

The Life of the Party

Cake decorator Karen Portaleo
breathes life and beauty into cake
making. By *Emelina Minero*



Karen Portaleo's cakes are more than sweet treats—they are breathtaking, intricate works of art. The granddaughter of a pastry chef, Portaleo grew up in bakeries and in artists' studios: She has two painters in her family, her mother and her sister. She herself has enjoyed a diverse artistic career, designing jewelry, creating sets and props for the advertising industry and sculpting in clay. Portaleo now sculpts in cake batter and icing, and she has elevated the domestic enterprise of cake decorating to an art form. She won the Food Network's *Halloween Wars*, is the lead decorator of lesbian-owned Highland Bakery in Atlanta, and has made cakes for celebrities such as Jane Lynch, Elton John and Demi Moore—all of this without any culinary training.

You seem to bring art into every aspect of your life. What is it that makes you so passionate about it?

Everything. It's so much a part of how I live that it's hard to parse it out as a separate act in my life. It's a compulsion. It's like eating—or falling in love. It's necessary. I have busy hands. I just moved, and while organizing my new home and studio, I've had to confront what I can only describe as a serious case of art supply hoarding. Every scrap, pencil, or feather has potential, and I cannot part with it. I may need help.

Do you make cakes with the intention of conveying a message, or evoking a specific emotion?

Usually, I am trying to represent those things for my client, to help them tell a story of some kind. This is what I think is unique about cake decorating, among other work in the culinary world: Cakes are the storytellers, the centerpieces that express something about why everyone has gathered. I can tell that story visually, as well as with the flavors inside the cake.

What do you love best about working with your clients?

I love being a part of their celebrations, helping them tell part of their story to their guests. I've also been doing this long enough now to have gone through a series of wonderful events in some couples' lives, from first dates to baby showers!

You won the Food Network's *Halloween Wars*. What is it about you and Halloween?

I like playing on the edges of scary. Not actual real-life scary, but the monster-under-the-bed, whistling through the graveyard, dancing skeleton in a top hat kind of scary. I grew up in the punk rock days, and we pushed the envelope in every which way. I think Tim Burton is a master of this imagery. There's a dark twist and a broken-tooth smile to his imagery that I love. Halloween is like a national holiday for freaks like me!



Karen Portaleo

You've made a lot of cakes of voluptuous women. Do you make a conscious effort to promote body positivity through those cakes?

Absolutely! But it's also my idea of true beauty. Of course, as a woman, I've struggled with my personal place on the body spectrum, but in my art I have always gravitated toward the voluptuous curves that speak to me of sensuality and pleasure.

Which cakes on your must-make list have you not yet made?

There is a list, and they will all be in my book! I am in the early stages of making a book that will include my cakes, as well as some illustrations, some stories, and a little bit of instruction. (karenportaleo.com) ■

