

# The Sweet Art

Feast your eyes and see how **cake photos** can be sweet business

words Desiree Koh photos Raymond Lee



**Husband and Wife Team**  
The partnership between baker Eileen Tay and photographer Chong Yew Hong has produced many eye candy creations

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Imagine a wonderland resplendent in bright splashes of red, orange, yellow, blue and green, and filled with macarons, chocolate trees, pralines, tarts, cupcakes and a three-tiered extravaganza from which The Red Queen herself is perched atop, presiding over a marvelous tea party.

If this sounds like a candy paradise that only exists in reveries through the looking glass, well it's not! This spread of sweet indulgences created for an "Alice in Wonderland"-themed birthday party with a nod to Tim Burton's vision was conceptualised and handcrafted by pâtissier Eileen Tay, owner of Artisan Sweets.

From little critters – the Queen's "slaves" – that adorned each cupcake to personalised party favours that were both edible and lickable to the Queen herself, a doll-like figurine in a majestic dress with a tiara on red curly hair, holding a flamingo wand, no detail has been spared in re-creating a whimsical landscape of desserts. This whirlwind of exuberant hues, intricate elements and individual uniqueness, all hallmarks of Eileen's epicurean art, is a photographer's dream come true.

### SWEET PHOTOGRAPHY

Which is why, to paraphrase the saying, behind every successful pastry chef is a passionate photographer. As Eileen custom designs

cakes, macarons and other delightful desserts for weddings, birthdays and other special occasions, her husband Chong Yew Hong, an avid food photographer, styles and shoots her creations. Between this perfect pairing, Eileen's confections not only taste and look magnificent, they are also picturesque works of art captured for Facebook and her portfolio.

"Good photography is important because our main line of marketing is Facebook, and the colours and details of our desserts are magnified by pictures," says Eileen.

Eileen spends a lot of time with each client discussing the theme and ambience of their event before she creates the cake, usually accompanied by a dessert spread. Yew Hong then shoots each set of sweets to tell the story behind them. From "Miss Marc", a birthday cake for a huge Marc Jacobs fan, and "Loving Yoga", a cake featuring yoginis in various poses to a racetrack full of cars and a homage to London, each beautifully concocted figurine and topping beg for their own close-up, and each scene lets Yew Hong's imagination run wild with a never-ending selection of angles and perspectives to capture. Wearing his photographer hat, Yew Hong often shares suggestions on how the cakes can be enhanced aesthetically, especially in a picture, whether it's adding a curl or another ribbon – small details that make the big picture look even more pleasing.

"Sometimes I just need him to take the entire shot so I can put it in my portfolio, because it's always useful for customers to see the cake as a whole when they are making their selection," says Eileen with a laugh. "But he'll carry the cake off and do his own thing – he always believes that close-ups of the details do more justice to the cake and help it look better." Yew Hong isn't the only photographer who's enthralled with Eileen's pastries. One of her regular customers, for whom the series "Amazing Amelia" was named – Eileen always

#### Pretty Packaging

(Left) Beautiful macarons carefully decorated in a glass jar with ribbons and frills

#### Photographer's Delight

(Opposite page) Jars of coloured candies (top); Yew Hong photographs the shop's hottest-selling item – macarons!



ISO 100 f/2.2 t1/100sec



ISO 100 f/1.8 t1/125sec



ISO 100 f/2.2 t1/125sec



ISO 250 f/2 t1/60sec



ISO 100 f/2.8 t1/60sec



ISO 250 f/3.5 t1/125sec

**Sweet Gear**

[Top] Yew Hong has a bag of tricks he uses to photograph the beautiful treats that Eileen produces

**A Baker and a Photographer**

[Middle and Bottom] To preserve the hard work poured into a creation, Yew Hong photographs every cake before it leaves the shop

*- Cake Story -*

My cakes should never be misrepresented by a photographer who isn't aware of the story behind them

names her cakes after the first customer that they are designed for – shot the “Under the Sea”-themed cupcakes starring Nemo, starfish, octopuses and shells on aquamarine frosting.

It might seem ironic then that there is a “No Photography” sign in the Artisan Sweets storefront, although amateur shutterbugs try to bend the rules, even resorting to hiding in the park across the street and zooming in on Eileen’s cakes with telephoto lenses. Her rationale is simple, and inspired by a bridal designer who never allows his dresses to be pictured on mannequins or snapped without direction. Eileen, too, believes that her cakes should never be

misrepresented by a photographer who isn't aware of the story behind them – she never wants to compromise the passion poured into the work from her team of chefs, formerly from five-star kitchens, who expertly work with the very best ingredients that are imported from around the world.

“We don't do things that don't showcase our workmanship,” Eileen says. “Everything on our cakes and desserts is handmade in our kitchen – we don't use toys or props, and every part of each creation is edible.” In other words, the perfect models of pastry perfection.

**A BAKER'S CALLING**

Eileen knew she wanted to be a chef when she was 16, growing up in a family where there was a huge cake baked by her mother, an excellent cook, everyday. To Eileen, “if you like food, you would want to think about how to create it.” After completing her “A” Levels, Eileen worked at n.y.d.c. Cafe, a restaurant in Singapore known for their desserts. She worked in the kitchen as well as on the floor, and continued to bake for friends through university. Even after working long hours in her former career as a communications professional, Eileen would get home at two o'clock in the morning and start baking. Four years ago at age 26, she thought, “Why don't I give professional baking a try?”

In a now-or-never leap of faith, Eileen was accepted into the revered Culinary Institute of



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ISO 200 f/2 t1/200sec

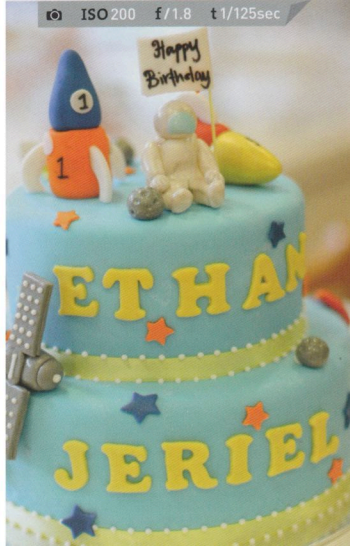


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**Fantasy Cakes**

Yew Hong shot these wonderful creations with his Canon EOS 400D

[Top from left] a wedding cake with cascading hand-crafted flowers, beautiful blue birthday cake for princess Clare, a bon voyage cake with Paddington Bear (Middle) a first birthday cake for football baby Tom (Bottom from left) a birthday cake for Ethan's astronaut aspirations, a sweet pink teddy bear cake for Dawn, Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland cake



ISO 200 f/1.8 t1/125sec



ISO 200 f/2 t1/125sec



ISO 1600 f/1.6 t1/250sec



America (C.I.A.) where she trained for eight months before working in U.S. restaurants to complete her professional education. Even after being instructed by Stephen Durfee, the famous French Laundry's first pastry chef whose most memorable lesson was to "eat and train your palate" and apprenticing in Michelin-starred kitchens, Eileen still uses her mother's machines from her teenage years, and fervently practises some of Mrs Tay's philosophies: Only fold a cake in one direction, and clean as you go.

At the C.I.A., all the techniques of baking and pastry-making became clearer and instilled more confidence so that Eileen became surer of everything she did in the kitchen. The intensive course also reaffirmed her decision to finally make a dream career out of her lifelong passion. Artisan Sweets opened its doors two years ago.

Although Eileen is known for her custom design cakes and dessert spreads, her true love is macarons, a sweet habit she has never been able to kick since she tasted her first one on a trip to Paris.

"I never thought of making cakes," she says. "I went to school because I love macarons and I went to school purely to learn macarons. But I went to the wrong school – if you want to learn macarons, you go to France." Although Eileen had also applied to Le Cordon Bleu, the high exchange rate for the euro steered her towards C.I.A. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise when she realised her passion for restaurant desserts. Even though she has made a name for herself making elaborate cakes, macarons are also a daily bestseller. (The best macaron she has ever eaten? Pierre Hermé. "Hands down. Perfection.")

Like a photographer who captures changing landscapes and different backdrops

**Intricate Work**  
(Top left and middle) Eileen painstakingly assembles a carousel cake

**Well Packed**  
(Top right) Packaging for Artisan Sweets – from paper bags to cake boxes, name cards and gift boxes

**Chef at Work**  
(Left) Eileen enjoys baking and putting together elaborate cakes where every detail is edible and gorgeous to photograph

- Edible Art -  
It's not often that you find something that looks as good as it tastes, or tastes as good as it looks



# How **sweet** it is...



### Artisan Sweets

A cozy cafe where everything is eye candy and not to mention, delicious

you that her favourite project ever would be the magnum opus she designed for the biggest day of her life.

“The cake closest to my heart is my wedding cake,” she says. A five-tier spectacle decked in Tiffany blue, studded with edible pearls and ravished with stunning red anemones, her favourite flower. It was the centerpiece of an eight-metre-long dessert table, the most extravagant she has ever put together, to serve 500 guests. “My husband said I didn’t do anything for the wedding except for the desserts,” Eileen laughs. Good thing Yew Hong has a sweet tooth and is just as passionate about what she does as she is. “It helps that he is very creative, so he gives me a lot of ideas.”

It’s not often that you find something that looks as good as it tastes, or tastes as good as it looks, in a little shop around the corner where the baker knows everyone by name and where customers become friends. In the world of Eileen Tay, from palate to photography palette, it’s all about having your cake and shooting it before eating it, too. 📸

all over the world, Eileen’s macarons are created seasonally and released in limited editions. Although you can find the black forest with brandied cherry, her most popular macaron, all year round, a pumpkin spice macaron was created for Christmas and a yuzu macaron evolved from a shipment from Japan, after she had tasted the delicious fruit there. As for the peanut butter macaron, “I make flavours I like to eat. I love Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, so I made it into a macaron!”

### PIECE DE RESISTANCE

Eileen has an extensive gallery of masterpieces to select from, but without hesitation, she’ll tell



their wedding cake



A trip to the confectionery can be as sweet on the eyes as it is on the palate. This issue, we were inspired by the colours and elaborate variety of baked sweets that can be captured on camera. Macarons and cupcakes in particular beg to be photographed. A stack of macarons look just like an edible rainbow, the colours so intense you can almost taste the rose flavour in the pink and the pistachio in the green. Cupcakes are special – there’s so much attention to the frills and swirls of icing given to such a small cake. Some are pictured so perfectly you can’t bare to eat it.