

in the mix



BAKE, RATTLE AND

When the customer is a six-foot, four-inch drag queen in a black-and-white miniskirt, four-inch heels, dainty gloves and a feather-festooned wig, it may not be business as usual at Carlo's bakery, a century-old sweet shop in Hoboken, New Jersey. But in the world of TV, it's another episode of TLC's newest hit, *Cake Boss*.

The client — identified as Miss Richfield 1981 — was an actual patron looking to buy one of baker Buddy Valastro's specialty cakes. He is the cake boss, after all, the star of a show that has become TLC's own brand of New Jersey reality programming — think *The Real Housewives* or *Jersey Shore*, minus the over-the-top brashness and bustlines. In that context, a drag queen looking for a cake to jump out of doesn't seem all that outrageous.

What is outrageous, often, are the cakes that Valastro and his crew of bakers and designers churn out, each seeking to top the last in bling and bada-bing.

A cake for a special event at a local aquarium? Valastro designs one with an array of sugared sea creatures and coral, building the edibles around a real aquarium. "It's awesome!" he crows to the audience.

A cake for daughter Sofia's birthday while the family is visiting Disney World in Florida? No problem. Valastro and his first lieutenant, brother-in-law Mauro Castano, use a Disney kitchen to re-create Sleeping Beauty's castle, with all of the Disney princesses sculpted in chocolate.

It's a sweet spectacle as Valastro slathers on chocolate ganache, whips up

vanilla cream and rolls out *fondant* by the yard. And while *Cake Boss* may be a dieter's nightmare, the thrust of the show really isn't the perfection of its confections — it's the spirit and squabbles of a big Italian family who operate a very busy bakery (they go through two tons of sugar a week).

Valastro's four sisters work at the business, along with his mother, three brothers-in-law, an aunt, a cousin and assorted nieces and nephews. And even though he's the youngest sibling, he was the obvious choice to run the business when his pop passed away in 1994.

"I'd been working there since I was eleven," Valastro says. "Now I'm the one who handles all the problems. Sometimes I wish it weren't so, but it's the same way my dad ran the place."

Except Valastro has taken cakes to a whole new level — and become a TV



FAMILY BUSINESS: With his large Italian family, Buddy Valastro, star of TLC's *Cake Boss*, creates one-of-a-kind confections — replicas of castles, cars, animals and more — in his New Jersey bakery.



ROLL **Another big famiglia is heating up the TLC schedule.**

star. "Now when people come into the bakery, they're looking to challenge me. It keeps me on my toes."

There are challenges within the family, too. The top tier of a three-tiered wedding cake turns out one inch too wide? Valastro chews out the baker and throws the tier — *splat!* — on the floor.

"This is how Buddy and his family live and how they operate their business," says Jim Berger, executive producer of *Boss* and the CEO of High Noon Entertainment, which brought the show to TLC. "There are moments that are funny,

poignant and that we as viewers can all relate to."

Like the run-up to sister Mary's fortieth birthday. She asks her brother to whip up something special, but he's too busy making a gigantic three-tiered apple cake topped with a huge chocolate tree brimming with tiny chocolate apples.

"Who does he think he is?" Mary cries to the cameras. "He doesn't have time for me? He's blowing me off?"

When she hires a cross-town competitor, the flour flies. "My own sister goes

behind my back!" Valastro tells the audience. "That is such a sign of disrespect."

For Berger, Valastro's larger-than-life personality is made for reality TV. "He's not afraid to show his emotions," says the industry veteran.

His company has twenty shows in production and is always on the lookout for new subjects who will pop on the screen. "You can count them on one hand," Berger says. "Buddy is one of them. He's really the Emeril of his ilk."

As for Mary's cake, Valastro ultimately came through. His three-tiered extravaganza featured zebra, cheetah and leopard prints along with a jewel-encrusted chocolate purse, edible lipstick and a whipped cream-enhanced shopping bag. It arrived in time for the party with a hug from her brother and loving admonition: "Don't you ever pull that crap again!"

—Kathleen O'Steen

