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Big Picture . Local Focus

Cake stylist's creation is cream of the crop

By Mick Zawislak | Daily Herald Staff

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The inspiration came by accident, but the resulting creation was a thing of beauty that took a Libertyville business owner to the top of his profession.

Mark Seaman, a professional cake stylist, who opened the Neighborhood Bakeshop in downtown Libertyville a year ago, recently won the gold medal in a one-of-a-kind national wedding cake competition in Tulsa, Okla.

Seaman, who also owns Marked for Dessert, a cake boutique in Chicago, spent 200 after-work hours, often into the early morning, creating a six-tiered homage to Lucille Ball.

The detail of more than 500 handmade fondant (a type of icing) feathers and 80 orchid blossoms made from sugar gum paste, propelled Seaman to the top prize late last month at the 14th Annual Oklahoma State Sugar Art Show and Wedding Cake Competition.

The cake's shape is actually a Styrofoam form but the icing required painstaking detail and patience. The feathered pedestal, for example, took 36 hours to make, Seaman said.

An international panel of decorators and bridal magazine editors picked Seaman's creation from among 65 entries. He also placed in the top three at the event in 2003 and 2005.

Seaman trained at the Baking and Pastry Arts program at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, and honed his craft with leading cake decorators, chocolatiers and sugar artists.

"You don't get an opportunity to do this type of work ... every weekend," he said. A traditional wedding cake takes three days to make, but he considered this a labor of love.

This year's theme was Hollywood glamour. Seaman initially planned on using Audrey Hepburn to depict a grand era, but didn't have a fully formed design in mind.

That was immediately resolved when he came upon images of a young and glamorous Ball while doing research at a used book store.

"It was chance," Seaman said.

Ball had been a fashion model and movie actress before becoming the "I Love Lucy" everyone knows from her television work. A heart with her initials is a central feature of the cake.

The winning entry is on display under an acrylic enclosure at his Libertyville store for the foreseeable future. Visitors should note the flowers are made of sugar not silk.