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A Deft Hand With Over-the-Top

Photographs by Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

CALL HIM 'CAKE' Above, Raven Dennis, at left, with two of his employees, Shawn James, center, and Willie Gooding. Above right, a rare sight: an uneaten piece of red velvet cake.

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TWO years ago, a party planner working for the hip-hop artist Mary J. Blige ordered a birthday cake for her from a Brooklyn baker who had long ago retired his given name - Raven Patrick De'Sean Dennis III - for the shorter if equally titular designation Cake Man Raven.

In celebration of Ms. Blige's 33rd birthday, Mr. Dennis constructed a cake that paid tribute not to any single one of her achievements or affinities, but, ostensibly, to all of them. Four feet wide and 26 inches tall, the cake featured edible approximations of a CD, a musical note, a Dolce & Gabbana shopping bag, a Christian Dior purse, a MAC cosmetics compact, a dove and a near-life-size baby, meant to symbolize Ms. Blige's spiritual rebirth.

Whether by happenstance or design, Cake Man Raven has become the city's most visually strident opponent of the restrained preciousness that has overtaken the baking world. Few would confuse the results of his labor with anything found in Real Simple.

Instead, Mr. Dennis's cakes and Mr. Dennis himself - or Cake, as he identifies himself over the phone - have a sense of the epic about them. For the Rev. Al Sharpton, he once made a model of the Bible turned to Timothy 2:15 ("Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved"); for Cab Calloway's 80th birthday, a songbook with a grand piano resting on top; for Marty Markowitz, the Brooklyn Borough President, a replica of its Borough Hall, twice. When the rapper Jam Master J died in 2002, he made a cake in the shape of a large Adidas sneaker with a gold chain and two turntables on it.

One morning a few weeks ago, Mr. Dennis sat at the only table in his shop on Fulton Street in Fort Greene, near the slices of red velvet cake for which he is known, remarking that his move from Harlem to Brooklyn five years ago had brought an influx of Caribbean clients requesting traditional wedding fruitcakes, or black cakes, soaked in rum. Occasionally, they question his qualifications.

"The mothers and aunts will stand over me and watch and say, 'Let's see if the Yankee boy can make the cake.' Everybody else trusts the Cake Man, but these ladies give me the third degree," he said.

Mr. Dennis, 38, went to high school in Elliott, S.C., where he was brought up by his late grandmother, Evelyn Nowlin Murrelle, a portrait of whom hangs on the wall in his shop, her face illuminated to look as she might in heaven. Together they perfected recipes for red velvet cakes, pineapple cakes and 7-Up and Coca-Cola cakes, also key components of the Southern confectionary vernacular.

Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Raven Dennis finishing a wedding cake at his bakery.

Eventually, Mr. Dennis left the South to attend Brown, dropped out and migrated across the city of Providence to the Johnson & Wales culinary school. Having completed his training, he returned to his native Harlem and ultimately began baking cakes, mostly for children's birthday parties, out of his apartment on Riverside Drive.

His clientele began to extend beyond a demographic of 6-year-olds once he had the good fortune to meet a man named George H. Andrews, who knew Lena Horne. Mr. Andrews had attended a party for which Mr. Dennis had baked a cake in the image of the medical symbol. With his friend's introduction, Mr. Dennis received the commission to bake Ms. Horne's 75th-birthday cake and many thereafter, one presented at Lincoln Center. His first cake for her was a red velvet.

"She said 'Red velvet, well, hot dog,' " Mr. Dennis remembered. "That's how I got that hot dog in my slang."

Through Ms. Horne, he made cakes for Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie, and soon enough he had begun to develop a reputation as the baker to the entertainment world's African-American aristocracy.

"He really gets to know you when he's making a cake for you," Mr. Andrews said. "He asks you, 'What do you like? What are your favorite colors?' "

Mr. Dennis's favorite cake, were anyone to ask him, is red velvet, so popular that he's had to limit slices to four per customer. The cake is the subject of urban legend, which has it originating in the kitchens of the Waldorf-Astoria. A guest who sought revenge on the chef who had billed her for the recipe - for $300, in some versions of the story - started doling it out wherever she went. The cake, with its vaguely chocolate flavoring and hue from red food coloring, has a long history of popularity in the South. Mr. Dennis slathers his with a cream cheese frosting in deference to tradition.