anything but, well, a piece of cake.

Lynnette's journey from cuisine to cakes began in the mid-1990s. Eager to learn the A-to-Zs of cooking, she enrolled in The Art Institute, a celebrated school for the culinary arts. While there, she dabbled in various mediums, learning everything there is to know about the creation and delivery of cuisine. When she graduated in 1998, Lynnette aspired to work in the restaurant industry. After testing the waters, she found the expectation of working long hours and the non-stop schedule unappealing. It wasn't long before her interest leaned toward other avenues.

"If I had stayed on the path I was headed, I would have wound up working in restaurants. I knew I wouldn't have much time on the weekends and holidays," said Lynnette. "I wanted to do something 'fun' when it came to creating food,

and I also wanted to have a life."

That something "fun" came in the form of custom cakes. Lynnette grew interested in designing the dessert after trying her share of disappointments. Though the cakes she sampled were always beautifully decorated, they were dry and dull-tasting. Intent on improving the process, Lynnette embarked on a journey to learn everything she could about designing cakes. With a background in culinary arts and an unrelenting determination, she knew she could take cakes to another level.

She began by conducting research and reading up on the various methods of cake design. Soon after, she was having private lessons with world-renowned sugar artists Nicholas Lodge and Kim Morrison, taking classes in Kansas and participating in decorative seminars in Georgia. Before she knew it, she had a firm grip on the art of cake design. The next logical step was to start a business, one that put her



Lynnette puts the finishing touches on one of her highly decorative cakes.

creativity and culinary passions to good use.

Since 1995, Lynnette has been running The Icing Custom Cakes & Confections, one of the region's most popular dessert destinations. Serving Stafford, Fredericksburg, Woodbridge and surrounding areas, the small business offers custom party and wedding cakes that are as appealing to the eye as they are to the stomach. Built on the belief that all cakes should taste as good as they look, The Icing has earned high praise from both new and repeat customers. For Lynnette, this kind of acclaim really hits home—literally.

Lynnette's entire cake operation occurs in the basement of her North Stafford residence, which is outfitted to serve as a deluxe bakery. Organized and well laid out, the quarters are filled with wall-to-wall baking accessories, expensive machinery and a tight-knit staff of five women. Unlike most businesses, where it's all work and no play, this one fosters an energizing and creative environment. The employees, all of whom are close friends, are encouraged to have fun while working.

"We're like a family here, and we have a great time working together. We laugh, chat about projects and talk about *The Office*," said Lynnette. "Everyone plays an important role in the business. I wouldn't be where I am today without them."

Every day, Lynnette and her team field customer inquiries, prep orders, maintain their presence on social-networking sites (The Icing has Twitter and Facebook accounts) and man the equipment they've so eloquently named. There's Sally, a 30-quart mixer; Bertha, a double-wide fridge that holds things like filling and early-stage projects; and Tabitha,

a fondant sheeter. Not to be forgotten is their unnamed commercial convection oven, which can bake half a wedding cake in just 39 minutes. Each piece of machinery plays a vital role in the production of custom cakes, but they're second banana to the utensils and ingredients.

Inside the bakery is an abundance of "cake toys" and special ingredients. On various shelves, there are airbrush compressors, mini-cake equipment, flower cutters, cookie cutters, ribbon and lace molds, among other decorating must-haves. Beneath them are plastic bins of food coloring, gum paste, petal dust, marabou and other necessary ingredients. Individually, they're just accessories, but when combined, they create some of the region's most memorable cakes.

"I have a lot of toys I use to make my cakes, and each one creates a unique design, whether it's sugar flowers or curtain work," said Lynnette. "When I'm running low on supplies, I just head over to Lowes and pick up some more tools. They have a ton of items you can use to create beautiful cakes."

It's that creativity that has kept Lynnette going in a competitive industry. Since she began making custom cakes, Lynnette's goodies have been in high demand. Some of her clients include the United States Marine Corps, Hilton Garden Inn, the Stafford County Baseball League, the Mountain View High School swim team and various other organizations. In addition to her renowned cakes, Lynnette makes other edible works of art, such as hand-decorated cookies, petit fours and candies. She sells these confections as a side business, called Sincerely Sugar.

"Sincerely Sugar was launched as a separate entity in 2008. We have always offered cookies, petit fours and other confections; Sincerely Sugar just allowed us to sell them on the Web and ship them nationwide," said Lynnette.

Whether it's through The Icing or Sincerely Sugar, Lynnette is creating an indelible impact on the local food industry. She's separating herself from the crowd by adopting unique approaches to traditional methods of cake and confection design. For example, all of the ingredients she uses are organic, each cake is baked to order and she never freezes them. What's more, she offers 13 traditional flavors and 19 signature flavors. But what really sets Lynnette apart from the competition is her dedication to design.

Cake decorating is more than just a skill; it's an art form that's learned through trial and error, years of studying, and experimenting with



Each element of every cake is custom-made with skill and care.

“...each cake plays a part in someone’s life story, and that’s what’s important to me. I’m happy I can be a part of that...”

various ingredients and creative expressions. For every sugar pearl mastered, there’s another styling to perfect. From beginning to end, designing cakes and confections requires immeasurable patience and a commanding attention to detail. After 14 years on the job, Lynnette is an expert at ensuring her projects run as smooth as marble frosting.

“You really only get one shot at this. When you start a cake from scratch, you usually have just a short window of time to get it done, and get it done right,” said Lynnette. “Everything has to be done to perfection, starting with the initial planning.”

Before a custom cake can be made, Lynnette consults with the client to determine the budget, desired flavors and designs associated with the project. She then sketches the cake in her lime-green notebook, sticking to the likes and don’t-likes aforementioned. Once the client approves the concept, the sketch goes on a wall and the creation process begins. Depending on the specificity of the requests, the entire operation can take anywhere from 10 to 60 hours. It’s a time-consuming process, but one that offers considerable rewards.

“One of my favorite parts about making a custom cake is seeing the customers’ reactions when they first see it. After all of the conversations and planning, it’s great to see how it finally comes out,” said Lynnette. “I recently made a cake that had a Twilight theme, and the customer cried when she saw it. That’s special, knowing that the cake was going to play a big part in her party.”

For more than a decade, Lynnette has been creating cakes for every type of occasion imaginable. The events she typically caters to include birthdays, graduations, baby showers, and of course, weddings. This wedding season will prove to be yet another busy year, considering how vital the cake is to the theme of a wedding. To put it in perspective, The Icing made approximately 771 cakes

last year, 271 of which were for weddings. Soon-to-be brides from all over come to The Icing to create that picture-perfect cake, and it’s up to Lynnette to add a creative flair to their requests. Where does she draw her inspiration?

It depends, she says. When it comes to wedding cakes, it can spring from dresses, themes, time of year, reception locations and even the “story” of how the bride and groom first met. Recently, a client requested a wedding cake in the shape of a vintage bottle of wine, their names lovingly added to the label— the pair first met at a winery. Other clients choose from traditional, contemporary, square and fall wedding cakes, opting for bold colors and decorations instead of the standard fare. When it comes to party cakes, the requests are no less inventive.

“I’ve created cakes that look like R2-D2 from Star Wars, guitars, sports helmets, and, believe it or not, bags of popcorn. Many of our clients give us the theme and the number of servings and then let us go,” said Lynnette. “Those are the cakes that are really over the top and lots of fun!”

Fourteen years, countless customers and thousands of cakes later, Lynnette Drake still loves every minute of her job. What started out as a post-culinary school passion has since evolved into a lucrative business that elates the taste buds of local families and companies alike. Through extensive self-training and the ability to adapt to her customers needs, Lynnette has created a tasty niche for herself.

“It can be a little sad knowing I’ve spent days creating something, and then after it’s displayed, it’s gone in an instant,” said Lynnette. “But each cake plays a part in someone’s life story, and that’s what’s important to me. I’m happy I can be a part of that, and I hope to keep creating memories through my cakes.”

To learn more about The Icing, or to schedule a free wedding cake consultation, visit www.theicingcakes.com or call 703-220-1869 today.



Left to right: Michele Ward, Amberly Slack, Lynnette, and Tanya Humphrey.

