

Gingerbread Goes Gourmet

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NEW YORK (AP) — Out of the kitchen and into the hotel lobby: Gingerbread houses have gone from being a homemade project done with mom to professional exhibits designed by pastry chefs and sometimes even architects.

And never mind the humble miniature: Some displays are life-size, while others depict entire villages. A few extravaganzas raise money for charity, while some include contests for home bakers. Many are part of larger Christmas celebrations at luxury hotels that also showcase decorated trees, Santa visits and holiday menus.

Susan Matheson, co-author of the book "The Gingerbread Architect: Recipes and Blueprints for Twelve Classic American Homes," says these types of professional gingerbread creations "are elaborately detailed, spellbinding constructions that must require an army of pastry chefs, historians, engineers and consulting experts. The results can elevate the craft to a high art form that transports the viewer into an ethereal miniature fairy world." But Matheson doesn't approve of glue guns or other non-edible components: "It's 100 percent digestible or count me out."

For those who admire both homemade and high art gingerbread houses, here are details on a few extravagant displays around the country this holiday season.

For the fourth year, Le Parker Meridien hotel in midtown Manhattan is hosting a lobby display of gingerbread houses designed by New York City bakeries. The houses include replicas of landmarks like the Egyptian Sphinx, the Mexican temple Chichen Itza and the Lincoln Memorial. A gingerbread creation of the hotel's executive chef Emile Castillo was inspired by a recent real-life headline, depicting a crane left dangling by Hurricane Sandy from atop a building on 57th Street. Customers of the hotel restaurant, Norma's, can get a ticket to vote on their favorite house by adding \$1 to their checks; the money goes to City Harvest, a local food bank.

The Mohegan Sun casino and resort in Uncasville, Conn., hosts a life-size gingerbread house that's 28 feet high (8.5 meters) and 20,000 pounds (9,000 kilos), made from 6,000 gingerbread bricks. Visitors can walk through the home to see tiny rooms decorated for Christmas with a holiday tree, chocolate stockings and cookies for Santa.

In Hawaii, a Waikiki hotel has a miniature global village in gingerbread. The display at the Sheraton Princess Kaiulani includes models of London's Tower Bridge, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a pagoda from Yakushiji Temple in the ancient Japanese capital of Nara, and Hawaii's own Iolani Palace. Executive Chef Ralf Bauer started the tradition years ago to recreate scenery from his native Germany.

At the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, N.C., a gingerbread contest that began as a local

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event 20 years ago is now a national competition with more than \$7,500 in cash and prizes. This year's 182 entries — including some from teens and young children — were judged by a panel that included pastry chefs, cookbook authors and a museum curator. A prize was also awarded to the gingerbread chef from farthest away, which this year went to a cook from Massachusetts. The contest requires all entries to be completely edible.

In Philadelphia, a gingerbread display at The Shops at Liberty Place made by Philadelphia chefs was modeled after Fairmount Park historic sites. The display, up until Dec. 9, serves as a preview event for the annual tour of Fairmount Park historic homes, which are open and decorated for the holidays until Dec. 16.

The Capital Hotel in Little Rock, Ark., has a 12-by-14-foot (3.6-by-4.2 meter) gingerbread village on display with an Arkansas countryside theme, including cows, horses, deer, rabbits and ducks along with a barn and an Ozark shack. Details include 100 handmade pine trees dotting a sugar-coated winter scene with a Polar Express train and snow forts.

At The Ritz-Carlton Lodge, Reynolds Plantation in Georgia, an entire train station has been recreated in gingerbread, sugar and candy, measuring 12 feet high (3.6 meters) and 16 feet (4.8 meters) wide. The creation depicts the depot for a train located on the resort property that takes guests on tours.

Wentworth By the Sea Hotel & Spa in Portsmouth-New Castle, N.H., has a 4-foot (1.2-meter) tall gingerbread house in the lobby, and the nearby Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth hosts a display of entries in a gingerbread house contest.

In a French twist on the gingerbread story, the French-based hotel chain Sofitel hosts a French holiday dessert called buche de noel, an edible Yule log, in their properties around the world.

David M. Schwarz Architects of Washington, D.C., sponsors the annual construction of "Gingertowns" by architects, engineers and others in Washington, Nashville and Dallas. The buildings stay up for a week, and are then disassembled and donated to charities along with cash contributions. This year's Gingertowns had a university campus theme with candy-studded buildings such as the I.M. Pez Library, the Cadbury Egghead Library and the Peppermint Patty Performing Arts Center.

If these descriptions have you dreaming of gingerbread creations you can't possibly make at home, Matheson, the "Gingerbread Architect" author, says there's still a lot to be said for "the simple art — the smell of baking gingerbread, the rough cut, over-iced, slumped and out of plumb gingerbread house with the candy pieces that slid out of position before the icing dried and the little hand that created it."

That, she added, is "a treasure."

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