

Mark Brickman WOWS Atlanta!

*When It Comes to Wedding
Cakes, this Pastry Chef Is the
Baker Man!*

by Deborah McCoy



How many of us know where life will carry us when we're 13? It's doubtful that many of us realize our career path at such a tender age. But that's not the case with Mark Brickman, Atlanta's pastry chef *extraordinaire*.

Growing up in New York and taking home economics, along with a required stint in industrial arts, young Brickman made his first culinary delight, popovers, in middle school and then went home to tell his mom he wanted to be a baker. Like most mothers her response, "Yes dear, whatever you want..." meant to placate a youngster

who certainly will never grow up to be a fireman, or an Indiana Jones, or a baker for that matter, did not fall on deaf ears when it came to her son.

A "scratch" baker and a good one, his grandmother, too, had been a great influence. He spent lots of time in the kitchen with her as she worked, essentially acting as her *sous chef*, measuring the flour and sugar and other ingredients that would go into the cookies, cakes and pies she created. He was enthralled.



When only 15, Brickman entered a summer program at the culinary

world's prestigious university, Johnson and Wales. Spending a week on campus in Providence, Rhode Island, and taking daily classes in the baking and pastry kitchen, it was here that his love for delicious desserts was cemented. He also realized that Johnson and Wales would be his university of choice upon his high school graduation (in 1988). It was also the only culinary school at the time that offered a degree in "pastry." (He graduated third in his class with an A.O.S. Degree in pastry arts and a B.S. in food service management.)



Continuing his culinary education throughout high school, he enrolled in a vocational-technical program. Each morning was spent in academics and each afternoon was spent making pastry. He won "bakeshop student of the year" his junior year and during his senior year, was placed in a

work-study program in Westchester, laboring in a bakery, 3 a.m. to 10 a.m. daily. From there, it was off to school. He says, "I knew what I wanted and I excelled. It would be my life's work."



College brought Brickman opportunity. In his junior year, he participated in an externship program in Lausanne, Switzerland. For three months, he created pastry under the direction of a French *pâtisserie*. The property where he worked, a vast resort, had five different restaurants in one building with Brickman supplying desserts to four of them. He termed it



“exciting!” He was also gratified to know that his European training validated his education. Then it was back to the States; he had won a full scholarship to complete his education at Johnson and Wales.

His first job, at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, brought more opportunity and much needed experience. He was privileged to work under Jeff Kneeland, an incredible, talented pastry chef, who Brickman characterizes as a man who could look at *any* image and sculpt it in cake. He credits college with providing the

foundation for his career but adds, “It’s the chef you work under that teaches you everything else. “

Brickman held top positions at upscale hotels across the country including the Ritz Carlton in St. Louis and Atlanta. Next was the Grand Hyatt, which had recently acquired Hotel Nikko. He describes the latter as the Japanese version of The Four Seasons [hotels], “...very high end, beautiful, and exemplary quality in every aspect from the décor to the food to the staff.” He was now “top gun” with a staff of eight. During his five years as pastry chef at





the Grand Hyatt, Atlanta, he was sent out “on loan” to the Hyatt Regency in Houston, in time for the *Grand Prix*, and then to the Grand Hyatt in Washington, D.C. when President Bush was first inaugurated. He calls it an “awesome experience.”

Brickman is a scratch baker. Everything at the Baker’s Man is made to order and so if you desire one of Brickman’s cakes, you don’t call on Wednesday for pick up on Saturday. As he says, “I don’t walk into a freezer and pull a cake out of a box.”

Brickman uses high-quality ingredients in his cakes—and it’s the ingredients that make the difference. Swiss chocolates, marmalade and Spanish cocoa powder are key factors because he says, “American companies have not grasped the concept of quality over sweetness.” “My cakes,” he adds, “are about *flavor* rather than sweetness.” This is why it’s critical when shopping for a wedding cake that you *taste samples before purchase*. Let your taste buds be the judge.

He’s proud of his cakes. When a bride books his services, he realizes that for good or naught, guests are going to inquire as to where she got the cake. So



up until the very end, the cake belongs to Brickman. It's his name on the product—and he wants to make sure that *everyone* will enjoy and admire it. The cake is after all, the focal point of the reception and the last thing that guests put in their mouths; it will be remembered. Brickman says that when you sample his cake, you should experience a “taste explosion.”

He's a traditionalist when it comes to wedding cake: three layers of cake, two layers of filling, four inches in height. He doesn't advise making each tier a different flavor since cake is *not* cut so that guests can sample each tier. But if you like a combination of different



cakes and fillings, he advises making them complementary, and putting them together in *one* slice to make for a unique and memorable dessert. His most popular combination is the traditional Southern white cake—a vanilla cake with texture somewhere between a pound and a sponge cake. A layer of chocolate buttermilk cake divides the vanilla cake layers and the fillings that divide both include a Swiss, white chocolate buttercream, topped by a thin ribbon of strawberry marmalade—and a caramel almond toffee buttercream. *YUM!*



Customization to Brickman is important. Flavors can be concocted for

the discerning bride who does not select one of his favorites—and of course color and design is key. It's important that the client meets with their florist ahead of time and knows the décor and the colors that will dominate her reception site. All will be coordinated to the cake, taking the bride's and groom's personalities into consideration. Cakes can even be made for those guests who are allergic to flour (more common than you'd think) and for diabetics. Brickman aims to please and it's appreciated by his clients.



And then there's the groom's cake, 60% of Brickman's wedding business. He credits the Food Network



for educating the public and upscale magazines like *Martha Stewart Weddings* and *In Style*, for making the groom's cake the norm (and I thought they were a deep-South thing). Brickman suggests if serving both, the bride's cake and the groom's cake, that you don't overdo it. For example, if you have 150 guests, you'd make the bride's cake for 125 and the groom's cake for 50.

When it comes to cakes and decorating, buttercream is his staple. He stays away from whipped cream/*mousse* fillings because they need to be refrigerated to maintain freshness—and cakes are often left out



for four or more hours at a reception. And he will not use stabilizers or preservatives as a solution to the problem. *Fondant*, the icing that's smooth as glass and rolled over cake, is used more for decoration.

Six-and-a-half years ago, Brickman made the decision to go on his own. He had made contacts along the way and he used those contacts to promote his business. He's also won innumerable awards and was one of the Knot's "Best of Weddings Pick 2007." And then there's the Allie Awards (Brickman's won four), which are the industry's way of rewarding the best. Given by NACE (National Association of

Catering Executives] and ISES (International Special Events Society), he has repeatedly taken top honors for "best cake presentation." When asked how he went so far in so few years, he answers, "Treating your business as you want to be treated as a customer."

Every savvy bride who reserves a vendor will sign a contract—and sometimes it's just plain unsavory to mix the pleasure of planning a wedding—with business. But Brickman's contracts, like his cakes, are works of art. They read like storylines; you'd love to read one—and to Brickman, they're essential because they provide a full



circle of communication between himself and his client. He makes his cakes come to life as he reads the contract to his brides-to-be because as the designer, he wants to put the visual into words; he can even see them *mentally* taste their cake and imagine its beauty. Brickman makes the necessity of a contract, sweetly palatable.

He is painfully honest. His pricing is on his website and it's loaded with information and beautiful photos of his cakes. As he says, "I have nothing to hide. Want to see my kitchen? Come on back!" And he doesn't nickel-and-dime his customers to death. You won't pay more for a square cake than a round, for example... It won't happen at the Baker's Man.

Mark Brickman

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