

the cake artist

interview with [maggie austin](#) | written by [rebecca poole](#) | photography by [maggie austin](#)



Maggie Austin's cakes can best be described as dazzling works of art. Her attention to detail, matched with her inventiveness, never fails to result in masterpieces that look worthy of their own museum exhibit.

You were an aspiring ballerina. How did you end up as a cake designer?

An injury ended my career as a ballet dancer. Classical ballet had been the love of my life and my sole focus from the age of four, so it was a very difficult time for me. I decided to attend The French Pastry School in Chicago, where I took a six-month overview of pastry making, and I really connected with the process of making sugar flowers. I decided to move to the DC area upon completing school and moved in with my sister, Jess. Soon after, we decided to make a website that showcased my sugar flower work. We ended up connecting with a local wedding planner, and she wrote a blog post about my work.

Two weeks after Maggie Austin Cake launched, I got a call from the *Today* show, which featured one of my wedding cakes. We hit the ground running, to say the least. Within a couple years, I was working with clients all over the world and teaching

workshops when I had time. Today, teaching is my real passion, and we've adjusted our business to give me as many opportunities as possible to do that.

Do you find that there are similarities between the worlds of ballet and cake design?

Absolutely. Both worlds are all about attention to detail and complete focus on the process. Ballet is the relentless pursuit of perfection, but I've let that part go. Imperfection is so much more interesting.

What's your approach like? Is there a type of environment you work best in?

Every project has its own unique process. Sometimes there are client meetings and sketches and a firm delivery date. Sometimes there are visits to the National Gallery for research on a new workshop idea. Sometimes I find a cool wildflower in my yard that I just need to re-create in sugar. Regardless, I work best in my quiet studio with my dog, Bessie, who frequently reminds me to head outside and enjoy the fresh air.

What inspires you?

It depends on the project. Sometimes a tiny detail, like the lace of an heirloom handkerchief, is the foundation of the design. Other times, I'm inspired by an art exhibit, my walks outdoors, an amazing runway gown, or a painting my husband finds at an antique shop. Occasionally, I'll start working on a project and it takes me in a totally unexpected direction. I've learned to go with the flow of the work rather than struggle against it.



The details on your designs really stand out—particularly your sugar flower work. Did that aspect of cake decorating come easily?

During the two-week wedding cake session in school, I made my first sugar flowers. I was the slowest in class, and my flowers were so chunky! But I continued working on them, and I did get a lot better. Sugar flowers are definitely my favorite thing to do, but I don't try to be botanically correct. Instead, I try to capture the essence of the flower—the temporal nature of it. My ballet training gave me an endless amount of patience, which helps in this aspect of cake decorating. During my time interning at a restaurant in Chicago, I'd often come home from an extremely intense shift and make gum paste roses to relax. Jess and I initially wanted to have a business that was solely focused on my sugar flowers, but the idea of putting my work on someone else's cake just didn't feel right to me. In fact, my cake designs initially grew out of the need to have a vessel for my flowers.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?

I love photographing my designs. By the time I'm taking pictures, the project has taken on a life of its own. In that moment, I get to be the audience. That transition from creator to observer is truly rewarding.

You launched Maggie Austin Cake in 2010—how have things changed since then?

Things have changed radically. We went from four weddings per week and a few workshops here and there to a handful of weddings per year and many workshops. Some workshops, like the Wedding Intensive, focus on sugar



flower technique as well as practical business advice from Jess. Other workshops, like the Dutch Masters Floral Design, are about exploring art in an unconventional way. That's the wonderful thing about owning your own business: you get to take it in the direction you want.

You describe your cakes as haute couture. What led you to give your cakes this description?

This terminology comes from my love of the runway. In fashion, when each stitch is executed with such careful consideration, the garment becomes art. Custom cake design is similar. The thrill of it is that the cake is one stand-alone piece made just for that client, and it cannot be replicated.



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Is there an event or a particular client experience that stands out as a milestone for you?

I have been honored to work with some extraordinary clients. I've made a birthday cake for Dr. Jane Goodall. I made the wedding cake for Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds. I've flown all over the world with my designs. But teaching has been the most fulfilling on a personal level. Students come with their own stories, struggles, and triumphs. It's an honor to be part of their discovery process.

What does a typical workshop consist of? Who is your audience?

Workshops are incredibly diverse, and that's what makes them special. We have renowned pastry chefs sitting beside retirees who have never worked with sugar. Students come to us from all over the world, and the friendships made in those short days are amazing. Our workshops are a safe and quiet refuge where artists are empowered to explore their own unique voices. I also

encourage them to make mistakes! My motto is Embrace the Imperfections.

What are some takeaways you hope students walk away with?

Creative people are, by nature, sensitive. It can be challenging to tune out the judgments, both internally and externally. Students at a workshop make beautiful things, but they also learn the importance of focusing on the process instead of the product. We celebrate that journey.

For more info, visit maggieaustincake.com