



## Belvidere woman puts together some sweet sculptures

By Elizabeth Davies  
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Marcia Puri decorates cakes, such as this leather briefcase one covered in fondant icing, for her business, Center Piece Cakes.

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*Photo 1 of 4*



Marcia Puri decorates cakes using fondant icing for her business, Center Piece Cakes....  
*Photo 2 of 4*



Marcia Puri of Belvidere decorates cakes for her business, Center Piece Cakes....  
*Photo 3 of 4*



A race car cake decorated by Marcia Puri of Belvidere....  
*Photo 4 of 4*



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BELVIDERE —

A brown leather briefcase stands upright on the kitchen counter, such an ordinary object in such an ordinary place that it doesn't attract much attention at first.

Then Marcia Puri points out that the briefcase is not leather at all. It's sugar.

"It is entirely edible, top to bottom," she said.

A master cake decorator and sugar sculptor, this Belvidere woman has an uncanny knack for creating just about anything out of a little icing and a dash of colored sprinkles. It's enough to make you second-guess everything you see.

Wait, what about that red bag over there? Is it a cake in disguise?

No, Puri smiles. That's just my purse.

But all around, evidence of Puri's artistic tendencies gleams with sugary goodness. There are the gold-rimmed roses atop a wedding cake. The silver-centered drop flowers showering over a layer cake. A red race car, sculpted from a square block shape, its front fender bent into a smile.

"I like to do something that you can't go to the bakery and just buy," said Puri, a former schoolteacher. "For some reason, I have a knack for sculpture. It comes more naturally for me than anything else."

Although Puri used to sculpt with clay, she is doing it with fondant these days. And her new business, Center Piece Cakes, is beginning to get attention. Puri has had articles in Chicago Bride magazine and expects one soon in Wedding Cakes magazine. She plans to take part in an annual sugar art festival in the fall that will be broadcast on the Food Network.

But perhaps the work that will gain her the most attention is that brown leather briefcase. It is heading for Chicago and will be on display in Moda Italiana, a leather handbag shop in the city's famed Water Tower Place. Puri arranged to make the sugar briefcase as a promotional piece for the store after speaking with the owner on a shopping trip to the city. She carefully painted on the gold teeth of a zipper and built a rich brown leather handle.

"Cake-making is very physical," she said. "It's a lot of hours, all at once."

Most of Puri's cakes take at least a day to make, and some take even longer. She often will painstakingly make each flower or leaf in advance, then arrange them like a florist would atop her cake.

It's extensive work, especially for someone who only took up cake decorating a few years ago. Puri was looking for a business she could start when she saw a television special on a famed cake decorator.

"I thought, 'That's what I should be doing,' " she said. "It was related to sculpting and very beautiful."

So Puri began teaching herself to decorate cakes by reading books, then taking Wilton classes. She traveled to Chicago and Canada to take private lessons with experienced cake designers.

"My first year, all I did was make cakes for people — friends, neighbors," she said. "I learned a lot that way."

Now, Puri is growing her business so she can take on more wedding, anniversary and special-occasion cakes. After all, creating gorgeous cakes gives Puri the chance to put her heart into her work and to make a living in an area that she is so vastly talented.

"I can combine business and art," she said. "I like being able to make people happy and make something beautiful."