

BEST FOR KIDS

TASTE TEST

THE CAKE EATERS
(from left):
Leo W., 6
Emma S., 11
Alex P., 6
Isabella K., 5
Benjamin W., 8
Clare S., 8



PHOTOS: T-SHIRT IDEAS; TABLES: LEO; PILLOWS: CLARE AND BARNIE; PIN THE TAIL ON THE DONKEY: EEBOO

TOP TIERS

Five local bakeries. Five amazing birthday cakes. We tasted them all—and lived to tell. The results



In one regard, providing a cake for a child's birthday is easy: Buy any kind of cake, or bake one, frost it, and serve it with ice cream, and the kids will not only demolish it, they'll ask for more. That said, we wondered what a few local bakeries would come up with if challenged to imagine and execute a fantasy cake, one that would silence our tasting panel of six children ages 5 to 11 into a state of stunned amazement.

In our test, we picked five bakeries and assigned each a theme: princess, mermaid, trains, space, and zoo. We expected the results to demonstrate an uncommon level of artistry. But the cakes you see here, quite frankly, blew our minds. Although we asked each participant for a cake that served 30 people, all except for one were much larger, possibly because the bakers needed more space on which to sculpt. Then, we cut the cakes and dug in. For comparison, we also tried a \$16 sheet cake from Costco, big enough for 40 people—chocolate with chocolate buttercream and strawberry mousse filling. While the Costco cake paled visually, the children liked the taste just about as well as the others. One even chose it as her favorite, as did her dad, who said, "Awesome. Great frosting. Would love to eat with ice cream." It's hard to go wrong when it comes to cake, but one entry did win the most votes for best taste: Sweet Thang's mermaid cake.



PRINCESS

The bakery: Le Royale Icing, 35 Chicago Ave., Oak Park; 708-386-4175, royaleicing.com
The cake: Chocolate and banana cake filled with vanilla and strawberry cream

"I think it's for girls," Alex, 6, said, but he and the other children nevertheless loved the combination of chocolate and banana flavors. Parents were impressed by the realism of the fondant fabric and agreed this was the perfect cake for a four-year-old girl. However, they generally found the buttercream too dense and the cake strangely wet.

CHILDREN'S COMMENTS ADULTS' COMMENTS

"It tastes like heaven."
"The chocolate and banana are really good together."

"Fun, pretty, creative. Did not like frosting."
"Impressive-looking 'fabric' frosting! Cake is dense and oddly moist."



MERMAID

The bakery: Sweet Thang, 1921 W. North Ave.; 773-772-4166, sweetthangcakes.com
The cake: White sponge cake filled with custard cream and fresh strawberries

Spectacular design and deliciousness converged in this cake. Parents raved about the level of detail, from the faux woodgrain on the treasure chest to the mottled colors of the shells. They and the children also loved the moist, light cake, fluffy frosting, and the surprise of fresh berries. "It tastes like a strawberry shortcake," reported Clare, 8.

"I love fresh fruit in cakes, but there's a little too much frosting."
"My favorite."
"The mermaids look like old people."

"The level of detail is amazing; look at the woodgrain on the chest and the shell colors. Moist. Frosting is kind of fluffy, and I love the strawberries."
"Incredible detail. The metallic fins are beautiful. Great, light cake. My favorite of the bunch."



TRAINS

The bakery: Three Tarts, 301 S. Happ Rd., Northfield; 847-446-5444, threetartsbakery.com
The cake: Yellow cake filled with ganache and chocolate buttercream

Of all the cakes, parents said this was the one they would most likely buy. It was by far the least expensive and, despite its basic round shape, was much more beautifully decorated than the typical neighborhood bakery cake. Everyone loved the chocolate fillings and not-too-sweet frosting, while the cake itself drew mixed responses; some adults found it dry, while others praised the fine crumb.

"They look like real zoo animals."
"The chocolate was richer than I expected."
"I like the vanilla and chocolate mixed together."

"Lovely; the animals are adorable. Fine crumb, frosting not too sweet."
"Very pretty cake; looks like a painting. Very good frosting—chocolaty!"



SPACE

The bakery: Angel Food, 1636 W. Montrose Ave.; 773-728-1512, angelfoodltd.com
The cake: Chocolate cake filled with malt buttercream

This interpretation of the assigned theme surprised us—we expected planets or maybe an astronaut—and the boys declared it their favorite design. "It has a rich chocolate taste," said Emma, 11, a view with which the other children widely agreed. Parents, however, thought the flavor was nondescript and unidentifiable.

"It's cool because it doesn't even look like a cake."
"It is one of the best cakes I ever had in my whole life."
"The cake is really moist. It has a rich chocolate taste."

"Fun, striking, and captivating. Great details. Cake doesn't have much taste. Dense texture."
"Very fun and unexpected; I love the planets popping off. Is this chocolate or not?"



ZOO

The bakery: Cakegirls, 2207 W. Belmont Ave.; 773-404-3147, thecakegirls.com
The cake: White cake filled with white buttercream

This cake won the most votes for appearance, with both parents and children expressing amazement over the adorable monkeys and lifelike bananas. "It doesn't look like cake," remarked Isabella, 5. Parents found the flavor bland, however, and were baffled by whether or not to eat the chewy outer layer of fondant.

"How do they make that?"
"It tastes like pudding; it's fluffy."
"I love the frosting and cake together."

"Fun and lively and full of personality. Cake is mildly sweet, texture is a little spongy."
"How fun. The bananas look real. Cake is not very sweet, a little bland."