

## The Transition Network guide to making celebratory cakes.



**Or: how to make an edible centerpiece for an Unleashing, anniversary, or just because you feel the need to celebrate something.**



Transition Town Kingston's Unleashing cake, an allotment, with marzipan vegetables and chocolate flake soil.

**By Julia Ponsonby, Schumacher College ([www.schumachercollege.org.uk](http://www.schumachercollege.org.uk)).**

The proper occasion for a cake – especially a fancy one – is a special occasion, to mark a rite of passage or a great achievement. Such occasions do not come every day of the week – and so the indulgence in sweetness and richness is excusable and kept in proportion. Enjoyed in this occasional way yummy cakes will not permanently destroy your appetite or rot your teeth. A fanciful decoration on top of the cake, makes it even more difficult to break into, and even more tempting to savour – but I am a great believer in edible art, and so am always happy to see people eating my decorations, however beautiful. Indeed, I would be happier to see them being gobbled up straight away than to think of them causing grief as they gather dust on a shelf and get slowly nibbled by mice.

Making cake decorations is thus a very good practice for someone who wants to develop non-attachment to his or her creations – and whilst you make your decorations, you should keep at the back of your mind the thought that you are making offerings – community offerings – that are destined to disappear. Never spend more time than you are happy to on these creations, given that you know they will soon have their moment of triumph and then

be consumed as part of a feast, fizzling valiantly into oblivion like fireworks. Having said that, do take photos!

Here are a few easy, fun methods for making edible decorations for cakes which should be done in advance of baking, when the pressure is off.

## Some Decorating Techniques

### **MARZIPANNING!**

Make your own almond paste or use Crazy Jack organic marzipan. I have found that the supermarket, non-organic marzipan doesn't last as well: a Christmas cake kept in the Schumacher College fridge for one month, had only two figures left standing when every one returned in January - and they were the organic ones. The models made with supermarket marzipan had melted into heaps, like snowmen, possibly because the glycerine and sugar/glucose content was higher and the ground almond content lower.

Crazy jack almond marzipan will give a slightly smoother finish, if you are after that, but the homemade marzipan is also pretty good and a little cheaper. Here is a basic Marzipan recipe, two amounts are given to suit the size of your cake.

#### **Almond Marzipan Recipe**

100g (4 oz) ground almonds*	300g (12 oz)
85g (3 oz) icing sugar, sieved	250g (9 oz)
2 tbsp egg white, approx	2 egg whites, approx
¼ tsp natural almond extract (optional)	1 tsp

*Method:* Combine the ground almonds and sieved icing sugar in a bowl. Make a well in the centre and carefully measure in the egg white and natural almond extract. Mix together with a wooden spoon until a dough is formed that holds together and can be gently kneaded. Add more egg white if required - or a little more ground almonds/sugar if the dough is too sticky/sloppy. If not using straight away, keep the marzipan wrapped in plastic or greaseproof in the fridge, so that no crusty edges form around it and it is ready to model.

\*You can, of course, go even further back to basics by skinning your own whole almonds, drying them and then grinding them in a coffee grinder - but it is difficult to get them as fine as the bought ground almonds, though sieving will help. Skinning or *blanching* almonds is done by soaking them in boiling water for five minutes and then draining them and immediately slipping the skins off - they should slip off as easily as socks. Dry the almonds out in a low oven or airing cupboard before grinding them.

**Marzipan modeling.** Not only can marzipan be used for covering celebration fruit cakes that you are going to ice, it is also great for modeling. Though at first touch marzipan seems as easy to model with as clay, it has a curious sagging quality when it comes to drying. Gravity seems to have a greater pull on it which means larger models must first be dried lying flat. For example if you wanted to make a 6" standing up figure you would first need to dry it lying down, with small rolls of silicone paper under its neck or any other places you

wanted to be curved. Marzipan droops as it dries. Once it is dried, however, it will keep its shape and can be carved to refine the outline. For this reason it is easier to make smaller models and sitting down figures, using cocktail sticks threaded through the head, neck and body for support. Marzipan is excellent for cutting out letters, making small fruit and vegetables and other small decorative objects, without use of armatures.

**Applying colour.** Use the more solid edible colours or powders that come from a specialist hardware store such as Lawsons in Totnes (check online availability 'Sugar Flair Colours' 'Squires Kitchen' etc). You can either knead the colour into the marzipan or paint them on top of the model when it is dry as I normally do, allowing for a greater ease when modeling and a more varied use of colour. As well as several pots of colour, and some gold dust, you may also like to equip yourself with edible glaze, glaze cleaner, and rejuvenator (also for thinning). Egg yolk can also be used as a medium for mixing the colour. Edible, shellac-based, glaze is only required if you want a glossy finish, but is a rather nice addition to your celebrations toolbox because you can also use it for giving chocolate leaves a nice sheen. When the colour is applied onto (as opposed to into) the models, it takes longer to dry – a few days, as opposed to overnight. Dry your marzipan figures in a protected spot where the air is dry and there is no risk of accumulating dust or being bashed into: once dry they can be stored in a lidded box.



Transition Town Totnes's first anniversary cake (made by the author). Note marzipan Totnes Pounds....

If you want to avoid using artificial colours even on special occasions, you can make simple caramel contrasts by very briefly cooking, grilling or blow-torching marzipan that has been painted thinly with egg white. Be careful not to heat it for too long as it will begin to expand and burn. You can also press nuts and dried fruit into the marzipan, gluing them down with the egg and hardening this with a brief spell in the oven.

Natural food dyes are also readily available now and you can make your own colours out of some fruit and vegetables . e.g. pink from beetroot juice.

These won't give such strong shades, but the contrasts may be all you need. Plain, ivory coloured marzipan is of course beautiful in its own right, and contrasts strikingly with dark chocolate.

## **CRYSTALIZING FLOWERS!**

These can be made in season and stored in a box until you need them. Suitable flowers are the simple shaped edible ones, wild and cultivated: such as violas, violets and primroses. Never take more than your share of the wild flowers which may be protected by law and need the chance to reproduce. Primroses are normally quite abundant in the March and

April countryside, but violets are rarer – and by preference you should use cultivated violas which flower throughout the summer and are often added to salads.

**Method:**

Separate an egg white into a small bowl and beat a little with a fork to break down the membrane (otherwise it can dribble off your flower in globs). Hold your chosen flower by a short length of stalk, and paint it back and front with the egg white using a soft paintbrush (preferably reserved for edible uses – I use a 1 cm flat sable brush). If you try just dipping the flower in egg white, it also doesn't seem to cover very thoroughly as flowers have a natural waterproofing, non-stick quality, like ducks!

Next, dust the front of the painted flower with caster sugar through a small fine sieve. Shake off surplus sugar. Repeat on back. Sprinkling over with a teaspoon also works quite well - but using your fingers seems to cause the sugar to stick in uneven crumbs.

Once evenly coated with caster sugar, leave the flower face down on a piece of non-stick silicone baking parchment to dry. In an airy, warmish place your flowers should be ready in one to three days. You can pinch off the stalks straight away or next day.

With primroses I tend to remove the green calyx with a half-pinch that allows it to be pulled away from the underneath conical centre of the petals without actually breaking it off - I usually do this after painting and coating with caster sugar - or next day. Arrange your crystallized flowers on top of your cake before the icing sets. As the surface of the icing or ganache dries the flowers will be held in place.

**CHOCOLATE LEAVES!**

The best leaves to cast in chocolate are fairly strong (not floppy) ones with a waxy surface and which you know to be edible – not that you are going to eat the actual leaf, but that it may taint the chocolate, so you need to avoid anything that is actually poisonous. Bay leaves are ideal, but I have also used softer leaves such as lime leaves, and rose leaves, which require more careful handling.

Pick your leaves, rinse or wipe them clean and then dry them/leave them to dry.

Melt a minimum of about 50g (2 oz) of chopped dark chocolate in a bowl which has been suspended over some simmering water. The water should not touch the bottom of the bowl. Once the water is simmering, turn it off, so the chocolate melts at the lowest heat necessary – so as to preserve its sheen or ‘tempering’. Don’t stir it until you see that it is melting well, and then keep your stirring to a minimum as chocolate has the annoying capacity to thicken if disturbed too much at this stage, or if cold water is added causing a sudden change of temperature. (Milk and white chocolate are



The Unleashing of Transition Bro Ddyfi featured not one but nine cakes, arranged as a Transition Timeline of cakes, with an accompanying story!

more difficult to melt evenly and for this reason they are not recommended for making chocolate leaves).

When the chocolate is evenly melted and saucy, take a spoon and spread a layer of chocolate over the underside of the leaves. This should be 2-3 mm thick (1/8<sup>th</sup>). Don't worry about a few lumps or bumps, but try and spread the chocolate right up to the edge of the leaf – but not over it. No need to cover the stalk. Lay the leaves green side down on some non-stick baking parchment on a tray or plate. When you've coated all your leaves, leave them to cool – this can be speeded up by putting them in the fridge if you are in a hurry.

When the chocolate has set thoroughly, the leaf can be very carefully peeled off: don't worry if your first leaf breaks, you will soon get the knack of separating green from brown. If, as you are peeling away the green leaf, you notice the chocolate to be extremely thin in one spot, stop separating the two and instead gently press them together again and apply a few extra blobs of chocolate to the thin area and leave to set. Once the chocolate leaves are ready, and free from any condensation that may have come from the fridge, you can varnish them with edible shellac. This gives a nice shine to chocolate leaves, that will contrast lusciously with whipped cream or a lighter brown ganache. They are also beautiful unvarnished. Store in a box - in a cool place.

### **TOASTED FLAKED ALMONDS!**

Spread bought flaked almonds out in one layer in a shallow tin and either toast them under a grill or in a hot oven. The grilled version will burn more quickly, but both methods require extreme vigilance and turning with a wooden spatula to ensure even browning – the nut flakes only need to be tinged with brown, not brown all over. The same method can be used to roast whole blanched almonds for decoration, but this will take a little longer – 5-10 minutes at 200.c.

### **CHOCOLATE CURLS!**

White, dark or milk chocolate bars which have been sitting at room temperature for a while – or in a slightly warm place (obviously not too warm or it will melt) can be the source of chocolate flakes and curls such as adorn cream cakes in the windows of the most luxurious looking patisseries. Use a potato peeler to peel off curls of chocolate from the side and back of the bar: a cold bar delivers short flakes, whereas a slightly warm or rubbery bar will allow you to carve off well rounded springs and curls of chocolate. Gather these up on a piece of paper, or carve them straight on to your cake.

### **STENCILS!**

Draw round your cake tin and cut out a piece of greaseproof paper or light cardboard that is a couple of centimeters larger than your cake. Cut simple, interesting shapes out of this to create a stencil. If the icing is sticky (e.g. cream), ask someone to hold the stencil over the cake whilst you dust icing sugar or cocoa over and through the stencil. If the icing is dry, you can simply lay the stencil directly on top of the finished cake, then dust. When you remove the stencil, a speckled impression of the shapes will remain. You can also place a natural object, such as leaf, on a cake and sprinkle over it – when removed the leaf shape

will be strikingly preserved by the dusting of icing sugar around it. Stencilled decorations are best done at the last moment. Take care to remove the stencil in an upright motion to avoid smudging.

## WRITING!

You can buy ready mixed plastic tubes of colourful icing in most supermarkets or cake decorating specialist stores. These are specially designed for writing, but if you want to minimize plastic waste you may prefer to mix your own icing using sifted icing sugar with a little lemon and egg white. Natural bottled food dyes can be used to colour the icing or go for simple contrast. Use an icing bag with the appropriate size nozzle, or make your own little cone out of grease-proof paper for piping a few lines. Melted chocolate can also be used for piping, as can butter icing (below)– but remember that if you are using a fine nozzle any lemon or orange rind will clog it up, so it is better to leave this out. You can also cut or roll letters using marzipan.



Transition Town Brixton's Unleashing cake, which featured the name of every Transition initiative that existed at that point written in food colouring...

## SPARKLERS!

Cake sparklers are now almost as readily available as birthday candles – but remember that they have to be lit while being held horizontally – so you can only put them on to the cake once they are alight.

When it comes to lighting candles and sparklers on a celebration cake, it is always good to have a few people around and several matches on the go. It can take longer than you think to get a cake ready at the last moment – and if you have a hundred candles to light, start at the inside and work outwards so you don't burn yourself.

## *Victoria Sandwich Cake*

This is a classic English cake named after Queen Victoria is very simple to make - and a great favourite with all ages. It is often called a 'sponge' cake because it looks spongy and yellow, but technically speaking it isn't a *real* sponge cake because it contains butter, and has baking powder not whipped egg white as the raising agent. Typically our grandmothers will have taught us to make this cake using *the weight of two or three eggs in butter and sugar and flour*. Since an average egg weighs about 2 oz (55g), the recipe given below is very similar – I have just upped the flour slightly to make it a little less sweet, though it is still pretty sweet. I often use muscovado sugar to give a mellower sweetness, though granulated or caster is more likely what our grandmothers would have gone for, producing a fairer cake.

Victoria Sandwich is a very versatile basic recipe to play with - you can convert a plain cake into a chocolate one, simply by substituting a little of the flour with cocoa powder. Or enhance it with the tang of citrus by adding a little grated lemon or orange zest. Two icings are given below – which can be ‘mixed and matched’ since the chocolate ganache is also very nice with a plain Victoria sandwich filled with raspberry jam, and far less sweet than the lemon butter icing – you could also top the whole cake with whipped cream, or simply dust it with a little icing sugar in the traditional way.

*For 1x18cm (7") sandwich cake  
(use 2-3 tins with at least 2cm/ ¾" depth)*

160g (6 oz) butter  
160g (6 oz) sugar  
3 eggs  
200g (7 ½ oz) plain or self-raising white flour  
(+ 1 level tbsp baking powder if plain flour)  
A pinch of salt  
50ml (3-4 tbsp) milk approx  
¼ tsp vanilla essence (optional)

*For a larger ‘roasting tin’ size cake  
(e.g.2-3, 25cm x 35cm/10"x14" tins)*

500g (1 lb 2 oz)  
500g (1 lb 2 oz)  
9 eggs  
600g (1 ½ lb)  
(+3 tbsp)  
½ tsp  
150-200 ml approx  
1 tsp (optional)

For Chocolate cake, substitute 25g/1 oz.(small) or 100g/4 oz (large) of the flour with cocoa powder and use only 175g/6 ½ oz (small) or 500g/ 1 lb 4 oz (large) of flour.

### ***Fillings:***

\*100g (4 oz) raspberry or strawberry jam

250-300g (approx 1 jar)

OR

*\*Chocolate butter-cream (for chocolate cake)*

85g (3 oz) butter  
85g (3 oz) icing sugar  
1 tbsp golden syrup or honey  
2 tbsp cocoa powder

250g (9 oz)  
250g (9 oz)  
3 tbsp  
6 tbsp (100ml)

### ***Icings:***

*\*Lemon Butter Icing:*

50g (2 oz) butter  
225g (8 oz) icing sugar  
1 tsp lemon zest  
2 tbsp lemon juice

150g (6 oz)  
675g (1 ½ lb)  
1 tbsp approx  
6 tbsp (80-90 ml)

OR

*\*Chocolate Ganache:*

100g (4 oz) dark chocolate

100 ml (4 fl oz) whipping cream

350g (12 oz)

350 ml (12 fl oz)

Method

1. A few hours before you start baking, or indeed the night before, take your butter out of the fridge and leave on a plate in a warm place to soften a few hours.
2. Prepare your cake tins, greasing with butter or sunflower oil and lining the base of the tins with siliconized baking parchment. If using old-fashioned greaseproof paper, butter/oil the top of this.
3. Measure the flour and set aside in a bowl with the baking powder and salt. Also add the cocoa powder to this if you are making a chocolate cake.
4. Measure the butter and sugar into a mixing bowl. Break up the lump of butter with your wooden spoon and then mix it with the sugar until you have a soft creamy, dropping consistency. The more you mix the lighter and creamier the blend will become. (If you have not taken your butter out in advance, or if the weather is cold, you may want to warm the butter and sugar in a low oven for a few minutes until it starts to melt slightly.) The creamed mixture is ready once it becomes a few shades paler than when you started blending it.
5. Turn the oven on to pre-heat and make sure your oven trays are placed fairly centrally, ready to receive the cake. You will need a moderate oven - 180.c (gas mark 5/ 350.f).
6. Beat in the eggs one at a time (or two by two if you are making the large ).
7. If you want to add any flavourings such as vanilla essence, or lemon or orange zest stir these in now.
8. Sift half the flour into the bowl and fold it in. Add the milk, then sift in the rest of the flour and fold again (sift in the cocoa powder with the flour if using – it is even more important to sieve cocoa than flour since it tends to arrive lumpier). You should now have a deliciously soft, dropping cake batter, one that is not too runny or too stiff: it will drop as opposed to dribble from you spoon when you give it a little shake, a bit like whipped cream. Add a little more milk if you think it necessary.
9. Pour the cake mixture into the cake tins and spread it out a little – doesn't have to be too perfectly spread as it will find its own level as it first melts and then rises up and sets. Put the cake tins into the oven – ideally there should be a good area of hot air all around the cakes, with nothing else cooking immediately above them. Close the oven door and time twenty minutes before you take a peak.

10. When ready the cakes should have risen well and be a light golden brown in the middle with a narrow ring of caramel brown around the edge. The cake should be coming away from the edge of the tin, revealing a gap of a couple of millimeters between cake and tin. With a hand placed gently on top you should be able to feel if the cake is set or still a bit wobbly underneath – test with a small knife or skewer if you're not sure. Push it into the middle of the cake until it hits the base and then pull it out to inspect. If ready the skewer/knife should be moist and clean with no cake mixture sticking to it. Leave the cakes to cool in their tins for five minutes before turning out and leaving to air fully on wire trays. I usually tip the round cakes first onto plates and then immediately invert them back on to airing trays, so they cool flat side down. With larger rectangular cakes you may need to cool them for longer in the tins and then tip them first onto trays or chopping boards and then back on to wire racks.
11. **Filling.** If making chocolate butter cream, measure the butter, golden syrup (or honey) and sugar together in a mixing bowl, remembering to sift both the icing sugar and cocoa powder. Once again the butter will be easiest to handle soft. Cream together until smooth. Put your thoroughly cooled cake on a plate/serving board, top down. Spread the butter cream on the flat side (what was the base of the cake when in the tin). Go to within a few millimeters of the edge – the weight of the top cake will push the filling out a bit further. Place the second cake on top, so the two flat bases face each other. If using jam it can be added when the cake is still slightly warm, or completely cool, using the same technique. (If you want to be really indulgent, then a layer of fresh whipped cream can be put on top of the jam - the cake will then need to be kept refrigerated until served). Sometimes if a cake has risen in a fairly mountainous way, you will have to carve off the central hump to get the cake to sit straight or stick flush together, e.g. when you are making a three-layered cake.

## 12. Icings

**\* For the lemon butter icing:** break up the butter in a bowl and melt very slightly in the oven, then mix until have a warm creamy consistency. Stir the zest into this and then add the sifted icing sugar bit by bit along with the lemon juice. It will take quite a bit of mixing to incorporate all the icing sugar, but the addition of lemon juice as well as warming the butter helps with this (if you over warm it by accident just allow it to re-set in a cool place for ten minutes or so). Once the icing is creamy and evenly mixed, spread it over the cake with a spatula – this recipe gives enough to cover the sides of the cake too. Add decorations such as lightly toasted flaked almonds (produced after a minute under a grill or a few minutes in a hot oven, spread out in a tin and turned regularly in both cases) or crystallized flowers before the icing begins to harden. If you want to glue down some of your design later, keep the surplus butter icing in the fridge until you need it then warm it slightly, re-mix and use it to stick down marzipan figures, chocolate leaves, crystallized flowers etc.

**\*For the chocolate ganache:**

Break the chocolate up into a bowl that fits snugly into the mouth of a saucepan without the base of the bowl touching the base of the pan. Fill the saucepan with a couple of

centimeters of water. Heat very gently until the chocolate has melted – resist stirring too often as this can bring out the temperamental side of chocolate and make it stiffen.

Meanwhile whip up the cream until gentle peaks form – move your whisk around so you are not whisking in only one spot! If there is any sign of the cream becoming granular or blobby stop whisking, you want it smooth, dune-like and able to hold an impression, but you don't want it to turn to butter!

Pour the melted chocolate onto the whipped cream and whisk or mix the two together, until no specks of white are left. You should now have a delicious milk-chocolate coloured thick cream (ganache) that you can spread over your cake – this recipe will give enough to cover the sides as well, with (probably) none leftover!

Add any flaked almonds or chocolate decorations you want to stick down quickly before the ganache sets, or glue them down later using a little extra melted plain chocolate. You can also swirl in a design in with a fork at this stage.

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