

Wedding Custom of the Month

February/March: Wedding Cake

This month I'll present and speculate on a few of the threads I find most interesting from the history of wedding cakes. Instead of attempting to weave these threads together, I point you to my main source: Simon Charsley's *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History*. This book offers plenty of context for what I've written here and a great deal of detail on subjects I haven't touched.

I'm an American living in Canada, but I'll discuss the history of British wedding cakes, as Charsley does. The North American wedding cake largely shares this history, and the only major difference in its most typical 20th-century form is that it's a white or yellow sponge cake, while the typical British cake is a dense alcoholic fruitcake layered and frosted in marzipan icing, then covered with white icing. Typical North American and British wedding cakes look almost identical: they are frosted with white icing and covered with elaborate designs, which are also made from icing and white. Most cakes on both sides of the Atlantic shared one feature during most of the 20th century that you might not recall if you didn't attend weddings before the late 1980's: they were frosted with royal icing. This icing looked lovely, but it dried so hard that it was quite difficult to cut through, prompting many bakeries to rent out a saw so the bride and groom could cut the first slice of cake, or to cut the first slice in advance and very lightly ice over the incision.

Shortly before the Protestant Reformation hit Great Britain, British priests often blessed a loaf of bread at the end of Mass in an act separate from offering communion. This loaf of bread was broken for the congregation to share. There are 16th century records of wedding parties carrying bread (as well as wine goblets) in their processions to wedding Masses to be blessed for this purpose. Such loaves of bread are one precursor of the modern wedding cake.

By the 16th century, foods containing large proportions of dried fruit were served on many special occasions throughout Britain. The word "plum" or "plumb" was found in the names of many of these foods, and it referred to any of several dried fruits. Descendants of this plum family include plum pudding, mincemeat pie, simnel cakes, hot cross buns, and the modern British wedding cake. As a sweet flour-based food resembling modern cake was developed by British bakers in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was a cake-like version of one plum dessert that came to be reserved for the most special occasions, including weddings. One reason this plum cake was chosen for such occasions is that it required ingredients that had to be imported: almonds, citrus fruits, a number of spices, and, as they became widely available, sugar and rum. These ingredients were too expensive to serve in everyday meals and they could be shown off at public celebrations.

It was rare to ice a cake until at least the 18th century. Even after icing was introduced to some desserts, icing something already so sweet and rich as cake seemed akin to gilding a lily. So it struck people as particularly luxurious not just to ice a cake, but to create the icing from sugar that, unlike most sugar, had been refined several times. Only icing created from such sugar could be made to appear extremely white, and white frosting was valued in part because the refining process made it expensive. Frosting made from this high-quality sugar was used on cakes for quite special occasions, including weddings. It is interesting that two physically contrasting elements of wedding cakes both signified great expense: deep, rich fruit cake and bright white icing.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, several variations on a custom of breaking some sort of biscuit or bread over the head of the bride were noted in England and Scotland. It is possible that these were remnants of older customs native to Britain, but it is equally possible that they were introduced by people enamored of antiquity, who believed (incorrectly) that they were re-enacting an ancient Roman custom. In most of accounts of this custom, the biscuit was broken over the head of the bride after the wedding ceremony, just before she entered her new home. In some cases, the unmarried guests scrambled for pieces of the biscuit and placed them under their pillows in order to discover the identity of their future spouses in dreams. Reports of this custom are scattered, and they cease during the 19th century.

A much more commonly noted practice first appears in records from 18th century Britain. The basic custom was this: after their wedding ceremony, the bride and groom made a rite of running several tiny pieces of wedding cake (in something close to its modern form) through the bride's wedding ring, then distributing these bits of cake to their unmarried women guests to take home and place under their pillows to assist them in dreaming of their future spouses. This custom also appears to have died out in most places during the 19th century, but somewhat later than the custom of breaking a biscuit over the bride's head.

During the 19th century, cakes became a feature of weddings rather than one food among others at wedding feasts. By the late 19th century, wedding cakes had taken on a form different from that of other cakes used for special occasions. At this time, the appearance of food was considered particularly important, and those who could afford to do so created lavish displays of food for special occasions. Height was a common element of these displays, and by the end of the century, commercial bakers who were competing to produce the most impressive wedding cake invented tiered cakes, then standardized the three-tiered wedding cake. In the late 19th century, commercial bakers also invented and popularized the art of piping icing into complex designs, and soon cakes were covered with elaborate decorations made entirely of icing. The fact that only professionals had honed their skills well enough to create such decorations was one reason that most people began to leave the creation of their wedding cakes to professional bakers. By the turn of the 20th century, wedding cakes looked and tasted much the way the typical wedding cake does today.

Around the turn of the 20th century, cutting the cake became a major ritual at most British

weddings. Charsley suggests a link between the earlier custom of breaking a baked biscuit over the bride's head and distributing its crumbs, the custom of passing bits of cake through the bride's ring and distributing them, and the twentieth century rite of cutting the wedding cake. In all of these rituals, the cake is broken and distributed, and those who receive it might use it to divine the identity of their future spouses.

Charsley is very cautious about making any sweeping statements to interpret these acts. But what interpretations he does suggest tend to associate the cake with the bride, and especially with her body. Charsley posits that the cutting (or, at one time, breaking) of the cake might signify the end of the bride's role as a single woman or the end of her transitional role as a bride. He also senses a sexual significance in the bride and groom together cutting with a phallic knife, through an outer icing that is difficult to penetrate, into a cake that is associated with the bride's body.

The fact that numerous brides still attempt to match their cakes to their gowns and bouquets lends support to Charsley's association of the bride's body with the cake. Over the course of the late 19th century, as cakes took on their modern significance, their decorations became less representative, until they consisted almost entirely of abstract shapes and depictions of flowers made with icing, and sometimes actual flowers as well. This change also lends support to the development of an association between the cake and the bride's body -- writing on the cake (as is common for other personal celebrations) or depicting the couple's particular interests on it would conflict with the cake's representing the bride's body. But flowers are appropriate to such a cake: not only can flowers represent the bride's maidenhead, the typical bride actually holds flowers.

Because Charsley chooses not to play with the idea of the cake symbolizing the bride's body as much as he might, he offers no related meaning for the cake's being served up not just to the groom but to all the couple's friends and family. But he does point out that, in the 20th century, eating the wedding cake has been removed from the more important display and cutting of the cake. The significance of eating the cake, then, might be unrelated to the significance of displaying and cutting it. The rite of cutting of the cake, he points out, has little relation to the practical purpose of cutting a cake -- to divide it up and serve it to guests. I must admit that I have never seen a wedding cake cut up for guests publically, but at every "white wedding" and even many of the non-traditional weddings I've attended, the couple makes a public ceremony of cutting the first slice of cake.

An interesting echo of this sexual interpretation of the wedding cake is given by Walter Edwards in his observations of a very different culture. In Japan, in the late 1980's, most couples had adopted the tiered white wedding cake, but their use of it was somewhat different from that of Westerners. At their wedding receptions, many Japanese couples made a rite of cutting the wedding cake. This was seen as their first act of cooperation as a married couple, as it often is in the West. Their performance of this act was made dramatic by means of a spotlight in a darkened room, a recorded narration, a cloth that was whipped off the knife at the crucial moment, the gesture of raising the knife high into the air, and dry ice vapor that misted the area surrounding the wedding cake as soon as the cake was cut. In fact, the act was pure ritual and

display, having no practical purpose at all: the cake was a plastic one with a pre-cut slit for the knife. Andrews interprets this act in part as sexual, noting that, in Japanese culture as in Western culture, foods made of grain are associated with fertility, and noting that the Japanese associate sweets in general and cakes in particular with young children, which marriage is traditionally expected to produce. The Japanese word for "cut" is taboo at weddings, as it implies danger to the fragile new union. So the act of cutting the wedding cake is called "inserting the knife" in Japanese – a phrase loaded with sexual implications.

Even if Charsley is hesitant to accept his own suggestion that the British wedding cake symbolizes the bride's body and that cutting into it represents couple's first intercourse, I am willing to accept it on a trial basis. I would add that breaking or cutting into the cake might signify that, with marriage and her loss of virginity, the woman ceases to exist as an individual, as a defined entity separate from all others. Maybe not – maybe the woman as an individual never mattered much to those who developed this rite, maybe the bride was considered a part of her parents' family until her wedding and, after that, a part of her husband's family. But the prominence of symbols of purity in weddings suggests a vision of the bride moving from a state of apartness to a state of union with her husband (if not from singleness to brokenness per se). Although the white bridal gown was not intended as a symbol of sexual purity when it was introduced, it certainly signified purity to many women in the 20th century. And some say a white dress signifies expense because it shows dirt so easily; a clean white dress looks pure, as if it has not been worn before, as if it (and, by extension, its wearer) has had no contact with the world. Perhaps the people who developed the rite of cutting the cake envisioned a young adult woman as someone who had recently grown into an individual who was separate from her family, and they saw her individuality as new and pure, unknown and untouched. How sad that her individuality was destined to be broken.

Penetrating the bride's body and depriving her of her virginity, let alone slicing into the integrity of her soul, are probably not acts you want to celebrate at your wedding. In fact, you've probably had sex with your partner before, and you and your partner might be of the same sex. But if you want to serve cake at your wedding, even a traditional wedding cake, I'd encourage you to do it. The art of bakers and decorators can be stunning, and cake is delicious. Charsley, at least, is very cautious about making any single, authoritative statement of the wedding cake's meaning. He sees significance in the fact that most people refuse to interpret the cutting at all, let alone interpret it as the groom's first act of penetrating the bride's untouched body. You should feel free to serve cake that means nothing in particular, or to give your cake any meaning you like.

If you do choose to make your cake or its cutting symbolic, I'd recommend announcing the symbolism you choose to your guests. In doing this, maybe you'll replace the symbols lurking in their minds, but more likely you'll give them an experience they would have lacked – the experience of eating something that is meaningful and sanctified. What meaning might you give that cake? A sweet cake might symbolize your delight in marrying. Or you might emphasize the fact that sharing your cake is about breaking bread with your community, dividing your bounty among your friends. The North American custom of newlyweds feeding each other cake might

be considered be a kind gesture of mutual support or a funny act of shared celebration, and maybe you can find a way to extend such gestures to your friends. A rich cake – particularly a fruitcake, because it is so rich and dense – might represent your union, your love for one another, or your blessings. Sharing cakes with such qualities among all your guests would be quite a generous act.

Or maybe you can find a way of applying the symbolism you've read here to your marriage. Maybe you don't want to divide your partner's soul or life with a knife, but you do want to celebrate the changes that marriage will bring to both of you. To do this, you might choose to mix two foods – you might layer two kinds of cake together for the wedding, or mix two soups as a ritual during your wedding meal. Play with your food, and play with its symbolism! Have fun playing together.

References:

Charsley, Simon R. Wedding Cakes and Cultural History. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Edwards, Walter. Modern Japan Through Its Weddings : Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989.

Copyright 2005 Kelly Fine. You may print this document for your personal use. Do not reproduce it by other means or for another purpose without my permission.


```
ERROR: undefined
OFFENDING COMMAND:

STACK:
```