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## This Class Is Cake

Fante's schools regular folks in creating fancy decorated confections.  
by [Sarah Watson](#)

On a chilly Saturday afternoon in late October, a few people filter into the back room at Fante's Kitchen Wares Shop in the Italian Market. They've come for classes on cake decorating--an art form established in Europe and cultivated right here in Philly.

The Philadelphia story of cake decorating begins with Jean Fante, the former owner of Fante's Kitchen Wares. Fante traveled to Australia and England to learn the craft, and brought books and basic tools--which weren't previously available here--back to the U.S.

Before then, cake decorating just wasn't available in the U.S., unless a chef from another country could be recruited for the task, says Mariella Esposito, who now co-owns Fante's with her brothers and sister. "In America, it wasn't a common thing to decorate cakes like the fancy way Fante learned."

Armed with this newfound knowledge, Fante began offering classes in her South Philly store in the late '50s. Her classes became known in culinary circles as *the* place to go to learn cake decorating.



Fante's has offered classes in cake decorating for more than 40 years, with instructor Deborah Lang teaching for the past 25.

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On this particular afternoon, an intermediate class is on the table, with a diverse group of five students preparing to perfect their skills.

Lang's classes are designed for two types of students. The beginner class is for those who've never picked up a pastry bag before. Basic decorating techniques, such as tool preparation, and making icing, piping (those pretty borders on cakes) and eventually roses are covered. Students must bring their own cake to work on, as well as their own tools.

The intermediate class is for those who have some experience decorating cakes. The focus of this class is learning and perfecting various kinds of piping and flowers made from buttercream and

royal icing. This particular icing dries extremely hard, and is often used for wedding cake and gingerbread house decorations. In the final class, students assemble and decorate a large tiered cake using the flowers they've made in previous weeks.

The classes are held in a kitchen just behind Fante's baking section. As students prep their parchment bags and organize their supplies, Lang plops a bowl full of icing into a large mixer and turns it on.

Each student has brought several containers of their own icing. They're instructed to color the white paste to their liking. Some choose shades of pink, while others use yellow or even orange. As they mix in the coloring gel by hand, the white becomes mottled with intense shades of pink or yellow but eventually smooths out to form an even cast.



The students place the desired metal tip inside their pastry bags, then fill the bags with large amounts of brightly colored icing. The icing is pushed down inside, and the bag is twisted and tightened so that no air remains.

Once everyone's ready, Lang quickly reviews the basic technique of making roses. She pipes out a small rounded cone shape onto a tiny metal platform called a nail. She then switches to a different bag with a chiseled tip. She gently pushes out icing while twisting the nail. Then she squeezes out shorter bursts of the pasty concoction while rotating to form petals.

After her demonstration, the students diligently repeat what Lang has just done. The classroom is silent except for the sound of crackling parchment paper and Lang's occasional suggestion.

"You guys are serious," Lang laughs in response to their silence.

James Lederman's flowers are drooping because his icing is too soft. Lang tells him to throw the icing away because the buttercream he's using is breaking down. He carefully scoops the coral-colored paste out of his bags and dumps it in the garbage.

He fills a new series of bags with uncolored icing and starts the process of piping out petals all over again.

Lederman, a 22-year-old Penn senior, grew up with his mom showing him tricks as she was cooking and baking. "I started taking it seriously as a personal hobby at the end of high school," he says. "I like cooking and baking a lot," Lederman completed the beginner series earlier this month and is now an intermediate student.

Decorating cakes is a popular way to bring some personalization and creativity to special events. Esposito says many people make wedding cakes and other confections for friends and family, or even to earn a little extra cash on the side.

Michelle Jones, a 38-year-old from Philly, took up the craft because she enjoys baking for her nephews. "I think it adds a personal touch," she says. Last spring a friend told her about the classes at Fante's, so she enrolled and is now an advanced student.

Most special events aren't complete without a beautifully decorated cake, whether it's from a bakery, a grocery store or even your own kitchen. But while cake decorating isn't something you learn overnight, Lang's classes provide the basic skills.

Those of us with busy schedules might not think we have the time to sit down and learn the basics of this art form, but Fante's courses involve just three classes held on Saturday afternoons.

"I really like having the classes here," says Esposito. "People are so proud of what they've learned in such a short time."

*Fante's Kitchen Wares Shop*  
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