

A Jump Into a European Fantasy

Julie Deffense Artistry

BY KARLO STA. CRUZ




Photo credit: Teresa Aires

A wedding cake created by Julie Deffense is a visually, aesthetic marvel, standing as the confectionary statue of celebration for any special day. Take a clear look at one of Deffense's show stopping creations adorned with two-thousand hand-crafted sugar flowers. No other brilliant and dedicated master baker would spend nine days meticulously matching a bride's dress embroidery with micro sugar beads. Maybe reference her vast, global perspective, drawing inspiration from the warm coasts of Cascais, Portugal on the outskirts of Lisbon.

Julie Deffense champions a serious mastery of elegant cake design down to a nuanced science, capturing an abstract feeling in dessert form. Stationed in Cascais in the summer and Sarasota, Florida in the winter, Julie Deffense Artistry, her eponymous, one-woman, luxury cake business of eleven years, offers a sumptuous, personalized approach to the confectionary sculpture for any wedding day or special occasion. Deffense's cake creations reflect her where she combines love in the details, a light-hearted celebration for life, and the audacious perseverance to chase your dreams, even if it means moving across the Atlantic to Europe.





“It’s more than just a piece of cake. There’s an artistic spin you can put on almost anything. You can’t be creative without a few risks, a lot of beauty, romance, and love for what you do,” said Deffense.

The mastermind behind the enchanting cakes began her romantic story with a move to Portugal back in 1998 for a three-month paid graphic design internship. Hoping to follow up her time studying architecture abroad in Florence, Deffense turned to Europe for creative inspiration while working in editorial design. One month in, she soon chose a long-term life abroad after the American expat fell in love with both her husband Jacques Deffense and the historic setting of castles, monuments, and old-world charm.

After running a commercial real estate magazine, working up to artistic director, and even launching her own interior design publication, Deffense knew her calling was in baking after a series of signs. Sandy Folsom of Wilton School of Cake Decorating and Confectionary Art based outside Chicago set up a masterclass in Portugal for two years, and Deffense did not hesitate to jump at this creative calling.

Location credit: Queluz National Palace, Queluz, Portugal



“I knew it was calling after taking Folsom’s masterclass, coming home with a three-tier dressed wedding cake with tears streaming down my face, but my husband reminded me of my full-time business in editorial,” said Deffense. She soon began garnering more business from her cake business ad than from advertisers, “This was the sign.”

In a country of medieval castles, wondrous coastal cities, and the second most attractive European wedding destination, Deffense had no shortage of cake artistry inspiration at home in Portugal. The Tivoli Palácio de Seteais, a historical, 18th-century countryside palace turned hotel, inquired for an anniversary cake. Coincidentally, Deffense had imagined her own wedding under the chandelier of the enchanted palace, however, she now directed her creative passion into the five-tier, celebratory cake. The Seteais cake mirrored the castle-like architecture, incorporating its signature, statement arch. Deffense added the classical piano and elegant chandelier to the masterpiece for extra detail.

Julie Deffense Artistry encompasses an intricate, elegant wedding cake design, incorporating personalized touches, hand-made decorations, and an affinity for standing out. Deffense begins her creative process by meeting the couple, mostly by Zoom or FaceTime these days, to develop an artistic essence she captures in the final design. Referencing personal elements like the design of the bride’s dress, the exact wedding destination, setting, and date, and even the story of how the couple met, Deffense personalizes the cake’s preliminary design, integrating the sentimental with an upscale, sumptuous memento for a prized occasion. Deffense possesses a comprehensive approach to her cake and the overall wedding, blending her design with other creative elements for the production.

Photo credit: Assunção Branco

“If they’ve already chosen the flowers, I have to see them. If they’ve picked the tablecloths, I have to see them. And if they’re working with a wedding planner, I would like to meet them. Our styles have to blend together,” said Julie Deffense, explaining her detailed, nuanced process from idea to confection.

From there, once settling a deal with clients, the mad cake genius plans her itinerary, only accepting one cake per week or three cakes per month to dedicate proper attention to detail. Creating hundreds of sugar flowers normally requires two months plus, so Deffense devotes her off-time on prepping them and additional décor. Once it’s game time, Deffense knows exactly what needs to be done.

Let’s say the wedding is Saturday. On Monday, Deffense paints and finalizes the sugar flowers and begins decorating cake parts that are not real. Thursday is baking. Friday is assembling. Saturday is delivery. “And Sunday is a day off, usually,” said Deffense.

Deffense signs every cake with a hidden golden dragonfly to pay tribute to her grandmother, who inspired her, along with her mother, with her baking. Inspired by the motif of a kaleidoscope of butterflies, Deffense’s latest creation pays homage to the graceful garden creature. Hundreds of hand-made royal icing Monarch butterflies painted with a lustrous, golden edible oil paint danced in circles around one of her latest five-tiered creations, which appeared on Portuguese television in late March. Deffense created wafer paper butterflies and attached them to thin floral wires over the sugar flowers to create the illusion of the fluttering friend.

“The wedding cake is so symbolic. The cake cutting is the first real job a married couple does,” said Julie Deffense.



Current cake trends champion a “bigger is better” style, as many couples who have postponed their dates and downsized their receptions are enticed to invest in detail, luxury, and grandeur. Deffense worked with a client that requested a 32-tier, ten-foot creation, her biggest undertaking in her one-woman show. Intricate detailing like sugar bead embroidery and hand-painted designs that mimic the proverbial fairytale wedding are popular among clients.

The COVID-19 global pandemic flatlined substantial business for Deffense as wedding celebrations postponed. But Deffense’s resilience and independent business model kept her passions afloat. Keen to the times, the cake artist and five-time cookbook author switched gears to consolidate her brand’s social media presence on Instagram. To show a depth of artistry in a much-needed healthy style for the quarantine couch potatoes, Deffense released her fifth book,

The Art of Salad, the first translated in English from Portuguese. The beautifully curated publication swaps gears from sweets to salad, incorporating fresh, feel-good ingredients while offering a healthier medium for artistic creativity in the kitchen.

No matter what life brings, Julie Deffense demonstrates a seasoned skillset of design, creativity, and ambition. Next, Deffense hopes to enter the television realm to share her extensive knowledge with the audience that helped support her brand. But the master cake baker intends to leave out the “scandals, melodrama, and toppling over, unsupported cakes,” instead she aims to share the uncertainty, but the beauty of jumping into the unknown.

“As hard as it may be to follow a different path, if it feels like the right thing to do, you have to go on and try it. I would not trade it in for anything,” said Deffense.



Photo credit: Assunção Branco

Cake Design Trends: Extravagance

Sugar Bead Embroidery

Sugar beads can imitate the embroidery and other designs of the bride's dress.

Sugar Flowers

Handmade sugar flowers add an artistic touch to any finished cake.

Intricate Patterns: Azulejo Tiles

The Azulejo Tiles, a Portuguese symbol and tradition, are a prime example of popular hand-painted patterns.

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Photo credit: Jacques Deffense



Location Credit: Queluz National Palace, Queluz, Portugal



Photo credit: Matilde Berk

Raspberry Champagne Cake

Julie Deffense shares her classic, light Raspberry Champagne Cake recipe, a popular cake that makes up nearly 90-percent of requests. Pair the fluffy cake with the White Chocolate Swiss Meringue Buttercream for a decadent, finesse finish. A technical challenge for any seasoned baker, the final product will impress your guests at any special occasion.

INGREDIENTS:

2 cups sugar
4 eggs, room temperature
2 ¼ cups all purpose flour
2 ¼ tsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
1 cup vegetable oil
1 cup dry champagne (or sparkling wine), room temperature
2 tsp raspberry extract
2 Tbsp seedless raspberry jam
Pink gel food coloring

DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven to 350F. Butter and flour two 8" round cake pans.
2. In a mixing bowl, mix together the flour, baking powder and salt. Set aside.
3. In another bowl, combine the oil, champagne and extracts.
4. In the bowl of an electric mixer, beat the sugar and eggs on medium speed until combined. Slowly add the dry ingredients in three batches, alternating with the wet ingredients, making sure to start and finish with the dry ingredients, then mix for about 2 minutes (do not over beat). Add the jam and a bit of gel food color, then mix on medium again just until combined.
5. Divide the batter between the two pans, then bake for 30-35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean. Remove from the oven and let cool on a rack for at least 20 minutes before flipping out of the pan to cool completely.
6. Once cooled, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 2 hours before filling and frosting.

WHITE CHOCOLATE SWISS MERINGUE BUTTERCREAM

INGREDIENTS:

6 egg whites
1 ½ cups sugar
1 lb unsalted butter, room temperature
1 Tbsp vanilla extract
½ bag white chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS:

1. Whisk the sugar into the egg whites, then set the bowl over a saucepan filled with just a few inches of simmering water over medium heat. Do not let the bottom of the egg whites bowl touch the water. Whisk the whites and sugar constantly until sugar is dissolved and mixture has thinned out, about 4 minutes. Continue to whisk until the temperature on a candy thermometer reads 140F.
2. Remove from the water bath and quickly place on your mixer. Using the whisk attachment on medium-high, beat the mixture until stiff, shiny white peaks form, about 7-10 minutes.
3. While the egg white mixture is being whipped, put your white chocolate chips in a glass bowl and microwave in 30 second increments until melted. Set aside to cool slightly.
4. Lower the speed to the lowest setting and add in the room temperature butter, 1 Tbsp at a time, letting each piece mix in fully before adding the next. When all the butter has been added, continue to mix on low speed until the consistency changes to smooth and creamy. During the transition it will look curdled but just let it keep mixing. Do not turn up the speed on the mixture or panic, this is normal.
5. Once smooth, add the vanilla and mix until combined. Add in the cooled chocolate and mix in completely.

Photo credit: Chris Joriann