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Life

A pinch of this, a pinch of that

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Making an unforgettable St. Patrick's Day dish is a piece of cake for Mei Sheng Ng and her baking talents

The students at Crane Country Day School won't just find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow this St. Patrick's Day. They'll find something richer: chocolate cake with chocolate ganache filling. Mei Sheng Ng made it for daughter Paige Russo's class. Wonder what four-leaf clovers, at top, taste like? They're sweet, said Ms. Ng. She makes them out of royal icing.

Mei Sheng Ng has apparently taken it upon herself to make sure the students in her daughter's first-grade class are getting enough greens in their diet. Today, she'll be dropping off a bunch that are currently in season: shamrocks.



"I know a lot of kids would eat them -- I wouldn't," she admitted with a giggle. "They're too sweet."

That's because they're made of royal icing.

This is, indeed, the Crane Country Day School students' lucky day. Ms. Ng, known for her elaborate cakes, baked one for St. Patrick's Day just for daughter Paige Russo's class. The cake features not only shamrocks, but a three-dimensional rainbow, pot of gold and leprechauns with such intricate detail that their tiny gum paste ears are even



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pointy.

"My sole job right now is taking care of my two daughters. There are times when I want something challenging to do," said Ms. Ng, 45, a former software engineer for Alias/Wavefront. "This is it."

It's easy to see how that could be. Ms. Ng doesn't just make your basic 8-inch round cake. But that is how she started out.

"My first cake was awful!" recalled Ms. Ng, who made it for daughter Sophie Russo's fourth birthday. It was a chocolate cake with white frosting -- or, at least, it was supposed to be white frosting. She couldn't figure out how to frost it without pulling up the chocolate cake underneath and getting the crumbs in it. "I knew there's got to be a way to do that."



After enrolling in a cake-decorating class through Santa Barbara City College's adult education program, she found that out -- and more.

(Incidentally, you apply a thin layer of frosting, let the cake set in the refrigerator

for an hour, then apply additional layers of frosting.) Before long, Ms. Ng moved on to fondant and gum paste, the moldable textures that allow her to do any number of designs. Hers have included a woven spring bonnet, castle, wedding cake with edible plumeria petals and baby grand piano that looks like it's ornately gilded with 24-karat gold. Ms. Ng even made a cake for her nephew's birthday that looked like a train. At least, it did for a while.

"Within a span of half an hour, it went from standing straight up to 45 degrees. It eventually all tipped over," recalled Ms. Ng. "We told him it derailed."

Ms. Ng uses a variety of techniques to detail her cakes. One involves using edible "dusting powders."

With a palette of about 30 shades, like "daffodil," she can apply color with a paintbrush to give a "flower" striations, for

example.

In fact, her cakes look so much like works of art, you almost don't want to eat them. But once you realize that a moist chocolate cake with rich chocolate ganache filling is inside, you quickly get over it.

"I want it to taste good, more than anything," admitted Ms. Ng. "The decoration is second."

One would never know that by looking at the cakes. Which is probably why so many people have encouraged her to start her own business.

Talk about lucky! Ms. Ng makes cakes for her family and friends for various special occasions. She baked the cake below for daughter Sophie Russo's piano recital. It has notes of chocolate.



"I haven't done it professionally because I don't want it to become work. Right now, it's fun," said Ms. Ng, who instead simply makes the cakes for special occasions for family and friends. She admitted, however, that she sometimes fantasizes about one day owning a shop that her daughters can help her out at.

But wouldn't that be work?

"That's why," she chuckled, "I said it's a fantasy."

Considering Ms. Ng's upbringing, it's surprising that cakes would even be one of her specialties. She had never seen one until she was 8 or 9 years old -- and even then, she didn't know what it was.

"There were two English stations when we were in Hong Kong. I remember watching a cooking show," recalled Ms. Ng, who saw a woman mixing eggs with some sort of liquid and pouring the batter into a pan.

Full-time mom Mei Sheng Ng spends hours in her Santa Barbara kitchen making professional-looking cakes. "I don't like cake!" she said with a chuckle. "That's why I like this. I'm not tempted to eat it."



"She put the pan in what I now know is an oven. I didn't even know that it was an oven because we didn't have ovens in Hong Kong," said Ms. Ng, who came to the

United States with her parents in 1969. "I thought it was fascinating that you could put something into an oven, bring it out and it looked good."

Kind of like the cakes that now come out of her own oven.

With all the baking going on in Ms. Ng's Santa Barbara kitchen, you can only imagine what her family has for dessert.

"Not the cakes!" she insisted with a laugh. "We try to eat healthy."

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STEVE MALONE/ NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Chocolate Blackout Cake

2 1/3 cups all-purpose flour

1 1/2 cups unsweetened cocoa powder

1 1/4 teaspoons salt

1 tablespoon baking soda

1 tablespoon baking powder

3 cups sugar

5 large eggs

1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

1 1/2 cups buttermilk

3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, melted

1 1/2 cups strong coffee

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter and flour two 10-inch round cake pans. Sift the flour, cocoa, salt, baking soda and baking powder into large mixing bowl. Stir in sugar. In another bowl, combine the eggs and vanilla extract, then mix them into the dry ingredients. Add the buttermilk, melted butter and coffee. Scrape the batter into the prepared cake pans. Bake the cakes until set around the edges and a cake tester inserted into the center comes out clean, about 50 minutes. Let the cakes cook in their pans, then invert them onto a rack. Cool for about an hour. Pour cooled chocolate ganache on top of one of the layers. Spread it out. Place layers together. Refrigerate for at least a half-hour until the ganache is firm. Frost cake with butter cream. Yield: one 10-inch round cake.

Chocolate Ganache

12 ounces heavy cream

16 ounces semisweet chocolate, finely chopped

In a medium saucepan, bring the cream to a boil. Remove from heat. Add the chocolate and let steep for 3 minutes, then whisk slowly until smooth. Let cool before using as filling for cakes. Cook's note: Ganache can be kept in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. Soften over low heat on top of a double boiler. Yield: about 3 1/2 to 4 cups.

Butter Cream

1 pound 10 ounces confectioners' sugar (about 6 cups)

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 cup warm water

2 3/4 cups vegetable shortening

6 ounces (1 1/2 sticks) slightly chilled butter, cut into 1-inch pieces

In a bowl of an electric mixer, stir together confectioners' sugar, salt and vanilla extract. With a whisk attachment, add the warm water and whip at low speed until smooth and cool. Add the shortening and butter and whip until smooth. Increase the speed to medium-high. Whip until light, fluffy and doubled in volume, about 10 to 20 minutes. Yield: 9 1/2 cups.

-- *From Mei Sheng Ng*