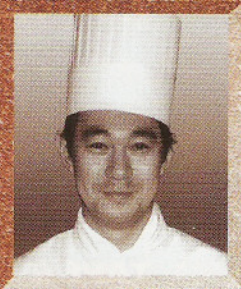


## Edible Art

BY PAM COOPER



*Max Kitano works as the pastry chef in the Marriot of the World Trade Center in New York City. Besides supervising the restaurant staff, he is able to make use of his artistic talents by sculpting three-dimensional scenes out of sugar paste and coloring them with food coloring through an airbrush. A native of Japan, Max has lived in America for ten years with his wife, who provides inspiration for his creativity.*

When visiting New York City, you must go to the Greenhouse Restaurant, located in the Marriott in the World Trade Center. And when you arrive, notice the beautiful pastry showpiece on the dessert buffet table—it is the creation of Max Kitano.

Max is the pastry chef at the Marriott and a very busy and industrious individual. Pastry art is only one of his many responsibilities at the hotel. A man of many hats, his duties involve supervising and scheduling restaurant staff, attending meetings, ordering supplies, doing reams of paperwork, and seeing to the endless details that come with restaurant management. Amazingly, Max still finds time to create masterpieces made entirely from sugar. The displays may take him more than a month from concept to completion, but when finished, the showpieces are exquisite examples of artistic expression. The most surprising aspect is that the designs are completely edible, being made entirely of sugar paste and painted with food coloring.

Originally from Japan, this year marks the 10-year anniversary of Max's arrival in America. His father is a retired photojournalist, and his mother taught the Japanese tea ceremony. Their activity in the visual and cultural arts was a natural inspiration for their son and the career path he ultimately chose. Max grew up painting and drawing, realizing that he had an affinity for art and creativity. When he can find the time, he still enjoys painting flowers and females, using airbrush and colored pencil.

During his first two years in the United States, Max

attended a culinary school in Maryland. He chose to pursue a career in pastry after realizing that he could use his artistic talents and express his creativity, both to the eye and tongue, through pastry. "After graduation," Max says, "I worked at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Atlanta, then in a variety of hotels and restaurants in New York." His initial goal was to be an artist, but instead, he became a cook in a pastry kitchen, working for talented French pastry chefs. While under their tutelage, he learned about the wonderful world and history of confectionery art. "The use of the airbrush in the pastry kitchen is relatively common," Max says. "As airbrushes and compressors became more affordable, more and more pastry chefs began using air-





*Decorative displays sculpted entirely from sugar paste and airbrushed with food coloring.*

brush techniques to finish their creations. In fact, even before airbrush was available, chefs were using a straw, dipping one end in color and blowing through the other end, just like spray over marzipan fruit."

The process of creating one of Max's showpieces begins long before the actual project is constructed. Since the confectionery creation shares space on the dessert buffet table, the first consideration is how much room to allow for the showpiece. While determining the size, the theme is also being developed. Max selects the themes according to seasons, holidays or something unique and fun, being careful to choose themes that are neutral and unrelated to religious holidays. Changing the display periodically keeps the display interesting for the restaurant patrons and provides continual challenges for Max's creative urges.

He gathers information for ideas from a variety of sources: magazines, books, catalogs, the library and by observing displays at department stores and gourmet shops. Eventually, a theme emerges, and he begins to sketch out his designs. "My lovely wife is a great inspiration," he says. "When I try to finish my drawings, she gives me a lot of ideas. By the

time I complete the final design sketch, I begin to think about the materials to be used, the methods to be applied and the colors to be sprayed by airbrush."

Visualization plays an important role in the development of the design and process for implementation. Once the final design is done on paper, Max says, "I see the showpiece in my mind, and I'm very confident about how I can make it. During visualization, I find the easiest and most effective way to produce the individual pieces that will be used in the display." Most of the items can be shaped by hand. But vegetables like corn, broccoli, cauliflower, etc., are very difficult, so he uses an instant mold mix to make a mold of the items. After the mold is made, he puts the sugar paste inside and presses to get an indentation. Wine bottles are also made using this method. Some items, like the wine barrel, are made by looking at pictures gathered during his research.

Since he doesn't always have the actual model to work from, it's especially helpful to have a number of photographs taken at different angles. He draws the pattern pieces on foamcore, taking careful consideration of scale and dimension. He then cuts out the individual pieces and assembles them to make the structural base for items such as the wine barrel. Adjustments to size and form are made at this stage.

The completed showpiece tends to become fragile, bulky and heavy, so the display should have





*Displays sculpted from sugar paste and airbrushed with food coloring (note rolled sugar paste ribbon at right).*

substantial support and be constructed strongly. A poorly constructed display will collapse from its own weight, by shock or vibration. The foamcore board used in construction provides the needed structural foundation. Once the forms are complete, Max begins to apply the sugar paste to each item. The sugar paste becomes hard and brittle when dry, so a sturdy structure is very important.

Max paints the individual pieces using the airbrush to achieve a realistic look. Food safety is of special concern, so Max uses food coloring to achieve the look he wants. "Liquid food colors are so easy to use," comments Max. "Just like colored ink, it is ready to drop into the hand piece of the airbrush and spray right away." Food colors come in a variety of forms: powder, oil-base paste and concentrated. The food coloring is easy to mix, and because it is water soluble, it is easy to clean—unlike most artists' paints. In the pastry kitchen it is common to use either melted white, dark or milk chocolate instead of paint to spray through the airbrush. The chocolate is easy to keep fluid while painting by putting the cup in hot water. "I use Paasche's economical (H) model at work, because this type of work doesn't require super detail. Simply apply the 'paint' in thin

layers of different colors. Double-action is useful, but single-action is still OK. When working at home, I use an Iwata airbrush."

The display is usually replaced after about a month; it then goes into a special storage room. These showpieces are often used again for display in the hotel's banquet room. Occasionally, a showpiece becomes damaged in storage or transport. When damaged, it is disassembled and the individual pieces are recycled for use in new displays. Max has received numerous compliments about his work, and in most cases, guests are surprised to learn that the display is made entirely of sugar and yet looks so realistic.

Reflecting on his accomplishments, Max remarks that being a pastry chef is a career and art display is only a part of that vocation. "Using the airbrush is only one of the many techniques used in pastry. In the diverse and vast world of pastry, I choose to specialize in artistic display and by using the airbrush. There are so many aspects to it—it is kind of amazing that way." As for the future, Max hopes to continue creating new displays. One of his goals is to write a book to showcase his work and share his techniques with others who love confectionery art.

- 1 A piece of foamcore is used for the backdrop; a foil-lined base will become the skating rink.
- 2 Pieces of styrofoam secured with bamboo sticks are used to build a foundation.
- 3 Sugar icing is spread over the styrofoam to form the hills.
- 4 Food coloring is used to color the hills and the backdrop.
- 5 Sugar paste is rolled flat, cut into tree shapes and allowed to dry.
- 6 Yellow and green food coloring is applied to the tree shapes.
- 7 The trees are arranged on the backdrop. Sugar is poured to make the skating rink and crystallized sugar is placed around it. Pieces of colored sugar paste are added to the hillside for stairs, and more blue is added around the frosting on the edges.
- 8 Poles and benches made of sugar paste are added. The ropes between the poles are rolled icing.
- 9 The penguins are individually shaped by hand from sugar paste, then painted by hand. A confectionary glaze is airbrushed over them for a nice finish.