



## Taking the Cake

**It's a basserpiece! Crafting a lifelike leaping lunger, Natalie Madison demonstrates her artistry with cakes**

CHEREE FRANCO /ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Sometimes people ask Natalie Madison if she is a taxidermist.

Once she did a photo shoot with an English bulldog in his home. Afterward, she ran her hands over his stocky body, gauging heft and shape. Another time, she declined an invitation to meet an award-winning, duck-hunting Labrador retriever. The owner wanted to bring the dog to her workspace. She said, "No, no, no, really, no."

Actually, Madison is something akin to a sculptor. According to her Facebook page, she offers "artistic services." Some of her tools are conventional, such as chisels and blades. Some are industrial, such as saws, drills and a blowtorch. But most are edible, like royal icing, crisped rice and gum paste. That's because, in January or April, depending on whether you count from when she hung a sign or when she quit designing clothes for Dillard's, she opened Natalie Madison's Artisan Cakes.

Madison specializes in aquatic life. She once carved a turtle and a mallard out of Rice Krispies treats and a crappie and a lobster out of cake and buttercream. Soon she will specialize in canines. The duck hunter is slated to star in a groom cake and the bulldog, to be rendered life-size and consumable.

Madison also does gore. There's been a re-creation of the original Jaws poster and a Steel Magnolias-inspired bleeding armadillo. The most graphic was a Walking Dead wedding cake, where bloodied zombies scrambled up two stories of buttercream-concrete and fondant brick, in pursuit of a pistol-wielding bride and groom.

Zombies and butchered pets are not quite what you would expect from a petite woman with warm brown eyes, pixie hair and a perpetual snaggletoothed grin. Particularly not once you realize that she answers to "Beetle," and that she recently dedicated three hours to coaxing a stray kitten out of a tree. She's more easily imagined among beehives, Winnie-the-Pooh "hunny" pots, apple-shaped cupcakes and frothy wedding concoctions. And she does this stuff, too. Her masterpiece, however, is a 2-foot-high largemouth bass.

#### FROM ONE BASSMASTER TO ANOTHER

In April, right before she left Dillard's, one of Madison's co-workers planned a 40th birthday party for her husband, an avid bass fisherman. The perfect touch, the co-worker thought, would be a 3-D largemouth bass cake. Back in the '90s, Madison put herself through college by decorating cakes at Rick's Bakery in Fayetteville. During her 15-year Dillard's tenure, she spent her weekends creating elaborate confectionery concoctions for friends and family. She knew she had this.

She worked 24 hours on the 30-inch, 50-servings largemouth bass. He had glistening scales, translucent fins, a round belly and an oversize bottom lip. He splashed among pulled-sugar waves and dusty chocolate cattails, looking nothing like a cake, and everything like a porcelain sculpture. Or, to a few people, like an actual taxidermy bass.

Should you wish to buy a 30-inch bass, be prepared to fork out \$800 - a bargain, really, considering that he takes more time to complete than Madison's roughly \$1,200 wedding cakes. But a bass cake is not a wedding cake, and Madison understands that \$800 is a big commitment for something you will photograph, admire and hack to bits. So she also offers a mini-bass, feeding about a dozen and priced at \$85.

But for Dale Maine's 60th birthday, his cousin Arthur Gilbert decided that only the big one would do. That's because Maine is a tournament bassmaster who has, on at least one occasion, caught a 10-pound bass.

It's a Thursday morning, and Madison is preparing to re-create her masterpiece. In addition to being an artistic-services provider, Madison is a ballroom dancer. Despite her bass-making soundtrack of spa-inspired Muzak, she is hyper. She hops from table to table, explaining how this will work. "I grid out sculpturally what I think the cake would be like, understanding that cake is about 2 inches thick. After I do that, I transfer the grids to foam core. Then I bake the cake and a little extra, just in case."

To demonstrate, she spreads six foam-core circles among upturned baking pans. Madison has already traced the foam circles onto Masonite (food-gradeparticle board) and cut out the Masonite circles somewhere in the bowels of the house, where the power tools live. She used a scroll saw, which resembles an aggressive sewing machine. On one of the work tables, a thin, corrugated steel bar stands upright, bolted to a larger Masonite circle. This is the base and backbone of the bass.

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Most days, Madison wears boot-cut jeans, athletic sneakers and a black, short-sleeve chef's jacket. Her office is a sprawling beige house that was once her grandfather-in-law's parsonage, just south of Little Rock on West Dixon Road. The kitchen and adjoining dining room are her workspace. The living room is reception, and the sunroom is stocked with showpieces - Styrofoam mock-cakes covered with flashy icing, pulled sugar and sculpted chocolate.

Madison grew up in Northwest Arkansas, followed her husband to Little Rock and took a job at Dillard's, fulfilling a childhood prophecy: "When I was 9, I told my mom I was

going to do windows at Dillard's. "And for a short time, she did. Then she moved on to designing clothes for the in-store children's brands, Copper Key, Class Club and First Wave.

But in October, after visiting a manufacturing facility in China, she forgot to take a preflight aspirin. Unfortunately, the man next to her didn't forget his sleeping pills. Madison was stuck in her seat for about 20 hours, unable to climb around her slumbering neighbor. Four weeks later, half-a-song into a ballroom dance session, Madison needed a rest. She knew something was wrong.

Doctors found a small pulmonary embolism, which they linked back to the flight. It was easily treated, but it made her re-evaluate her life. She knew fashion would never be her primary passion. "I thought, 'I'm almost 40. It's time to do something else,'" she says.

## FLESH AND BONE

Madison pinches off a chunk of something resembling Play-Doh, rolls it between her hands and flattens it against the Masonite base in unceremonious splotches. "As long as it stays cold, it's easy to work with," she says. This stuff, called modeling chocolate, is why she keeps the house temperature about 70 degrees. It's made from Guittard dark chocolate, corn syrup, confectionery discs and food coloring. She has various shades of brown and green, so that the covered board resembles camouflage. After an airbrushing with green food coloring, the camouflage appears pond-bottom muddy.

Madison covers the pond-bottom with plastic to guard against wayward crumbs and carves chunks from red velvet and strawberry sheet cakes, using the Masonite circles for guides. Then she slides these chunks down a steel bar, cushioning layers with white chocolate buttercream frosting. Every few layers, she slips in a Masonite circle for added support. Eventually she has a messy heap of stacked cakeblocks, oozing luscious mortar.

She figured out this whole steel bar/Masonite thing through an online class on [Craftsy.com](#). The class was led by Mike McCarey of Mike's Amazing Cakes in Redmond, Wash. McCarey is one of Madison's heroes, as is Colette Peters, of Colette's Cakes in New York. Like Madison, Peters is a former designer. Unlike Madison, Peters designed jewelry for Tiffany & Co.

Colette's Cakes seems to be the go-to place for celebrities seeking fancy desserts. Kanye West, Yoko Ono, Al Pacino and the Rolling Stones are among her customers.

Madison hasn't made a single cake for a single celebrity. But judging from the pictures on Peters' and McCarey's websites, Madison remains the unequivocal largemouth bassmaster.

To retain that title, she does these things, in this order: Shaves the cake-tower into a tube with, appropriately, a fish-filleting knife. Sculpts a bass skull directly onto the cake using still-warm Rice Krispies treats. Slathers the cake-torso in buttercream icing to keep crumbs from marring the final fondant. Carefully lifts the now 20-pound structure, bangs the bass against a refrigerator shelf, inhales sharply as he sways, exhales as he rights himself, sets him in the refrigerator and gratefully shuts the door. Gets in her car and drives home at 9 p.m., 12 hours after she began her workday.

### DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

By 9 a.m. Friday, Madison is back at the bakery, grinning broadly. Today all of her favorite parts will happen. But first she has to get through the fondant. Most bakers buy the sticky, confectioners'-sugar concoction ready-made. Madison mixes her own, in three flavors: lemon, almond and white chocolate. Now, she attacks a ball of white chocolate with a rolling pin and uses a snippet of institutional light diffuser (you know, those plastic sheaths covering the fluorescent bulbs at your office) to imprint a scaly texture on what will soon become bass skin.

By midday, she's well into her second-favorite part - using a combination of paintbrushes and cosmetic brushes to swab the bass's undercoat in brown, green and black food coloring. Her most favorite part comes next - shaping the cranial details out of cream-colored molding chocolate. "It's fun just to get my hands into it," she chimes, gleefully rubbing a would-be gill between a thumb and finger. Upon close inspection, the end result - a cascade of delicate pink, fleshy bits - closely resembles the floating ruffles that are so popular among her wedding clients.

Next, there's the precision work, sketching markings with a tiny paintbrush and airbrushing the whole affair with a magical gloss. It comes in a plastic bottle labeled "pearlsheen" and post-application, the bass is subtly silver. It glistens damply under the overhead lights. Madison steps back and squints at what appears to be a flawless bass. But she's not so sure. "His eyes are set too far back." She frowns. Then she shrugs. "It's too late now."

By 7 p.m., only the sugar work remains. This is the part where she twists and tugs the semisolid solution into taffylite fins and waves, until it hardens into shape like blown

glass. Madison hopes to recycle leftover sugar from another project, but the opaque, oxygenated stones are reluctant to melt back into liquid sugar.

When the sugar finally cooperates, Madison is able to spread it on a silicone pad, where it hardens into a translucent sheet. But if this sheet of solidified sugar shatters, the shards are sharp enough to slice through skin. "I try not to let that happen, because then I have to go get latex gloves," Madison says, trying to coax a gelatinous blob from a measuring cup with her spatula.

She already wears thin sheaths under bulky dishwashing gloves, since the roughly 320-degree mixture sears bare skin. As she kneads the clear goo, it sizzles and pops, releasing air bubbles. Madison shapes small pieces, such as fins, between her fingers, and melts the tips with a blowtorch before pressing them into place, hoping the candy-glass adheres to the fondant. To form large pieces, like shimmering waves, she drapes sheets of sugar over upturned bowls. Once the sheets cool, they hold their shape even after the bowls are removed.

Now there's nothing left but accouterments: copper pipes covered in gum paste for cattails, a chocolate-covered Rice Krispies treat stump, a sign made of balsa and chocolate that reads: "In my next 60 years, I'm gonna do a lot more fishin'."

By 9 p.m., Madison has completed her masterpiece. Again. Except that this time, the fish is nearly a foot bigger, measuring in at just over 40 inches. She doesn't mind that soon, her bass will be decapitated and gutted. "I love that people are able to eat them. That's why I make them," she says, her voice bright with conviction.

But Patti Maine, Dale Maine's wife, said it was a while before she could bring herself to lop off the head. "Oh. My. Gosh. The pictures do not do it justice. You couldn't help from dropping your mouth open," she says. Dale Maine may be one kind of bassmaster. Madison is another. But in the end, their bass meet the same fate.