

LEARN TO MAKE AND DECORATE AMAZING CAKES STEP-BY-STEP

WIN!  
£100 worth of  
designed contact  
paper from  
Tal Tsafrit!



Cake  
MASTERS

ISSUE 70  
JULY 2018 £4.20

# Cake

## Masters MAGAZINE

### Kids' Cakes Edition

# 7

### Fantastic TUTORIALS

+LEARN STEP-BY-STEP  
+EASY TO FOLLOW

COMPETITION  
TOP TIPS  
CAKE ADVICE



Toy Box Cake  
Tutorial



Cute Cactus  
Cake Tutorial



Hot Air Balloon  
Cupcake Board

# Cake Icons

## Julia M. Usher

It's great to recognise cake icons in the industry for their expertise and phenomenal designs. This month, we speak to Julia M. Usher.



- **Leading author in cookie decorating**
- **Known in the industry for her 3D cookie designs**
- **Teaches her skills all over the world!**

**Julia M. Usher is known for her beautiful 3D cookie designs and has owned a boutique bakery for ten years! She now teaches her craft all over the world. Here we find out more about her cookie decorating journey and her top tips for budding cake decorators.**

**Can you tell us about your cookie decorating journey - where did it all begin?**

I'd have to say it began with my mum when I was old enough to stand on a stool to reach the kitchen counter. From a very early age, I shadowed her in the kitchen, following along especially intently whenever she was baking or decorating sweets! You might say I was born with a sweet tooth! My family, like so many American families, also had a ritual of decorating Christmas cookies for the various neighbourhood parties and cookie swaps at that time of year, so I was no stranger to cutting out cookies and mixing royal icing even then. However, I didn't get into cake decorating professionally until much later into my mid-thirties after having pursued at least two other careers. Cookie decorating came even later and pretty much by accident. After closing my cake bakery, I wanted to write a cake book but

had trouble selling it to publishers. It eventually morphed into a cookie swap book called *Cookie Swap: Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year*. That book did well which resulted in another cookie book, *Ultimate Cookies*. One cookie thing led to another and now I'm primarily teaching cookie decorating, both online and in person while managing Cookie Connection, my community-based website, making cookie videos and designing new cookie products.

**We know you had a career as a mechanical engineer and management consultant, what was it like to move from a very structured corporate environment to a creative one?**

It was actually not as hard as you might think. I am a very disciplined worker and compulsive planner. I keep lists of my various lists and my work to-do list is a small book! But even creative work benefits from having a plan and the discipline to execute that plan. Also, I had always loved to create in my spare time whether it be baking, decorating the house, doing paper crafts, wrapping gifts, print-making... you name it. It was just a matter of time before I turned that creative passion into my profession. I'd say the hardest part about the move was financial. I went from a high-paying corporate job to a business where it can often be tough to make ends meet. While I had at one time been the primary breadwinner in my family, I no longer

was and that was a little demoralising for me.

**What was it like owning and running your own bakery?**

I love conceiving things and building something from nothing. I also love working for myself and having the freedom to do things exactly as I want them to be done. My bakery, which I



ran from about 1996 to 2006, afforded me all of these pleasures especially in the early startup phase. I also loved the purely creative aspects of the business – i.e. taking customers' general wants and desires and turning them into something even they had never imagined. Which brings me to your next question...

**Tell us about your decision to close the bakery to move to a more educational route**

Running a bakery is very hard and often repetitive work. After about ten years in the business, I eventually closed shop because I grew tired of hiring and training staff over and over (turnover in food service is notoriously high) and also making the same wedding cakes time and again. Even though my bakery was a custom shop, most people don't want the risk of a brand new wedding cake design on their big day and so customers often gravitated toward styles I had done before. I decided to close shop so I could focus solely on the creative process without the tedium of production work or staffing issues getting in the way. That's when I turned to writing and food styling, first for magazines and then for my own books.

**How does it make you feel to know you are an icon in this industry?**

I'm actually pretty stunned to be considered one. As I mentioned earlier, I fell into cookie decorating almost entirely by accident about 12 years ago at a time when cookie decorating wasn't an 'industry'. I never knew the cookie business would explode to the extent it has and I'm still not certain I've found my ideal spot in it. I struggle daily with work-life balance and juggling my various roles in the industry (Cookie Connection host, content creator, teacher and product developer) to the point that I worry about not bringing my best to each of these things and letting down students, hosts and/or business partners in the process. I constantly see all sorts of skill gaps that I could close too... But angst and self-doubt aside, I have to say I am incredibly honoured and elated to have been selected for this feature and so very grateful to all of my customers and students who have generously supported me and my work over the years. It's their enthusiasm that continues to fuel my creative process. Thank you so much!

**Would it be fair to say you were the first person to create 3D cookies?**

No, not at all. Gingerbread houses have been around since time immemorial! But maybe I was the first to make a 3D cookie teacup or BBQ grill or retro oven?! I'm not sure but I bet if we all looked hard enough, we'd find these things have been done before too!

**What is the most elaborate or memorable 3D cookie you have created and why?**

My most elaborate designs are probably my rose garden and recent Christmas fireplace scenes. Each was no more than 6-8" on each side, but contained hundreds of royal icing or cookie parts. As with most things I make, I primarily



made these projects to stretch my skills and also to, hopefully, open up new cookie possibilities for others.

**What top tips do you have for someone wanting to make their first 3D cookie?**

1. Sketch your design before you start and identify the various pieces you will need to construct it. Planning is paramount!
2. Take stock of the moulds and forms you have for shaping those pieces; then adjust your design if needed to work with your tool constraints and to ensure a well-proportioned finished product. Remember, almost any oven-proof item can be used as a mould! There's no need to buy lots of new tools.
3. Be sure the dough you're using is well formulated for baking on curved objects without spreading too much and cracking.
4. File the pieces after baking to ensure a tight fit.
5. Proceed carefully through the decorating of each piece making sure to balance colours and textures across the entire design and that the piece views well from all angles.
6. Lastly, allow ample drying time between assembly steps and use very thick icing 'glue' to put your project together. The thicker the icing, the faster everything will dry and the less risk of pieces shifting during assembly.

**Can you tell us your most favourite cookie design you have created to date?**

I don't really have favourites. By the time

I finish a project, I typically have looked at it for so long that I'm ready to move right on to my next creation!

**Your work is so immaculately neat and precise, what tips can you give to cookie artists who want to present their work in the same way?**

Thanks so much! My biggest tip for 3D work is to maintain precision at every step of the process. If the cookies weren't baked uniformly to start, it will be





harder to ice them neatly. In turn, if they weren't iced smoothly, it will be harder to decorate on top of them and to assemble the finished product. By following my tips in the previous question and by making sure your icing is at the right consistency for various tasks, you will find it easier to get consistently precise results.

#### Do you have tips for preventing cookie breakages?

I don't sell and ship my cookies any longer and I didn't do much shipping even when I had my bakery so I'm not an expert on packing for shipping – which is when most breakage is likely to occur. But when I travel with 3D projects for my classes, I pack them as minimally as possible. I avoid wrapping bubble wrap or anything else around them as I usually do more damage than good in wrapping and unwrapping them. I just set my cookies on non-skid shelf liner material in cupcake caddies and carefully hand carry the caddies onto the plane. Then I watch them like a hawk to protect them from careless TSA agents and passengers! My damage rate is pretty low, it's usually other people handling or knocking my cookies that causes the most trouble.

#### Can you share a cookie recipe with us that is the best for 3D cookies?

Almost any cookie recipe can be adapted to work well for 3D cookies. What you're looking for is a recipe that doesn't spread much or lose its shape during baking. My gingerbread recipe ([www.juliausher.com/blog/more/cutout\\_cookie\\_gingerbread](http://www.juliausher.com/blog/more/cutout_cookie_gingerbread)) is well formulated for 3D work but if you'd like to adapt some other recipe, there are three recipe variables to consider:

1. The ratio of flour to fat - the higher this ratio, the less the dough will spread.
2. The type of fat in the recipe - the substitution of shortening for some or all of the butter will create a crisper, less spreading dough.
3. The amount of leavening - even with my gingerbread recipe, I sometimes cut the baking soda in half to minimise spreading over especially curved surfaces.

Just bear in mind that as you increase the quantity of flour and/or reduce the

leavening, you will get a sturdier and somewhat tougher dough. Striking the right balance between lack of spreading and good flavour and texture is key. Also remember, rolling the dough thinner than usual is sometimes enough to prevent too much spreading and misshaping.

#### Looking back on your career, what has been your biggest highlight to date?

If you're speaking of professional accolades then I'd have to say being Cake Masters' first Cookie Artist of the Year in 2013 and then being named both Sugar Artist of the Year USA and International Sugar Artist of the Year in the 2016 Edible Artists Global Awards (EAGA). To be recognised by such respected institutions, and on a global level, was so unexpected and completely overwhelming. But truly my biggest reward comes each day from connecting with other passionate cookie decorators either online or through my classes. There's no greater pleasure than hearing that I've helped someone improve his/her skills or advance his/her career in some way. I also learn so much from all of my students and everyone I 'meet' online. I wouldn't trade these connections for anything in the world.

#### What is your biggest inspiration for your work?

I typically don't look at others' cookie or cake work, or even others' drawings or paintings, for inspiration because of copyright issues and also because I don't want anyone else's style to overly influence my own. I want my work to be unique and immediately recognisable as mine. So I generally look to everyday objects or nature for inspiration and try to find ways to turn these things into 3D cookies.

#### We know that you are very passionate about the illegal use of copyrighted images in cookie design, why do you think people continue to ignore the implications of this?

I'd generalise this statement to say that I'm passionate about protecting the copyrights of all artists. Most artists work long and hard, with too little pay, and so it's critical for us to respect their choices about how their work gets distributed for public consumption. But to answer your question, I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt so I have to assume that any first time copyright offender simply made an unwitting mistake. Perhaps that person didn't understand



the law or what constitutes a violation of it. Copyright rules and their enforcement can also vary from country to country so that's a consideration too. The more that magazine editors, community sites, competition judges and other industry leaders educate the community about this issue, the less of an issue it will be. However, when I see people violating copyright rules (on Cookie Connection or in competitions for instance) after having had them clearly explained one or more times, I tend to think those actions are not mistakes. People need to understand there's no shame in crediting the original source of their work and more often than not, seeking permission from the copyright holder can be win-win for all. I've seen so many cases where the original artist has been pleased not only to give permission to use his/her art but also to actively market the other person's rendition of it.

**Have you spotted any up and coming talent? Please tell us who they are and what you like about their work?**

Gosh, there are so many great new (and old) decorators out there that I hesitate to name names for fear of leaving out someone quite wonderful. But if I have to name names, I'd say Thomas Blake Hogan, Shelby Bower and Rebecca Hines, the first, second and third place winners of my namesake cookie competition at Kerry Vincent's 2017 Oklahoma State Sugar Art Show (OSSAS). Their work completely wowed me especially

out of only one just by cutting the tip wider or in different ways; I don't have to clean them (I'm inherently lazy this way!); they are biodegradable so there's no remorse about throwing them out when I'm done!

**What are the biggest cookie trends right now?**

The biggest trend I'm seeing is more and more people moving from making and selling decorated cookies to teaching cookie decorating. I think this trend is happening for a couple of reasons. First, the overall skill level in the cookie industry has improved by leaps and bounds in recent years so there are more qualified teachers setting up classes and schools. And second, it's more lucrative in most cases to sell cookie decorating classes than it is to sell decorated cookies because the latter are so time-consuming.

**What are your plans for 2018/2019?**

My plans for 2018 are pretty firmly in place at this point with several more teaching trips and shows scheduled through the rest of the year. I'm off next to Patagonia in southern Argentina, Japan, and Switzerland and I can't wait! I will continue to host Cookie Connection, make videos and add to my growing cookie stencil line each month. While I am already booking classes for 2019 (teaching is my favourite thing to do!), I am mostly hoping to find that elusive work-life balance that I mentioned earlier!

For Julia's stencils, visit **Confection Couture Stencils at [www.confectioncouturestencils.com](http://www.confectioncouturestencils.com)**

For more information about Julia and her work visit [www.juliausher.com](http://www.juliausher.com)



“ *I want my work to be unique and immediately recognisable as mine.* ”

considering that 2017 was the first time each entered this competition. Please check out their stories and amazing entries here: <https://cookieconnection.juliausher.com/blog/saturday-spotlight-winners-of-the-2017-oklahoma-sugar-art-show-cookie-competition>

**Who are your cookie/cake heroes?**

My biggest hero is Kerry Vincent. Her wedding cake book was my go-to when I was just starting out in cake decorating. Since then, she's generously endorsed my cookie books and given me a platform for expanding the cookie industry through my cookie competition at her OSSAS. While she is a wonderful cake artist with super high standards, it's her willingness to help newbies expand their skills and careers that most impresses me - and inspires me to do the same.

**As a cookie decorator, what tool can you not live without?**

A parchment pastry cone! I do all of my outlining and flooding and all of my detailed string and dot work with one. I only resort to metal tips when I want a textured effect like basketweave or dimensional flowers. I love cones for many reasons: I can get a lot of mileage

