

These Classes Take the Cake

by Karen Gadiel | Posted: Friday, February 27, 2015 5:53 pm

For a sweet way to learn a new skill, in the confidence that even any mistakes will be enthusiastically enjoyed, classes in icing... um... take the cake. Tools, know-how and delicious recipes add up to one-of-a-kind, unforgettable desserts and a learning process students return to for multiple helpings. Alexis Zaharis teaches Wilton cake decorating classes at Michael's and at the Tompkins County Public Library and her students - from ones who came because their friends were going to those who signed up because they wanted to be better at birthday cakes – say the first class series almost inevitably leads to second and third helpings.

Zaharis says she comes from a family of foodies and bakers who encouraged her interests. She began taking classes as a teenager, learned more at the Culinary Institute of America and at the International School of Pastry Arts, now known as the Natter School of Pastry Arts. “I got totally addicted to cake decorating,” she explains, adding that she’s also a member of ICES, the International Cake Exploration Society, continuing to learn from others as passionate as she is about the art of decorating cakes.

Why decorate a cake? “What? Why not?” she asks, sounding astonished. “You can have a cake that’s really simple that’s all about taste; or one that transports you with a feeling, a celebration. For me, some of the pleasure is that it’s a creative process that’s very temporary. It’s enjoyed for a moment and eaten. Then that moment passes and then we have a new moment.”

Zaharis offers many different classes from basic beginner baking and decorating fundamentals to advanced sculptural work. “I demonstrate different techniques and then they execute the techniques. I work with each student on helping and developing skills.” A first class might include information on the best cakes for frosting and baking tips to make frosting easier, moving on to an opportunity to experiment with different frosting recipes and the tools to create unusual and beautiful toppings.

Anna Murray-Bartels says she was looking for a hobby she could do with her spouse, who really likes baking, so they went to classes together. “I had no skills at all,” says Murray-Bartels. “I definitely developed them as I went along. In some ways, it’s an easy medium, in other ways, it’s harder than clay.” Eventually, they discovered a great division of skills - “She’d rather bake the cupcakes – and I like decorating them more. The icing can be quite delicious.” And with practice, which she compares



Careful Hands

Alexis demonstrates the technique for making calla lilies.

to learning penmanship, “You tend to get to a point where you have a style and you can tell your flower from somebody else’s.”

Part of the time, students are learning about tools, how to make icing, how to fill a decorating bag and hold it, what different tips are for. “If you were a carpenter, you could do most of your work with a simple hand-saw,” Zaharis points out. “But it would make your work better and more efficient and versatile with other tools. So, too, with cake decorating, you can invest in as many or as few tools as you want. Classes are very inexpensive, mostly \$20 to \$45 – and as someone who went to culinary school, that is so inexpensive! And then you might spend up to \$50 on tools to get started. Where you go from there is up to you.”

And in some respects, mastering the arts of pastry involve valuable life lessons as well. “You have to be willing to take risks in the kitchen and do new things,” Zaharis says. “In baking and cake decorating, it’s helpful to be patient – there are things you can’t rush. So there’s patience, and dedication to practice, a willingness to do something again and again and improve on it.”

“It called for a different kind of patience,” says Kate McCullough, who has taken several classes with Zaharis. “It even became a little meditative – and made me very popular with my children!” Families and co-workers often find themselves the beneficiaries of practice pieces, as well as finished work.

After Patrice Jennings began taking classes – mostly to spend time with Kate – “I realized how much fun it was and how much I really loved it,” she says. “It was easier than I thought, and offered more opportunities to be creative.” For a party for a co-worker, Jennings created a memorable garden of cupcakes; her 7-year-old celebrated a recent birthday with a cookie-decorating activity. “The process is as much fun as the product,” she says. “For years, I would look at cakes and think, How did they do them? Now I think, I can totally do that, and do things they wouldn’t think of!”

Find information about upcoming classes at alexiszaharis.com/classes.