



### **For You, My Sweet**

*From oysters and lamb testicles to cream puffs and spun sugar, the evolution of cakes as a symbol of wedded bliss*

**By Amy Halloran**

The typical wedding-cake tower echoes the long white flow of a wedding gown. For me, it evokes a train of thought attached to the whole cloth of weddings, including Cinderella-style courtships, a trip to the altar, and two words that glue you to a new life.

But what is the tradition of the traditional wedding cake? How did the layers get stacked? What does it mean when a bride and groom smooch cake in each other's faces? And do white towers of sugar and fat mean anything to marriage ceremonies in other cultures?

Most sources attribute the Romans with giving us the first wedding cake, which was not a cake as we know it, but rather, bread made from wheat or barley. The groom broke this round over the head of the bride, which was meant to somehow ensure fertility, especially if the newlyweds shared the crumbs.

Medieval England featured a habit of stacking a tower of small, spiced buns as high as possible. The challenge was for the couple to kiss over the tower without toppling it. Kissing while keeping the buns in place guaranteed a prosperous future for the couple, and this was when marriage was for money, remember, not love. Fishermen wed fishwives, and rich cousins married each other to consolidate property and power.

Supposedly, a French chef who was visiting England in the 1600s thought to improve this custom by stacking tiers of cakes. But at this time, the wedding cake was not the major wedding-food centerpiece that it is today. English recipes for "bride's pye" called for outrageous groupings of aphrodisiac foods tucked between two crusts: oysters, lamb testicles, and cockscombs. Bride's pye continued on through time; a recipe for one featuring a hen

full of eggs plus minced meats and fruits is in a Yorkshire cookbook from the 19th century.

Originally, brides cut the cake alone, but as wedding cakes evolved, so did icing. Icings initially were baked onto the already baked cakes, and the name for icing refers to the shiny hardness of the stuff—the iciness, if you will. Iced cakes were so hard that brides needed help cutting them, and so the bride and groom cutting it together became a symbol of the joint effort of marriage.

As far as a white cake and frosting symbolizing virginity, well, that idea became attached to the cake in Victorian times. Prior to that, the whiteness was emblematic of another status: money. Whiter sugar was more processed, and cost much more than browner products. Whiter frosting implied affluence, not purity.

It was also in the late 1800s that wedding cakes were made edible on all levels; all but the bottom level of the tower was often spun sugar. Improvements in ingredients, including baking powders, sodas, and sugar, and improvements in kitchen tools, such as cake pans and more evenly heated ovens, made the baking of multiple layers of cake practical. Stacking systems grew up, too, and Prince Leopold's 1882 wedding cake was the first famous cake whose upper layers were not just decorated sugar rounds.

Feeding each other cake is a Kodak moment of great intimacy in public. Many couples break the pressure of that minute by smashing cake into each other's mouths. Sharing cake is supposed to indicate the way the couple will nourish each other in their married life, and some link this breaking of a bread-like product to Christian practices of communion.

The wedding cake is a Western phenomenon that is migrating a bit into other cultures. Traditional Chinese wedding cakes are presented to the bride's family as part of the wedding proposal, and these "happiness cakes," or "dragon and phoenix" cakes, are filled with bean pastes and sent to guests with wedding invitations. Now these cakes, and of course our ubiquitous white tower, are showing up at Chinese weddings.

French customs for sweets at a wedding include *croque-en-broche*, a cone of cream puffs standing on a nougat base and wrapped in a lace of caramel. I read about one overdone example of this that had wedding guests protecting themselves from chunks of burnt spun sugar with napkins as the chef tried to dismantle his creation with a saucepan.

Although it is superstitiously unwise for a bride to bake her own cake, there are no rules regarding a groom baking one, and with costs starting at \$2-3 slice and climbing beyond \$20 a serving, you may want to hit the kitchen.

Still, wedding cakes are so crafty and artisanal these days, why not go all out? Bakers are modeling churchyards, getaway cars, and wedding beds. They're stacking cakes of suitcases and hatboxes. Frostings are going dark chocolate and deep reds. And if any cake is one you can have and eat, too, the wedding cake is. Keep a piece in your freezer, or, as my husband's grandparents did, can it in brandy, and you can taste some on your 50th anniversary.