

Let Them Eat Cake

Ready-to-serve cakes offer favorite tastes and new choices

By Barbara Wujcik

The large rounds from **Rowena's** (800/627-8699 or rowenas.com) make any occasion special. They come in a variety of flavors, including almond and lemon. Suggested retail: \$27.95 each.



Tortuga Rum Cake Company (877/486-7884 or tortugarumcakes.com) lets you share a taste of the Caribbean. Flavors include banana, chocolate, coconut and classic. Call for pricing.

Cake, in its varied forms and flavors, has always been special. After dinner, it's the last act of a great play. It affords the host or hostess a final opportunity to elicit a 'wow' response as it is presented and enjoyed. Cakes and other baked goods have traditionally been part of celebrations and good times. They're the star at birthdays, weddings, graduations and other festive events. They can, however, just be a pleasant surprise on an ordinary day. Many of your customers feel nostalgic when they remember their mothers saying, "There's cake for dessert."

Even Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* was excited when she realized there would be good bakery cake at a family christening.

While people want to give loved ones these fondly remembered tastes, they don't have a baker hidden in the kitchen. Nor do they have the time or know-how to put together memorable cakes.

Fortunately, there are ready-to-serve cakes and other baked goods that you can offer your customers. These treats provide the great tastes they remember. In addition, they present new concepts and flavors to help them redefine palate preferences.

From the Local Bakery

"Just Desserts has been in business since 1974 and we bake everything from scratch using all-natural ingredients," says Matthew Tesoriero,

director of marketing. "It's like homemade. We use real cane sugar and unbleached flour."

The company has 16 core cakes. He says the consistently popular flavors are classic, such as chocolate, carrot and lemon.

"Flavor trends may come and go, but I think there is always room for the classics. There is something to be said for flavors you can rely on," he continues. Tesoriero says classic chocolate is the company's top flavor and the cakes sell well because they're comfort food.

As far as trends, people are busy. He says they want something to grab and go. One trend he sees is people looking for smaller portions. They still want the same flavors,

but not so much of them.

Tesoriero says the company has responded by introducing cupcakes, mini bundt cakes, mini-lava cakes and most recently mini-cheesecakes. They also have a bit line, including brownie bites, that are very successful, as well as whoopie pies.

"In fact, our Chocolate Peanut Butter Whoopie Pie was named one of the Top 10 tastes by the *Mercury News* during the January Fancy Food show here in San Francisco."

"We are a premium brand," he says. "We decorate and finish everything by hand. Our roots are in a local corner bakery and we continue to think like that. It's fun, that we are able to keep some of that as



These Pixie Hats are the third in a series of Mad Hatter petit four assortments by **Divine Delights** (800/443-2836 or divinedelights.com). Decorated by hand, they're made with all-butter shortbread cookies, moist cake layers, truffle and butter cream fillings. They're available in Irish Crème, Chocolate Mint, Banana Crème and Minted Truffle. Suggested retail: \$3.75 per hat.

we grow."

Just Desserts' latest introductions include a toasted coconut crème cream and black velvet cake, a triple layer 6-inch cake finished with dark chocolate ganache.

"We are always looking for new products to introduce," Tesoriero says. "There is always room for cake for birthday celebrations, treating ourselves and comfort food. A lot of people bought our products in the 1970s and 1980s and they are still our customers."

A Touch of History

Sunrise Bakery and Sunrise Gourmet, located in Hibbing, MN, is more than 100 years old. Virginia Forti, the founder's granddaughter and current owner, says her company is best known for potica. The community was settled by miners who brought their Eastern European recipes with them. Potica is a baked good with Slavic roots made of a sweet dough rolled paper thin, then filled and rolled up. It has many layers.

A local favorite, potica emerged on the national stage through a happy set of circumstances. It was 1960 and John F. Kennedy was in Minnesota during his campaign for President. As they had in other places, the Kennedy women were organizing coffee gatherings where people could meet the candidate.



A slice of the many-layered potica from **Sunrise Gourmet** (800/782-6736 or sunrise-gourmet.com) would be a welcomed treat with coffee or any time of day. Suggested retail: \$12.99.

At one of the events, a hostess served potica and Eunice Shriver, Kennedy's sister, so enjoyed it that she declared if her brother got elected, she would have it served in the White House. He was elected and she served it. Forti says a food critic from a Los Angeles paper was at one of those events and wrote about it, including contact information for the bakery. The orders started to come in.

"Once I saw that, I told my dad, who then owned the shop, that we should make potica on a regular basis," Forti says. "The flavors have expanded from the original walnut to include pecan, poppyseed, walnut apple and cream cheese. We go through several tons of walnuts and ship all over the country."

Making a Day Special

John McCormick, Rowena's president, is new to the cake and baked goods business, but he knows what he likes. He bought the business in January 2011 and was already familiar with the company's products. McCormick was in the market for a small business in the Norfolk, Virginia area and met the company's previous owner through a mutual acquaintance.

"I looked at the business, employees, customers, brand and products," he says. "I saw a great opportunity. The company had survived some tough times. It's a premium product, and I think the economy is now in our favor. The cakes and products themselves are a treasure in our area. People have fond memories and warm feelings associated with our pound cakes. The products are outstanding and there is room to expand. I see a lot of potential."

McCormick says that he sees three current food trends: wellness foods, international foods and comfort foods, which is the category Rowena falls into.

"Our cakes have been special occasion purchases," he says. "I want to turn it into something that makes a regular occasion special, not a run-of-the-mill event. We offer products that will enhance the occasion, food treats, a perfect dessert."

Rowena has plans to make a good product better. They have been taking a look at everything the company makes and are tweaking some recipes to make them taste better. For instance, they are switching from margarine back to butter.

"Our cakes have a decent shelf life and freeze well," McCormick says. "However, I want people to buy the cake and eat it rather than store it away. We want to make our cakes closer to the time the retailer gets them. My goal would be to have our bakery very responsive to trends, new orders. I would like us to be more daring. We want to introduce fun, exciting and delicious products. First and foremost, Rowena's cakes need to be good."

McCormick says if something is good and has value people will buy it. Everything the company does is to support the wholesale customers.

"We want to honor and respect people who have our products," he says. "We think selling our product at the independent specialty foods retail level adds value to our product. For the customer, it says more about the person as an entertainer and what he or she thinks of the people who they are serving the cake to."

McCormick says he plans to look into what grandmothers used to make. "We have an excellent lemon curd that sells well," he says. "We want to see what else we can make that people remember but can't find or buy. We are working on things for the July show and look forward to introducing new products."

Taste of Tradition

Sometimes baked goods evoke memories of family traditions and celebrations. Some companies give people the opportunity to pick up and try these goods without all the preparation. One of those traditional baked goods is rugulach, a delicate finger pastry Chewys (858/271-1234 or chewys.com) makes with a light, flaky, cream-cheese dough. This dough is wrapped around delicious fruit and nut. "Chewys makes rugulach

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Three layers of dark chocolate cake, two layers of bittersweet chocolate ganache and a smooth glaze create this six-inch Black Velvet cake from **Just Desserts** (510/567-2900 or just-desserts.com). Suggested retail: \$12.99-\$14.99.



Rich chocolate cake is made richer with the full-bodied tastes of coffee and chocolate liqueur in the Chocolate Espresso Cordial Cake from **Yahoo Baking Company** (800/575-9373 or yahoobakingco.com). Suggested retail: \$5.95.



This three-inch white chocolate raspberry cheesecake from **Pamela's Products Inc.** (707/462-6605 or pamelasproducts.com) is made with real raspberries and is gluten-free. It has a dark chocolate cookie crust. Suggested retail: \$4.99.

in 22 flavors and we are always looking for new flavors," says Dave Harris, company sales manager.

At the Fancy Food Winter Show, the company introduced Marionberry Rugulach. It also introduced some new packaging, including two-piece packs. In addition, Chewys is offering a new four-piece size for another traditional baked good, Hamenstaschen cookies. The cookies are shortbread triangles with cherry, strawberry, raspberry and apricot fillings. Harris says they are one of the company's best kept secrets.

"We give retailers the opportunity to sell both cookies and pastries," he says. "The smaller sizes give us the opportunity to get into the often neglected gift basket business. There are companies out

there selling baskets year round. It's a new opportunity to put product out there and we hope its innovative. It gives retailers the opportunity to sell more; for consumers to find and try products. I think people are looking for new flavor profiles, such as Marionberry. Rugulach has been around forever, but there are still a lot of people who don't know what it is. It can be enjoyed with coffee and tea any time of day or dressed up for evening. One of the latest ways we suggest using it is for a dinner party dessert. Take several different flavors, such as an assortment of fruit flavors, crumble them up over ice cream. If you want, drizzle a chocolate sauce over it."

Take A Vacation

For the customers that can't escape to the Caribbean, Tortuga Rum Cake Company lets them bring a taste of the islands home to share with family and friends. Monique Hamaty-Simmonds, the company owner, says she has noticed an interest in international food and sees international products in all types of stores.

"Our cakes are made outside the U.S. and use Tortuga, an authentic Caribbean rum," she says. "I think people are open to exploring new tastes; it is noticeable. This past Christmas I saw rum cakes being baked in local bakeries. Rum cakes are now a category and the category is growing. People who experience these cakes are looking for more. We have been on the back shelf and are moving to the front."

The original vanilla-based with walnuts is still the best seller. The chocolate is also very popular. Those are followed by the tropical flavors — coconut, key lime and banana, which all do well. Hamaty-Simmonds says people are trying the tropical flavors — coconut is the third most popular. Coconut actually enhances the flavor of the rum and is becoming more and more well-liked.

"I think the fact that it is a Caribbean product leads people to try more flavors," she says. "It brings up a vacation mentality."

She adds that when a retailer is displaying cakes, sampling is crucial. "It's the best way to show the value, moisture and texture. Tasting is key. Our goal is to spread our wings and be in every gourmet store."

An Artistic Flair

Sometimes customers want something they wouldn't or couldn't

make at home. Angelique Fry, owner of Divine Delights, says her company is one of the largest producers of artisan petit fours.

"We are a little more expensive, but we offer a higher level of quality, detail and product selection," she says. "Our petit fours are labor intensive. We are copied, but they tend to dumb it down."

Fry notes that there's a trend of people looking for frilly or girly desserts. "I see more flowers, happy ornate things," she says. "We had a plain trend, just a dusting of cocoa on top, that I think is over. At the recent Fancy Food show I noticed more color in chocolate, more artisan, more ornate. I see modern, cleaner design, but more detail."

Another trend is smaller sizes. "People want a variety," Fry says. "They want many tastes. There are more pastry chef-type desserts, more pampering, more luxury. People don't want a lot of calories, but they want something. They have become more sophisticated. They want more fun. As an added benefit to retailers, you can charge more because these are the types of things that people wouldn't do at home."

She says popular flavors are Irish cream, chocolate mint, banana cream and chocolate — there's always room for chocolate. They stick with the more mainstream flavors: coconut, pineapple, banana, banana cream and lemon. She says they also layer with fruit puree. People expect that in the summer; along with coconut, which is very popular, and lime.

Fry says that as far as display and merchandising go, "you need to display these with chocolate in the pastry case. We also have some

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cheese retailers who carry them as a perfect pair. It makes a nice display. It is the perfect takeaway for dessert. Petit fours are great with coffee and tea and for birthdays. They can also be stacked up to create a birthday cake."

Cordially Yours

The Yahoo Baking Company has been in business since 1944. The company makes a series of gift cakes, fruit cakes and cordial cakes.

"Our cakes are uniquely packaged," says Geoff Crowley, company owner and general manager. "For example, we have one package shaped like a can of beans. The cake is vacuum-sealed, placed in the can and comes out like a cake roll. We also have a demi-loaf that is very popular for gift baskets."

He says Yahoo uses high-quality ingredients, fresh cream cheese and buttermilk in their unique recipes.

Recent introductions have included new packaging for the smaller cordial cakes, which are packaged as a sampler set. The four mini-cakes are each in their own box and then are banded together. The company also has a 30-ounce cake in a gift tin.

The top flavor for the cordial cakes is Caribbean rum, followed by chocolate chip amaretto, chocolate espresso and bourbon pecan.

"The sampler set is a good seller," Crowley says. "The smaller sizes go nicely with coffee and tea and can be displayed in the store with them. Or the cakes can be displayed with similar products."

Cake for Everyone

Although many welcome a chance to eat cake, some abstain for health reasons. Over recent years, that concern has been addressed with enjoyable results.

"Our niche is as the best tasting gluten-free food provider," says Stephanie Robbins, director of marketing at Pamela's Products. "Our products appeal to those with and without special dietary needs. Everything we make is gluten-free for those who need it, with the desire that our products always taste as good or better than the wheat counterparts."

Robbins notes that what the customer wants is changing. "Just as we see greater convenience put into grocery and frozen foods, people are

gravitating toward smaller cakes."

She adds that "of course, the cupcake craze is still going strong and that's probably fueling much of this, but what it means is convenience and personalization. It's very easy to pack it in a lunch, or to serve a few different flavors for a shared dessert experience or at a party. Personalization allows for special flavors served to a specific individual or adding frosting or a special touch such as a ganache, fresh fruit or sprinkles to make each cake served personal."

Robbins says these trends manifest themselves in Pamela's three-inch mini cakes. "While our New York Cheesecake is our most popular, of course it's a classic, the Agave Sweetened New York style cake is also quite popular," she says. "We hear from people who bring our cakes with them when they believe they will not otherwise be able to enjoy a dessert. Of course, we cannot discount the trend in natural foods, that being that people are much more savvy about eating higher quality food today."

She adds that "most people want to enjoy a delicious, decadent dessert, but they don't want to compromise on the ingredients. Choosing products such as Pamela's that have organic ingredients, all natural fats and no fillers, is important. Consumers don't want their good health to be compromised by their food, especially their special treats."

She says it is important for retailers to understand the product and the consumer. These are decadent items that people are "treating" themselves too. Allow for the entire purchase to be "special" so that the consumer can feel the specialness from selection and purchase to serving and enjoying. "Pamela's offers retailers a great opportunity to showcase top of the line products for all of their customers, and still fit the needs of their specialty customers," Robbins says.

Customers want to enjoy cakes and other baked goods to celebrate with family and friends or remember happy times in their youth. Companies have responded with smaller sizes and specialty products. Some have opened new worlds to buyers by offering new flavors and concepts. An assortment of these products will draw customers ☺

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