

The Importance of Gingerbread:

We have just returned from our Thanksgiving holiday in lovely Clinton, Wisconsin. We have been spending the holiday with the same dear friends for years and years. We never miss. Time spent with happy, chattering children, old friends and good food is priceless. The four-day suspension of time we call Thanksgiving provides all these ingredients and more. Smiling is continuous. Laughter is the order of the day.

Over the years we have learned to incorporate another tried and true component of holiday happiness, a folk art and fantasy concoction known as gingerbread houses. The word 'houses' should be taken in the broadest way. Structures would more accurate. This year (it changes every year) our gingerbread world included a church, a homestead, a farm stand, the toy barn, a graveyard and Rapunzel's tower. You will notice that there is not necessarily any logic in the selection of structures. Some of them return annually and others are the inspiration of an evening. I wish we could do them all every year but the project involves many dozens of hours as it is. This year we left out such classics as the opera house and the tenement, the airport and the ski slope. So many notions, so little time.

The basic shapes, the naked structures are cut and iced together a full day ahead. The ginger walls are about a half-inch thick, formed in 15" baking pans, and the glue, we call it "goop" is liberally applied to every joint. Goop is powdered sugar, egg white and a little water. When allowed to dry thoroughly, the buildings are as solid as your furniture. You'd need a hammer to knock them down. It's a good thing that they are as tough as they are. Some of our little ginger artists are long on imagination and short on motor skills. While certain (unnamed) adults treat the pastime with exquisite and compulsive detail, critters like little Owen, aged three and two quarters, go at it as if he is running through a cornfield. But there is rarely a serious building collapse and we are twenty-five years accident free. Eat your heart out Chrysler.

There is only one golden rule for the gingerbread creations. Everything, and I mean everything, must be edible. Everything that is used for foundations, structures, landscaping and ornamentation must be a food product. So your bricks and your mortar, your lumber and your roof, your wheels and your skaters all must be edible. It's challenging but it leads to the most fantastically imaginative scenes. Why just this year, Veronica created "pampas grass" from tiny elbow macaroni atop thin spaghetti stuck into green jelly-leaves. Marvelous!

Rapunzel's tower was the special pet of twin five year olds. They are seasoned veterans of gingerbreading having started with us at the age of two. They entered the room at one on Friday afternoon and left at six. For five solid hours, no breaks (except potty of course) and no breathers they set their pretty little heads to the task of completely covering a two foot tall, six inch square tower, in goop and candy. A more glorious creation you have never seen, complete with Rapunzel peering out her high-up window. Her marvelously long hair (licorice ropes) trailed down to the garden below as she patiently awaited rescue. At the end of the day I asked the girls, the twins who made the tower, where the Prince was. Without hesitation they answered in unison, "No boys allowed." Ah, the simple rules of life.

I have a friend named Maeve who is eleven. Maeve is smarter at eleven than I am at...a lot more than eleven. She appears to have just stepped out of a Mary Engelbreit picture. Really. Hair perfect. Expression perfect. Eyeglasses perfect. Attitude perfect. Anyway, Maeve was in charge of the churchyard this year. The churchyard is usually a fairly somber place, not scary but reserved. Half way through her efforts I noticed that the cemetery was rather like a New Orleans graveyard. There was color everywhere. The stones were fanciful and pretty. The epitaphs were good-natured, even funny. "Rest in Pieces", for example. I remarked to Maeve how happy the place was. She said, "It's a graveyard for clowns. There was a circus train crash and this is where the clowns ended up." I'm not making this up. She really said that. *She* made it up.

I guess that's the point, isn't it? Once a year a lot of very wonderful people get together to make something up with each other. How great is that? The joy of creation magnified by the power of laughter is a force unstoppable. It feeds on itself, growing as the hours pass, so that when you do step back to take a look, what you behold is a jaw dropping, happy world made of children, candy and love.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the "grown ups" (I use the term lightly) who make this world possible. Children don't just walk into any place in town and sit down to make the ginger world. Nothing at all would happen without Chef Tom and Queen Carol and Veronica of the Pampas and Sainte Michelle d'Eglise and Sean the carpenter and Chris who made the twins and Nicole who harnesses Owen and Nana Pajamas who walks by shaking her head. You make it all easy. And that's a wonderful gift. Thank you. Thanks to you all for understanding the importance of Gingerbread.