

# Queen of cakes

From Beyoncé to The BFG, Lindfield food artist Michelle Wibowo has immortalised many famous figures and iconic buildings in cake

WORDS: Rebecca Pitcairn

If you think some of the showstoppers on the *Great British Bake Off* are daring then wait until you see the work of Sussex food artist, cake and sugar sculptor, Michelle Wibowo.

Michelle's sensational sweet creations have included a 10ft-tall statue of Roald Dahl's The BFG, a 19ft by 9ft recreation of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, a 9ft by 5ft portrait of Beyoncé in biscuits and a huge corgi-shaped sponge, which holds the world record for the largest dog-friendly cake.

At the end of last year, for the 20th anniversary of the release of the first Harry Potter film, Michelle was commissioned by Warner Bros Studio to create a giant Hogwarts cake.

**'The cake took around 300 hours to make, which includes 63 trees, 33 windows, 14 pizza boxes and six lampposts, made out of real gingerbread'**

It appeared on ITV's *This Morning* before slices were enjoyed by a select number of Harry Potter fans at Warner Bros Studios in Watford and also distributed to disadvantaged and deserving families in the area.

Standing 5ft tall, almost 6ft wide and weighing over 100kg, it took Michelle more than 320 hours to build and was her biggest challenge to date. 'I am a massive Harry Potter fan and



**ABOVE:** Michelle's *Creation of Adam* made entirely out of cake

**LEFT:** Michelle makes exceedingly big cakes

having the privilege to create something to celebrate this event is a dream come true,' the 43-year-old says. 'I stayed up for three days with just a few 20 minutes naps to recharge. It took a while to recover but having a good massage after all the hard work felt amazing!'

'I really put my heart and soul into the project and I do hope what I did can do justice to all Harry Potter fans around the world.'

**ICING ON THE CAKE** Michelle's work is admired by film and TV production companies globally. She has designed life-size cake models of the popular *Game of Thrones*

characters, Jon Snow and Sansa and Arya Stark; created a real-life looking Mr Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* and, for Christmas 2020, Disney+ asked her to make a gingerbread house replica of the McCallisters' house from *Home Alone* to mark the film's 30th anniversary. 'Home Alone is such a classic movie so I was thrilled to do it,' she says. 'The cake took around 300 hours to make, which includes 63 trees, 33 windows, 14 pizza boxes and six lampposts, made out of real gingerbread covered with snow icing! I couldn't get enough of the gingerbread smell, it reminded me of Christmas.'

Michelle's love of baking started from childhood – she



remembers experimenting in the kitchen from the age of seven. However, she ended up studying architecture at university, which unwittingly gave her some of the skills required for constructing her larger-than-life cakes.

'I always start by sketching the ideas, from there we can then

*'Every ingredient has an expiry date and we want it as fresh as we can for the delivery'*

figure out the right structure for the project,' the mum-of-one explains. 'Having some DIY experience comes in handy too. I use many common building materials, such as wood and metal pipes for the construction, but I also need to consider food-safe materials and how to not contaminate the edible parts.'

#### LARGER THAN LIFE

Michelle worked in cake decorating shops in London after university but it wasn't until she moved to Burgess Hill, in 2007, and set up her own cake business that she started to get some



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slightly more absurd requests. 'I was mainly working on bespoke cakes for party celebrations for private and corporate events,' she says. 'One that has always stuck in my mind was for a couple who ordered a realistic life-size cow cake for their wedding.'

'Then I started getting requests to make larger pieces for PR and advertising. My first large scale commission was a giant cupcake for Covent Garden Real Food Market in London back in 2009. I used more than 50kgs of icing sugar, 10kgs of butter and 12 massive slabs of sponge cakes. I didn't have a studio space

back then, so I had to construct it in our conservatory and we struggled to get it out the door! Thankfully we managed to transport it safely, cut it on site and share it with visitors on the day.'

Michelle now has a large studio in Lindfield, where she has lived for the past nine years.

'I love walking around the village in the afternoon and stopping for a cheeky lunch. It's a small village but bustling with unique shops, cafés, pubs and great restaurants too,' she says.

Nearby Haywards Heath is also full of special memories for Michelle as she was asked to make a commemorative cake for the town's 2017 celebrations to mark the 175th anniversary of the arrival of rail.

The project was documented for Channel 4 TV show *Extreme Cake Makers*, which aired from 2016 to 2019, and followed Michelle and other elite sugar craft specialists turn cakes into delicious works of art.

'The show was fun but also challenging when you have a tight deadline and are working on a real client project, while having a camera crew following you around all day,' she explains.

'The train was one of my favourite projects – it was a 6ft replica of a Victorian steam engine complete with rotating wheels and real steam coming



Photo: Susanna

out of the locomotive chimney. It was picked up from the studio by a horse and carriage, paraded around the town and finally cut by the mayor and shared with everyone during a picnic in the park.'

There's no doubt that Michelle's transient creations are works of art but what makes her edible masterpieces somewhat more remarkable are the additional challenges she faces as a sugar artist.

'The major difference when working with food compared to commissioning a sculpture or other artwork is the fact that I can't prepare too far in advance,' she explains. 'Every ingredient has an expiry date and we want it as fresh as we can for the delivery, so timing is critical. Most of the time, I need to work day and night without any sleep approaching the deadline as everything must be done so close to the delivery date.'

**ABOVE:** Michelle conjured up a huge Hogwarts cake for the 20th anniversary of the first Harry Potter film

**BELOW:** Michelle created a life-sized cake of Mr Darcy, played by Colin Firth in the TV mini-series of *Pride and Prejudice* for the series' 25th anniversary

Remarkably, Michelle still has a sweet tooth after working with cakes for so long.

'I love light, airy cakes like chiffon cakes,' she says. 'I'm not bothered about any particular flavour. They're all delicious! I can't use this type of cake for my sculpted cakes, however, as it's too soft to retain its shape, so I normally use a Victoria sponge.'

Michelle remains tight-lipped about future assignments,

but says that although the big projects gain the most media attention, the ones she enjoys the most are the more low-key commissions she makes for local families.

'I love making realistic pets – dogs, cats, horses, you name it,' she says. 'It is a challenge to capture the likeness, their personality, the beady eyes, even the drools and there is something sweet about discovering why they are our best friends. However, I do always remember tricky projects the most. No matter how well you planned it, something unexpected always happens, such as not being able to get the cake through the door, an accident during transit or bad weather.'

'But we always make it through in the end – it's all part of the learning process, which makes each creation better every time.' ♦  
**Find out more about Michelle's giant cake creations at [michellesugarart.co.uk](http://michellesugarart.co.uk)**



Photo: Susanna

Michelle was dog tired after making a giant dog-friendly corgi cake