

Happy Cake Days

Decorate your own cakes to celebrate life's milestones.

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TERRA

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The basics

Like anything else in life, you start at the very beginning. And well begun is half done, as they say.

First decide which cake you want to make. Are you going to follow one of the designs in this book, or are you going to create your own version? Will you make the cake the same size as shown, or maybe a little bigger or smaller? If you decide all of those things before you begin, you'll be well-prepared for what's to follow. If you're creating a design of your own, it can be useful to get your thoughts down on paper first. Draw the design and plan what cake sizes you'll require. Think about which types of fillings you want to use, and make a note of how much you'll need of each. Write down whether you'll be using fondant or marzipan, and the quantities and colours. Use the tables on the previous pages as a guide.

Then it's time to bake the cakes in the sizes you need, make sure that you've got the fillings ready and colour the fondant by kneading the colour through it as required (or buy ready-coloured fondant).

Baking

Get the sponges you need ready for the cake you want to decorate. If you love baking, this is your chance to use your favourite recipe, or otherwise buy a cake mix and follow the instructions on the packet.

Allow your sponges to cool thoroughly. You can easily bake them on the day before, and the sponge is easier to cut then too. You could also bake the sponges several days or even weeks in advance and freeze them. Just after thawing is the best time to slice them in half.



Tip: When colouring fondant, it's best to wear vinyl gloves since the colour can stain your hands. Knead fondant as you would knead dough: stretching and folding the coloured paste will help you to knead the colour through the dough quickly and evenly.

Filling

Before you can fill the sponges, you first need to make the fillings. Place the buttercream in piping bags. Make sure that you have everything to hand and start with a tidy work surface. Once again, to be prepared is half the victory.



* Slice the sponge horizontally three times using a bread knife or cake saw. You can also slice it just twice, but I personally prefer to include three layers of thinner filling than two layers of thick. This helps the cakes to retain their shape better too, as the filling doesn't tend to be pushed out to the sides by the weight. Three layers of filling can also look more appealing since you can use different sorts of fillings or colours – remember, appearance matters.


① Use a piping bag to pipe a vertical line of buttercream down the side of the sponge before removing the layers; this will help you to replace them correctly afterwards. Then remove the layers and brush them.



② Pipe a layer of buttercream onto the bottom sponge layer. Using a piping bag not only allows you to know exactly how thick the buttercream layer will be, but also ensures that it will be piped on evenly. It's much trickier with a spatula.

③ Place the next layer back on the cake and pipe a dam around the edge to hold the jam filling in place. Add the jam as required into the space left by the dam and spread it evenly. The dam prevents moist fillings coming into contact with the cake icing, which would cause the sugarpaste to melt. Pipe a dam if you're filling the cake with whipped cream too.




 Tip: Do you want an ultra-smooth cake? If so, cover it once, or even twice, more and allow it to set in the fridge each time, before finally smoothing it out with a warm palette knife.

4 Place the next sponge layer on top and pipe a layer of buttercream onto this too. Then place the final layer of sponge on top. The line of buttercream down the side should now be nice and straight, with all the individual layers properly aligned.

5 Apply gentle pressure to the cake. If any filling is going to ooze out, it's better to happen now than when the cake is covered. Crumb-coat the cake with a thin layer of buttercream and smooth it out. Hold the spatula upright when smoothing out the sides to make them nice and straight.

6 Place the cake in the fridge to allow the buttercream to set slightly, so that covering the cake will be easier and give a neater result. Remove the cake from the fridge just before you're ready to start covering it. Use a warm palette knife to smooth out any remaining unevenness.



 Tip: You can give your buttercream filling an extra edge – I like to sprinkle it with chocolate or caramel, but the possibilities are endless. You could try crushed biscuits, pieces of fruit or nuts. Soft cake is delicious, but it can sometimes be a tastier – and more surprising – experience to come across a cake with a crunch.

Covering

Take the correct quantity of fondant in the colour required (the quantities are shown in the table). Knead the fondant until pliable before you begin rolling it out.



1 Roll the fondant out using a smooth rolling pin on a non-stick board or another smooth work surface. If the fondant is sticking, rub it with a little Crisco or dust your work surface with a little icing sugar – but don't use too much, and make sure that the icing sugar doesn't land on top of your fondant. Note: never turn the fondant over. Instead, to keep it even, frequently rotate the fondant clockwise through 90 degrees. This will ensure you roll the fondant out evenly and in a nice circle.



* Check whether it is big enough by using your rolling pin to measure up and down the sides of the cake plus its diameter to see how wide the fondant needs to be rolled out. In other words, you need the diameter plus twice the height and a little bit extra to cover the cake properly. Once the fondant circle is big enough, use the smoother to even it out.



2 Gently place the rolling pin onto the fondant circle and roll the fondant over it. Lifting the rolling pin, move it across onto the cake then carefully smooth the fondant over the cake as you unroll it from the rolling pin.

3 Use the smoother to even out the top surface of the cake.

* Secure around the edge by pressing lightly with your hands. The edge is a cake's weak point and cracks tend to form readily. By applying light pressure to the edge now, you can prevent cracks forming later.

 Tip: Only apply pressure to the rolling pin when rolling away from yourself. Roll back towards yourself without applying pressure, merely to reposition your hands. Your fondant will become much smoother this way.

 Tip: If your rolling pin is too small, you can drape the fondant circle over your arm instead.


Tip: When filling
and covering cakes,
using a turntable makes
everything just that
little bit easier.

4 Now smooth the fondant firmly against the sides. Instead of pulling on the fondant, apply slight upward pressure against the sides – pulling it will increase the likelihood of cracks or thinness, and the top edge will be less defined. To smooth out folds or wrinkles, lift the previous part slightly and then continue to smooth it downwards again. By smoothing the fondant out in this way, you won't be left with any big wrinkles.




5 Apply firm pressure to the smoother along the top surface and the sides of your cake to remove any remaining unevenness from the fondant. Use the rounded edge of the smoother to smooth the lower edge of the cake into a neat finish.



6 Cut away the excess fondant using a knife, spatula or pizza cutter. Don't cut away too much, especially if you're not planning to add a decorative finish to the lower edge.



* The method is the same for square cakes, but this time make sure that the corners are nice and smooth before moving on to smoothing out the sides.


Tip: If you've got air bubbles
in your fondant, you can pierce
them using a needle. Better still,
to avoid any risk of the needle get-
ting lost in the cake (it doesn't
bear thinking about!), use a
needle tool instead.

Covering the cake drum

Tip: For a low-budget cake base, instead of a cake drum you can use strong cardboard or MDF board which you've covered in fancy paper or a layer of foil.



To cover the cake drum, I always roll out a generous amount of fondant to make the whole process a bit easier.

However, I do find it a shame to hide all that fondant under a cake. Not only can it cause problems when cutting and serving the cake, because it makes sliding the knife underneath a little tricky, but it also means that quite a lot of fondant is 'wasted', especially in the case of a large cake drum. "Waste not, want not," as the saying goes – so I've come up with a solution.

Roll out the fondant so that the circle fits over the drum. Instead of covering the entire top surface of the drum with Tylose glue, just apply it to the outer 5 cm. Place the fondant over the drum and use a smoother to smooth it out. Lift up the drum and balance it on your hand, holding it up in the air so that you can cut away the excess fondant. Take a piece of cake card that is slightly smaller in diameter than the cake itself. Place the cardboard onto the covered drum and trace around it with your knife. Then remove the piece of fondant from the centre and roll it into a ball – you'll be amazed at how much extra fondant this gives you to use later for making the decorative figures. Stick double-sided tape around the edge of the drum and attach a nice decorative ribbon to it.

Tip: Sometimes it gives a neater finish to cover the drum at the same time as you cover the cake. While this uses the least amount of fondant, it also requires a bit more experience in covering cakes. Needless to say, this method doesn't work if you want to use a different colour of icing on the drum than on the cake.



Stacked cakes

A stacked or tiered cake is of course the ultimate cake, a cake with a real ‘wow factor’. I can still clearly remember the first stacked cake I ever made: I was pretty nervous about it, and with good reason – it didn’t turn out well! I didn’t have access to clear instructions at the time, so I made a few beginner’s mistakes. I’ll spare you the details of my first attempt at stacking, but I hope that, armed with these explanations, your stacking activities will be much more successful.

The first thing to remember when making a stacked cake is that you can’t simply place cakes one on top of the other, because the weight of the top cake will cause the cake below it to sag considerably. Instead, you need to support each tier from below.

Cake dowels are used to support each individual layer. I personally prefer to use Wilton plastic dowel rods – these are tubes which you can cut to length using a knife or a pipe cutter. These dowels work best if you’re making large stacked cakes.

You may decide to use wooden dowels but, if so, make sure you sand the edges smooth after sawing them to length. Another option is to use thick wooden skewers. For smaller stacks, you can also use chocolate sticks, which are tasty as well as functional. Never use plastic drinking straws since they are too weak to support the cake’s weight.

The number of dowels you need to place between each layer partly depends on the kind of dowels you’ve chosen. I’ve based the list below on Wilton plastic dowel rods. If you’re using thin dowels, you’ll probably need to insert more.

For cakes smaller than 20 cm in diameter, I’ve assumed you’ll be using thin dowels, because using thick dowels makes relatively large holes in the cake below.

- 4 dowels beneath a 10 cm cake
- 4 dowels beneath a 15 cm cake
- 5 dowels beneath a 20 cm cake
- 6 dowels beneath a 25 cm cake
- 7 dowels beneath a 30 cm cake



Tip: The safest and most stable way to transport a stacked cake is in the car boot, on a non-slip mat. And...taking a deep breath before you drive off will offer the best chance of you – and your cake – arriving in one piece!