



EDITOR'S PICK

FOOD & DRINK

Let's Eat: Curtis & Cake's Southern-style confections 'dress for the occasion'

Let's Eat

By Victoria Davis | Special to the Cap Times Mar 10, 2019  3 min to read





Monica O'Connell of Curtis & Cake holds a vanilla rum bundt cake in her Fort Atkinson kitchen. "I want each cake to be the best cake that person has ever tasted in their life," she said.

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Tart makes open-top galettes with fillings from butternut squash to sweet pears and pecans. Everything is sold frozen with baking instructions on the back.

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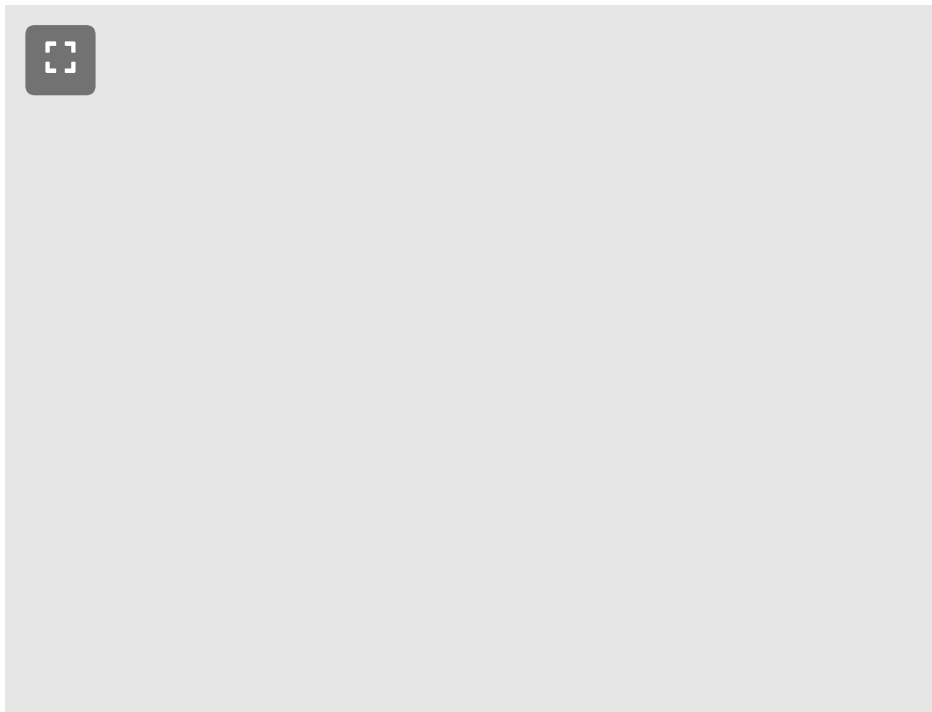
It's an experimentation day for Monica O'Connell. Melted butter and whiskey bubble on the stove as she drizzles brown sugar butter rum caramel syrup on a vanilla rum bundt cake, then pulls a chocolate bundt out of the oven.

"Today I am a woman on a mission," said O'Connell, founder of Curtis & Cake. "It's time to get these cakes settled."

O'Connell started Curtis & Cake in 2015, making small-batch, celebratory cakes and sweets with a strong Southern influence. As part of her New Year's resolution, O'Connell decided to master the art of creating beautiful and boozy bundt cakes. In the 1960s-style kitchen inside the old [Friedens Church in Fort Atkinson](#), O'Connell is on her 12th round of trials.

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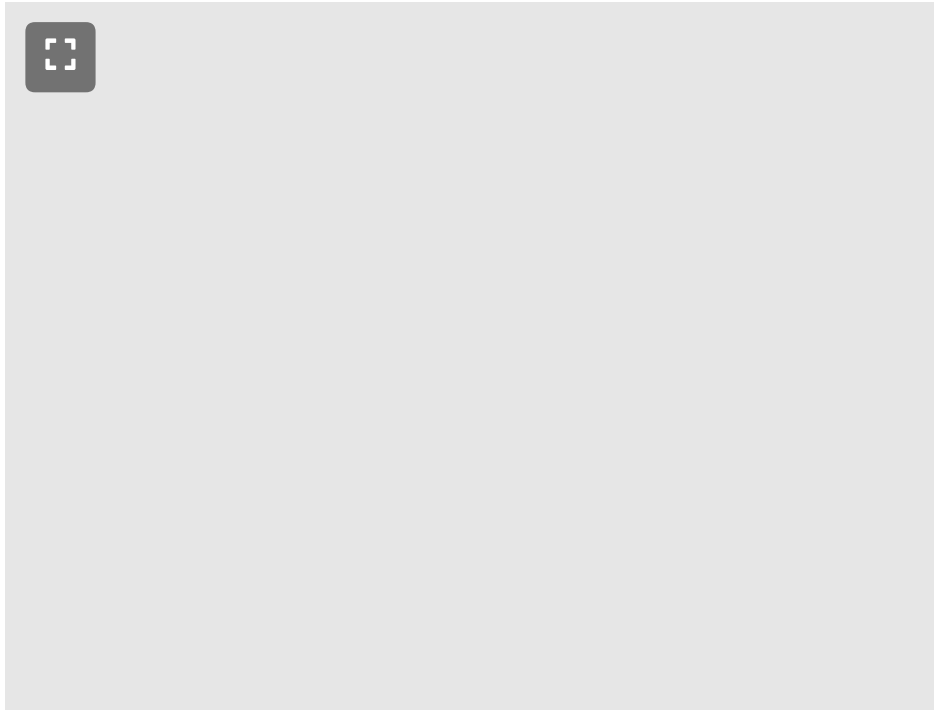


Monica O'Connell holds a chocolate bundt cake in the Fort Atkinson home of Curtis & Cakes. As part of her New Year's resolution, O'Connell decided to master the art of creating beautiful and boozy bundt cakes.

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“Serena Williams was once asked, ‘How do you get so many aces?’” O'Connell said. “And she was like, ‘Because I try to hit an ace every time I serve.’ That’s what I’m trying to do. I want each cake to be the best cake that person has ever tasted in their life.

“I’m such a Virgo that way.”



Purple and gold flower petals top a vanilla lemon cake with vanilla buttercream at Curtis & Cake.

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O’Connell has always loved to bake, but she didn’t always consider it a profession. She earned a Ph.D. from New York University in ethnomusicology, writing about black feminist theory and New York jazz culture in the 1930s and 40s. For eight years, she served as executive director of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago.

She decided to go full-time with Curtis & Cake in 2018, and Madison has taken notice. Now, three times a week, O’Connell drives 36 miles to and from the city delivering cakes for online orders. It’s a one-woman show, with O’Connell as baker, marketer, delivery woman and accountant.

She’d like to bring more members onto her team and expand her commercial kitchen into the room next door to the one she currently has. Recently [O’Connell raised funds with a Kiva loan](#), for which 226 funders supported her with \$10,000 total.

The ethos behind Curtis & Cake is the idea of celebration. Even the name for her business, “Curtis,” comes from an early memory O’Connell has sitting on the stairs at one of



“It’s very Southern to ‘dress for the occasion,’ and that’s what I do with my cakes. I dress them for their occasions,” said Monica O’Connell at Curtis & Cake.

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her mother’s famous bashes, munching on a slice of warm rum cake, watching the “grown folks” dance to soul music from singer-songwriter Curtis Mayfield.

“It might seem basic, saying you want to help people celebrate with beautiful decorations and good food, but it means a lot to people,” said O’Connell, who dabbles in

confectionary with hand-made marshmallows and peanut brittle. “We all want to be the recipients of that kind of hospitality and thoughtfulness.

Each of O’Connell’s cakes, whether a four-layered red velvet or a three-tiered hummingbird cake, has its own Southern charm. Some are dressed tier to tier in red, orange and pink flowers or embroidered with gold and silver edible beads.

“What I have come to understand as a Southern philosophy for life is to make everything as beautiful as possible,” said O’Connell. “It’s very Southern to ‘dress for the occasion,’ and that’s what I do with my cakes. I dress them for their occasions.”

The bundt cakes harbor not only a Southern spirit, but also a personal significance to O’Connell that sets them apart.

“My mom used to make rum bundt cakes all the time when I was growing up,” said O’Connell, pouring the hot whisky and melted butter onto the chocolate bundt cake. “It was my dad’s favorite so we always had some around.

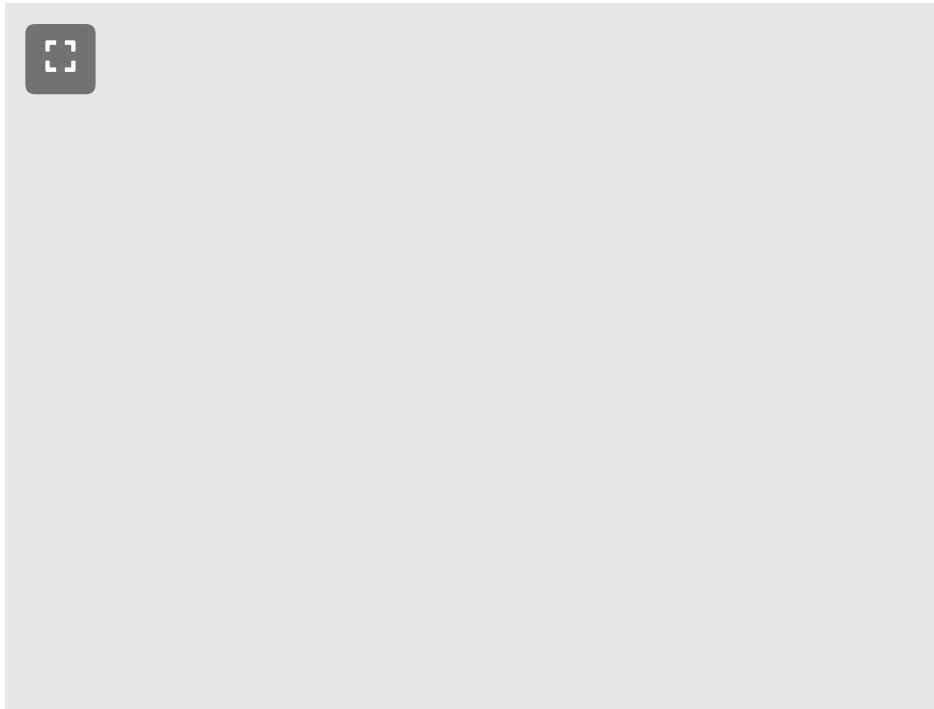


Brown sugar butter rum caramel syrup covers a vanilla rum bundt cake made by Curtis & Cake.

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Growing up in Stone Mountain Georgia, O’Connell says her mother wasn’t much of a “scratch baker,” more apt to use a Duncan Hines box mix for her famous rum cake. But O’Connell says her mother was a talented hostess, shining her brightest after pulling together a holiday soiree for family and friends. O’Connell was her mother’s right-hand woman in the kitchen, making pies and candy.

“When I look back, what’s so meaningful about it for me is how much work my mom put into it all behind the kitchen doors,” said O’Connell. “There’s so much experimenting and trial and error that’s involved with creating these events for people. The joy I saw my mother bring to people with her parties is what inspired my business.”



Monica O'Connell at Curtis & Cake frosted this six-inch-round cake with vanilla bean French meringue buttercream. On top, she placed purple and gold flower petals.

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Another skill O’Connell adopted from her mother’s hostessing was making her own jams and jellies. In her studio kitchen, O’Connell dedicated a shelf to strawberry, peach and other jams that she uses as fillings in her cakes.

O’Connell’s strawberry jam was used on this experimentation day as the filling, along with lemon card, for a three-layered vanilla and lemon cake. She frosted the six-inch-round cake with vanilla bean French meringue buttercream. On top, she placed purple and gold flower petals.

“I definitely try to bring an attitude of celebration with whatever I’m making,” said O’Connell. “We all deserve to treat ourselves to a slice of delicious cake and have it feel special.”

Finally the chocolate bundt cake was done, covered in chocolate whiskey glaze with a touch of salt. O’Connell took a bite.

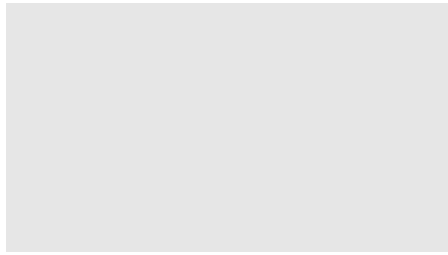
“Oh!” she exclaimed. “That’s boozy!”



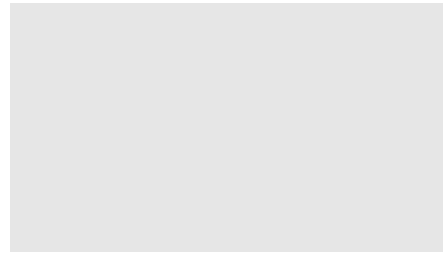
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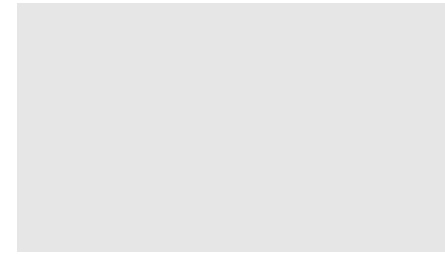
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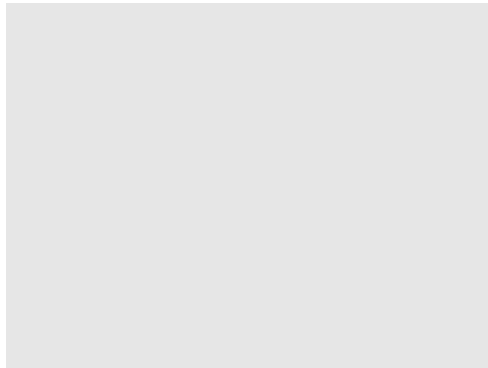


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