

Three Bakers' Worst Nightmares Come True

October is the month when we love thinking about ghosts, goblins, ghouls, and whatever other monsters horror writers can conjure up to scare us during late night movies.

But for chefs, frights don't just happen on [October 31](#) — real-world culinary horrors can strike at any time. The following baking horror stories detail how three ACF members were able to save their desserts from turning into their worst nightmares.

Attack of the Killer Buttercream





As a seasoned pastry chef, Casey Shiller, CEPC, CCE, AAC, program coordinator of Baking and Pastry Arts at St. Louis Community College, is used to multitasking — and it's not uncommon for him to produce multiple wedding cakes on one day for several different venues. Once upon a time, his process involved making the buttercream he would use to ice and decorate a cake on the same day as the wedding.

Until this happened:



Shiller

Everything was a little rushed this particular day, as our first wedding was an early-afternoon affair, and I was facing a timeline that didn't allow for much wiggle room for

mistakes. Of course, this is when most mistakes will materialize.

The cakes were all torted, waiting on the finished buttercream to be placed between the layers and utilized for decoration. I was beginning the meringue for Italian buttercream. The syrup was almost to temp, and I began whipping the whites. The whites were a little under-whipped when I added the boiling sugar

syrup. Of course, this meant the meringue wouldn't become as firm when whipped. I started over.

Dumping the loose meringue into the trash from the eighty-quart mixing bowl, I began getting anxious. As the second batch of syrup reached the needed temperature, I ensured I would not make the same mistake with the whites again.

This time, I waited to add the syrup when the whites reached their perfect peaks. Finally, the meringue worked perfectly. Looking at the clock, I knew I needed to get hustling, as the cake wasn't even filled, let alone iced and decorated. I needed to get the buttercream completed faster. I began hurriedly adding the butter to the Italian meringue. Midway through adding the butter, I noticed I had made buttercream soup, as the meringue hadn't cooled properly thereby melting the butter into a liquid.

Now in full-panic mode, I added the remaining butter hoping it would emulsify in, and create a spreadable cream. No such luck. Staring into this large batch of silky soup, I now needed to come up with a plan to cool it down and get the butter to solidify. With cloudy judgement, I decided to add ice to the mixture, hoping somehow it would spur the butter to solidify. Nope. Now the ice had melted in, and yielded an unusable, water-logged, buttercream porridge.

After getting help from his pastry sous chef, who saved the day by handily making the third batch of buttercream without incident, the two were able to assemble the cake and get it to the wedding. Although they ran a little late, with some stalling from his sales manager, Shiller was able to set up the cake for the reception and the guests were none the wiser.

But Shiller is. He learned his lesson that day and no longer makes buttercream on the same day as weddings.

Weird Science



It all started with what Michael Kalanty, CEPC, CCE, Emeritus, author of “How to Bake Bread,” thought was a basic mathematical calculation and a desire to impress his executive chef.

*Michael Kalanty
Kalanty* *Eight times 1 cup is
8 cups. So I started
with 8 cups of eggs.
Eight times 1/2 cup
is 4 cups. That's how much sugar was needed. Eight
times 1 tablespoon of vanilla is 8 tablespoons.*

I was bulking up my recipe for carrot cake. I was proud of myself for using geometry to calculate how many times I'd need to multiply the 9-inch round cake recipe in order to fill two full sheet trays with carrot cake batter.

That's what I'd promised my executive chef when he asked for a sweet donation for the PBS fundraisers who'd be on the phones all weekend at the studio adjacent to his restaurant. His name was on the line

because food donations for the volunteer phone handlers get a ton of free advertising by helping the station raise money in its semi-annual telethon.

However, this gift for the telethon turned into a marathon of horrors when it was time for Kalanty to add the flour to his Frankensteinian concoction.

Eight times 2 cups of flour is 16 cups. I added the flour and then blended everything together with the wooden oar in the rondo. It was a little too much batter for the rondo, so I decided to scrape everything out and transfer it to the 20-quart mixer.

And then for some reason I went back to the formula and multiplied the 2 cups of flour by 8 a second time. ... Eight times 16 cups is... 128 cups? Could that be right? I checked and 8 times 16 is 128. Seemed like a lot, but here goes.

Before I realized what happened, I'd already measured and added the extra flour to the mixing bowl. When I turned the mixer on, I realized my mistake and was filled with horror! I watched flour puff up into clouds and spill over the sides of the mixing bowl. The batter was getting so stiff the paddle attachment was having trouble mixing everything together. Was this what bulk cooking was all about? It seemed to be more frightening than I thought it could be.

The frights didn't end there. When his boss came around to find out what was going on, Kalanty was convinced his aspirations of becoming a sous chef would go up in smoke that day. But to his surprise, his chef, while disappointed, used this monstrosity as the inspiration for innovation by suggesting that he repurpose the failed cake by making it a [carrot raisin](#)

[bread](#). Kalanty could even still make his cream cheese frosting, which would be sold to the volunteers as a delicious spread for the tasty bread.

And the best part of his scary story was that Kalanty learned that any kitchen failure, no matter how petrifying it may seem, can be a teachable moment for a chef that culminates into a recipe for success.

The Infernal Wedding Cake-Walk



When Natasha Capper, CEPC, Executive Pastry Chef at the Piedmont Driving Club in Atlanta, was asked by a member family to make a cake for their son's wedding, she was flattered. But unfortunately, she was also uninformed. The missing ingredient to this story was the fact that the wedding reception would be held in a tent with no air conditioning — which led to an infernal mess.



I arrived with the cake about two hours before the event, just as the wedding coordinator asked. The sun was beaming through

Capper the beautiful clear
roof and the tent
was already nice, warm and humid. Nice if you're an
orchid.

The bride had chosen a very stable filling so I thought, it [would soften] but there was plenty of structure and would hold up fine. She had wanted a nice tall cake so the top two tiers were foam dummies. I set the cake up and put beautiful fresh flowers on it. It truly was a very pretty cake in a lovely setting.

Before leaving, I spoke to the GM of the venue and said if the sun gets to a point it is shining directly onto the cake, you may want to get a couple of strong guys to pick it up and move it inside at least until the sun goes down. It was late evening, so I figured the sun was just going to keep moving and eventually be blocked by the building the tent was attached to.

But it didn't work out that way.

The heat caused the icing on the top two layers of the cake to melt and the foam to slide off. To make matters worse, Capper had a plane to catch and was unable to go back to the venue to fix it. Luckily, the wedding florist, who she already had a good working relationship with, covered up the top tiers of the cake with flowers so the melted parts of the cake were successfully hidden from view.

Since then, Capper makes it clear that when it's hot as hellfire, it's always best to err on the side of caution.

Lessons learned: If it seems like it's too hot, it is. There is nothing wrong with telling someone the cake is not safe where it is and asking to move it inside. And last,

but not least: Don't set up a wedding cake in a tent in Georgia without air conditioning, ever!

It doesn't have to be Halloween for a culinary horror story to take place, but luckily, unlike the characters in our favorite scary movies, professionals are able to walk away from these types of kitchen nightmares relatively unscathed.

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