



Style and Substance

Wedding cakes that taste as fabulous as they look

By TERESA POLITANO Photos by JOE EPSTEIN

Donna Sardella is a walking Zen lesson for those of us with kitchen lust, who yearn for more spacious cabinets, larger counter space, more modern surroundings.

Sardella works in a tiny lopsided space in an old basement in Millburn, a very small corner in the kitchen of Basilico Restaurant that she calls her own. She frequently must unplug and rearrange the portable freezer (home to gelato and ice cream) so she can maneuver from oven to countertop.

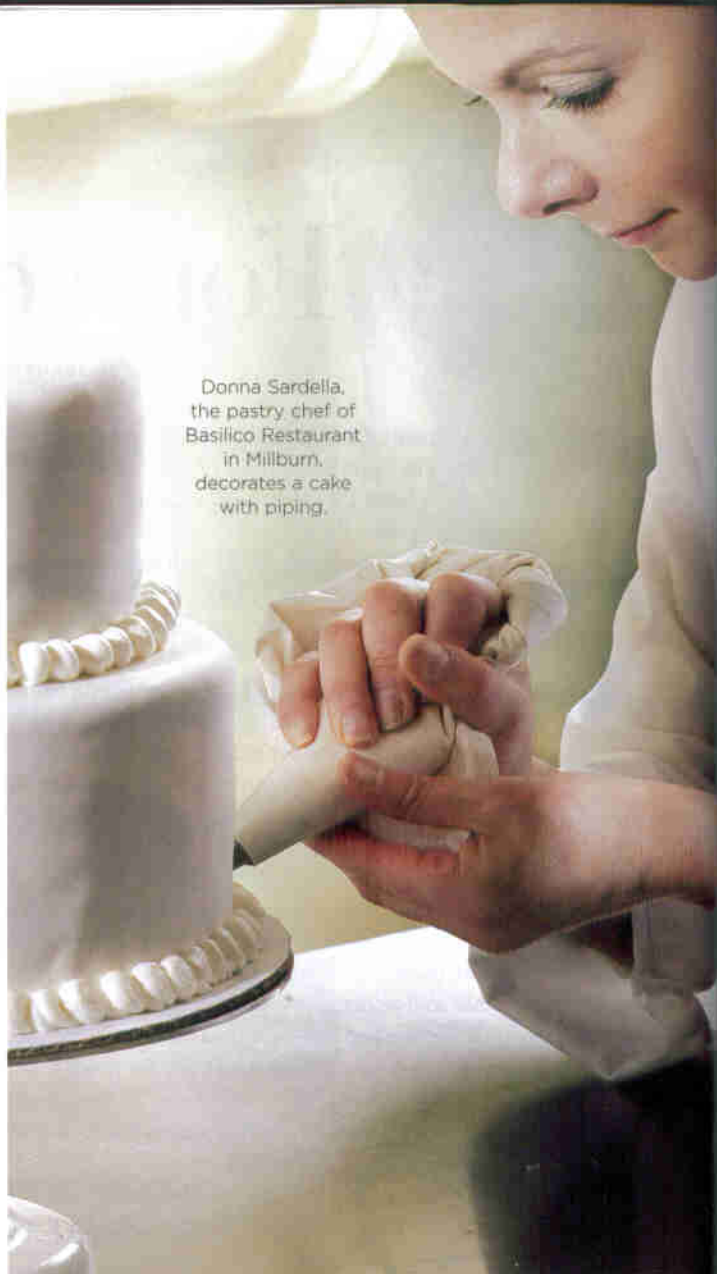
It seems impossible to even turn around in this space, but it is here where she makes three-tiered wedding cakes — baking the many layers, hand-rolling the fondant with a floral embossed rolling pin to give it the look of delicate antique jacquard fabric, rolling beads made of royal icing one by one and strung together like a Chanel candy necklace.

Her space is so precariously small, you worry that she'll never get the cake out, that instead the bride and groom will have to crowd in front of the shelves of carefully labeled containers of sugar and hazelnut just to ensure their wedding photos of the ceremonial cutting of the cake.

And then suddenly the cake is upstairs, sitting on a silver platter, gloriously basking. Sardella is the executive pastry chef at Basilico, which boasts a dessert menu that is both legendary and extensive, with more than 20 entries ranging from the crisp napoleon to the creamy ricotta cheesecake, plus strudel, zuppa inglese and a daily soufflé. She has an impressive résumé, is a graduate of the French Culinary Institute and worked at Le Cirque, Bouley and the Jumeirah Essex House.

Her philosophy? Desserts must taste as amazing as they look.

Which is one thing when you're making desserts for the restaurant, quite another when you're baking party cakes for 50, 75 or 100.



Donna Sardella, the pastry chef of Basilico Restaurant in Millburn, decorates a cake with piping.

"Most people want a 'wow' cake," says Sardella, and they prefer style over substance. But Sardella seeks both, which is why she makes a simple syrup from fresh raspberries, for example, to spread over layers of chocolate cake before she decorates it, to keep the cake moist, dense.

Sardella's cakes start at \$500, and should be ordered at least a month in advance (a cake to feed 100 is about \$1,200). She loves to make simple, classic cakes with an elegant twist (such as the one pictured) but also makes whimsical cakes — including one with a "Wizard of Oz" theme, complete with yellow brick road and Dorothy shoes made of chocolate and painted red.

Sardella grew up in Staten Island, part of a large Italian family, with a mother who loved any excuse to bake — from birthdays to good report cards.

"We sneezed, there was a party," says Sardella, whose childhood nickname was Sweet Tooth. One of her mother's ice box cakes sometimes becomes a dessert special at Basilico's, but Sardella's personal favorite is mom's lemon meringue pie. ☺