



Pastelería Ideal's chief cake decorator Josafat Medina and several of his towering creations

Let them eat cake: A trip to Pastelería Ideal

BY JIM JOHNSTON

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The aroma gets you about fifty feet from the door, a warm mixture of sugar and butter competing with the exhaust fumes from nearby Eje Central.

As you pass through the doors of the Pastelería Ideal you enter a life-size version of Candyland. Thousands of sugary cakes, muffins, tarts, danishes and donuts are spread out before you – more than 300 varieties. And that's not including the cookies (I counted almost 70 different kinds).

A beloved institution, well-known to generations of Mexicans, Pastelería Ideal was founded by a Spanish immigrant, Don Adolfo Fernández Cetina, in 1927. He had come to Mexico City in 1913 at the age of 17 to work with a cousin in his small bakery business.

The cousin eventually went on to other things, but Don Adolfo kept baking, first selling "pan de caja," bread wrapped in wax paper and sold via small carts door to door, and later opening the store on Calle 16 de Septiembre in the Centro Histórico. Today there are three locations in the city with more than 250 employees.

The ovens are going 24 hours a day, seven days a week at Ideal. You can see fresh rolls and pastries descending via glass elevators from the work area above. The aisles are bustling with shoppers armed with

MORE INFO

- The main store is located at Calle 16 de Septiembre 18, Col. Centro. It's open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily.
- There are also three branch stores at: República de Uruguay 74, Col. Centro; Callejón San Antonio Abad 57, Col. Tránsito; and Av. Hank González 773, Col. Valle de Aragón 2da. Sección.

metal tongs to make their selection. "But you have to get here early for the most popular items like the rebanada de mantequilla or the panqué americano," said supervisor Elizabeth Sancha. "They always sell out fast."

You may feel like you've put on a pound or two just looking at the baked goods on the main floor, but that's just the beginning. Head to the upstairs showroom and you'll see hundreds of cakes of all sizes, shapes and colors. Round, square, multitiered (the biggest, with nine layers, requires three workers to construct), they might include a plastic doll, ice cream cones or even a tiny ballerina twirling above a bubbling fountain with twinkling lights.

Need a cake to feed 1,600? No problem. You could bake it



Don't let the surfeit of options overwhelm you.

at home (all you need is 100 kilos of flour, 400 eggs, 40 kilos of butter and a 10-foot ladder to reach the top), but the "pastejeros" at Ideal have been making cakes to order for special occasions for generations, and they know their stuff.

I spoke with the "maestro decorador," or chief cake decorator, Josafat Medina, who has worked at La Ideal for more than 30 years. He's part of a team of sixteen workers who produce up to 200 cakes a week.

"I began at the bottom and worked my way up. Nowadays you can study baking in culinary schools, but I learned by watching the old masters. Everything here is traditional – we don't change the recipes.

They're passed along from generation to generation."

He's made cakes for just

about every event life has to offer. "Weddings and quinceañeras are the most popular," he said, "We've made cakes for TV and movie stars and for four Mexican presidents as well."

The smallest cake you can order is 6 kilos, the largest 160 kilos. Estimate one kilo of cake for every ten people. Prices range from 570 pesos up to 18,400 pesos and vary depending on the type of frosting and filling chosen.

There is a Mexican saying "las penas con pan son buenas" – troubles with bread are good. So forget your troubles – and your carbohydrate intake – and enjoy a visit to the Pastelería Ideal.

Jim Johnston is author of "Mexico City: an Opinionated Guide for the Curious Traveler." His blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com