

A Bonus Section for Our Georgia Readers

Georgia Living

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...and more

Ashley Schwerzler's parents bake
giant gingerbread men.

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Southern Living

Ashley Schwerzler holds one of the 2-foot-tall gingerbread men her parents make at Frosted Pumpkin Gourmet.



PHOTOGRAPHS: BLAKE SIMS

Oversize Cookie Cutters

You might wonder where the Schwerzlers got the cutters for their imposing gingerbread men. “We had them custom-made by a metalworker,” Jeff says. “Most home ovens won’t hold the big pans we use, but smaller cutters are widely available at kitchen-supply stores. If you’re trying this at home, just take some cardboard, cut a template of the shape you want, lay it on rolled-out dough, and trim along the edge with a paring knife.” Otherwise, call Frosted Pumpkin Gourmet, and place an order.

Gingerbread Giants

A seasonal treat grew to major proportions for these creative bakers.

Using thick oven mitts, Jeff Schwerzler moves full-size baking sheets from a hot oven to cooling racks. Across each pan sprawls exactly one gingerbread man. But oh, what marvels! Each thick and aromatic beauty measures 2 feet from head to heels, weighs 4¾ pounds, and is more than 1 inch thick—a true giant among cookies.

Jeff’s wife, Karyn, will pipe on chocolate-colored royal icing to form twinkling eyes, a dot nose, and an upturned smile. She’ll add buttons of red and green icing resembling holly berries and leaves. The hefty cookie cutouts will likely serve as centerpieces before people start mischievously

breaking off irresistible chunks to eat.

Ordinarily these two bakers spend their time making impressive wedding cakes at Frosted Pumpkin Gourmet, their home-based business nestled between Alpharetta and Free Home. They started making gingerbread men (small as well as large versions) to fill a seasonal lull in weddings, and the operation quickly grew into a thriving sideline.

Rolling in (Cookie) Dough

Karyn and Jeff met at Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island, where she studied pastry arts and he studied culinary arts. After graduating they worked for restaurants, hotels, and caterers in New York and, for nearly a decade, ran a storefront operation called Kakes by Karyn on Long Island.

“We had seven employees and were busy all the time with weddings, except in No-



right: The newest Schwerzler, baby Nicole, needed a few months to get bigger than some of the cookies her family makes.

“Gingerbread kept us going through the slow times. When we wanted to start a family, though, we realized we had no time and couldn’t afford a home close to our business.”

They sold the entire setup and took a year off to consider their options. They came to Atlanta to see what opportunities it had to offer. When they discovered they could buy a great suburban house—complete with a large yard and located close to schools, churches, and potential cake customers—they decided to stay.

Family Affair

Six years later, business booms at the Schwerzler house. The couple turned a two-car garage into a commercial-quality kitchen, which includes big mixers, ovens, refrigerators, and worktables. Daughters Ashley, 4, and Nicole, 1, both pitch in as much as their little hands can.

Brides-to-be and their mothers consult with the bakers in a den-turned-office, where they taste samples and pore through photo albums that teem with images of past efforts. “On a good week, we make 10 or 12 wedding cakes,” says Jeff, who personally delivers and sets up each one.

Gingerbread continues to fill the seasonal gap in the cake trade. “About 10% of our business is gingerbread,” Jeff estimates, “all of it from October to December.”

Size Matters

The behemoth 24-inch gingerbread men (\$49.95) often earn center stage at holiday parties. Their 14-inch siblings (\$24.95) command nearly as much attention, especially when grouped together. More normal 8-inch versions (\$6.50)—they make thousands—often serve as take-home favors at company parties and housewarmings, as gifts among friends, or as Christmas stocking stuffers.



right: Karyn and Jeff enjoy working closely together in their bakery. **below, left:** Frosted Pumpkin Gourmet also makes gingerbread birdhouses. **below, right:** Karyn outlines a giant gingerbread man in chocolate-colored royal icing.



left: Ashley and Jeff play with some dough. Spending time together was one reason the family launched its home-based business. **below, left:** It takes a lot of dough to make cookies that weigh up to 4¾ pounds each.

The couple also makes gingerbread angels, ornaments, and trees, each colorfully frosted by hand. “We make 14-inch-high gingerbread birdhouses too, our take on the cookie-house idea,” Jeff says. “They have a traditional, simple look, not like the gaudier ones you see. Our cookie dough recipe is more like shortbread. It’s not as intensely spicy or as dense as some gingerbread; it has a nice, light texture that’s softer than the kind that snaps when you break it.”

Rolling Pins Ready

During the holidays Karyn and Jeff stay busy mixing, rolling, cutting, baking, and decorating gingerbread. “We’ve made a lot of new friends,” Karyn says. “The whole business—cakes and cookies too—has grown mostly through word of mouth. Some people call in orders early, knowing there’s a limit to how much we can produce. They want to make sure they get the same thing they liked so much the year before.”

“You can’t beat that kind of connection with customers,” Jeff says. “It makes us very glad to be here.”

JOE RADA

Frosted Pumpkin Gourmet: (770) 205-7998 or www.frostedpumpkin.com.

“Gingerbread kept us going through the slow times.”

Karyn Schwerzler



Custom Cakes

Jeff and Karyn’s highly personalized wedding cakes feature white, chocolate, or carrot cake layers alternating with chocolate mousse, raspberry, lemon, or other fillings. They use rolled-on fondant or spatula-spread buttercream icing. Sometimes they add colorful marzipan shaped like fruit or stack hundreds of cream puffs into conical versions. “People feel the energy we put into this and realize how much we love what we do,” Karyn says. “Brides want to be involved in their wedding cakes, to be creative, and we help them.”

left: Eloquent wedding cakes are this bakery’s mainstay.