

Have Your Cake

OVER 40 YEARS LATER,
UKROP'S STILL SERVES UP CUSTOM
CONFECTIONS FOR THE BIG DAY

By GENEVELYN STEELE

MADDIE HIBBERT is a Ukrop's cake consultant — the face customers see when discussing their wants and preferences for a custom wedding cake. She facilitates more than

600 orders a year from Ukrop's Market Hall in the West End. Brides meet with Hibbert over an array of sample slices to try, gazing at images of swirled tiers. Though the number of wedding cake orders has decreased since Ukrop's grocery stores closed in 2010, the care and quality put into making them haven't.

"We use the original Dot's Bakery recipes," Hibbert explains. Ukrop's keeps its flavor offerings simple; only pound cake with buttercream icing is on the menu. Pound cake comes in six flavors: golden vanilla, white, velvet fudge, marble, lemon and almond.

"Cake trends are retro this year — vintage icing techniques, detailed piping and layers bookended with elaborate swags," Hibbert says. "But our most popular look is a horizontal texture with a little crumb peeking out under a smoothly iced top. Brides like to add their own flowers. It looks like a whole other cake."



**"We still color swatch.
Brides bring in fabric, and we match it."**

—SHARON BOWMAN, UKROP'S PRODUCTION BAKERY ASSISTANT MANAGER

Referrals bring orders to the Ukrop's website, but nostalgia drives sales, unlocking childhood memories with a whiff of butter and sugar. Matching cupcakes or customized 6-inch rounds expand the bakery's sales into anniversaries. Larger 14-inch wedding cakes, with up to five tiers, feed receptions. Hibbert says, "We still do complimentary cake tastings, giving a box of flavors to take home."

But Hibbert is only part of the team. Sharon Bowman, assistant manager of the Ukrop's production bakery, executes the orders. She oversees every baked good headed to retail; in 2025, she approved over 6,000 celebration cakes for Mother's Day.

An elite trio of decorators produces the wedding cakes. All production is done by hand. "Nothing changes but the numbers," Bowman says with a laugh.

Bowman's personality is relaxed, but she's serious about occasions. "Cake is for a special time in your life," she explains. Her favorite flavor is almond, and even after 36 years with Ukrop's, she still loves nibbling on the almond cake trimmings.

Sena Chourb, Tuyet Nguyen and Phally Ryan are the Ukrop's wedding cake squad — top-tier

frosting artisans who pipe and letter with ease. The confectioners look to Nguyen for precision. She began decorating in Vietnam; at Ukrop's, she's worked in inspiration from YouTube.

"I learned how to pipe icing in my country," Nguyen says, "but I learned how to color it from Sharon."

Buttercream roses are sculpted days ahead, handpainted, then allowed to dry. Colors are checked to make sure they haven't "moved" or darkened as they've set. Soon, the color palette of Ukrop's cakes will be more naturally hued to comply with new FDA food dye regulations, but you won't be able to tell they're tinting with beet juice.

"We still color swatch," Bowman says "Brides bring in fabric, and we match it."

Chourb and Ryan also deliver the cakes, fixing bubbles and cracks from temperature changes or transport. They bring along a repair kit to smooth any rough edges after cake setup.

"Chop chop!" Chourb says to Nguyen, and the four women grin over their latest creation.

"That means take that icing up straight *exactly*, or it doesn't pass," Bowman says with a laugh and glance at Nguyen.

"I don't worry about this group," she explains. "I can focus on my other tasks. But I still sign off on every cake." ■



Ukrop's wedding cake decorators Sena Chourb, Tuyet Nguyen and Phally Ryan