

# The toppers take the cake

## Collector appreciates the whimsy of vintage cake toppers

By JEANNIE WILEY WOLF  
STAFF WRITER

Jo Ann Martin has her mother to thank for triggering her interest in wedding cake toppers.

"My mother gave me hers and that was just the beginning," said Martin, of Delaware, Ohio.

The topper was very ornate and lacy, she said, "... much more intricate than I normally would choose."

Fifteen years later, Martin — who is half of the creative genius behind Gooseberry Patch, a mail-order and Internet business that specializes in homestyle cookbooks along with calenders, nightlights and all manner of kitchen accessories — is still collecting vintage wedding cake toppers and now has about 50 in her home.

She said she likes collecting wedding cake toppers because they're fun.

"Like every girl, they make me think of that very special day that all girls dream of," said Martin.

"The expressions on many of the grooms makes me chuckle," she said. "They are all so different and I often wonder about the previous owners."

Although no one really knows how or when wedding cake toppers originated, they can be traced back to the late 1890s, according to the Wedding Cake Toppers Web site.

Original cake toppers featured a bride and groom on the top level of the wedding cake. There was no humor, no variation and generally speaking, only one ethnic race when first created. The bride wore white

and the groom a black tuxedo. The figurines were saved as a treasured memento of the wedding ceremony by the bridal couple.

As cake toppers became more popular in the 1900s, variations on the bride and groom theme expanded to include silver bells, love birds, doves, cherubs and cupids. Early materials used to make wedding cake toppers include plaster and/or gum paste. These options were popular, said the Web site, because most toppers were homemade. As the popularity of toppers expanded, more commercial materials such as glass, paper and wood were used to manufacture them on a wider scale.

In the 1920s, cake toppers became even more common, and the 1927 Sears and Roebuck mail order catalog included a whole page of wedding cake toppers. During World War II, wedding cakes often had grooms dressed in uniform as toppers.

But it was the 1950s that made a topper almost a requirement on a wedding cake. Grooms might be in top hat and tails, and brides followed the wedding-dress fashions of the day.

Martin said she initially found most of her collection at flea markets and antique shops.

"I found them pretty easily," she said. "Now they are much more difficult to find. I always keep an eye on eBay for that extra special one that I have to have."

But the hobby can be expensive, said Martin. For high quality toppers, she has spent upward of \$40 or more, while the more unusual ones can sell for over \$100, she said.

"Most of the cake toppers that I collect and enjoy are from the '50s and '60s. I love the old lace and tiny bits of leftover icing," she said.

Martin's favorite topper is one she recently received as a gift. It features tiny pink bows on a-trellis



Martin

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— JO ANN MARTIN, COLLECTOR OF WEDDING CAKE TOPPERS



Photo provided to The Courier  
A FEW OF THE many wedding cake toppers collected by Jo Ann Martin are shown in this photo. Martin began collecting the toppers after her mother gave her the one that had been on her wedding cake. Martin particularly enjoys finding toppers from the 1950s and '60s.

around the bride and groom. And she displays the topper on a special little pink cake stand.

"It makes me smile every morning," she said.

In fact, Martin keeps all of her collection out so she can enjoy them. She keeps the wedding cake toppers — displayed on antique cake stands, tiny cupboards and boxes — in her sitting room where she has her morning coffee.

"I try to keep all the color neutral so that I can enjoy the simplicity of the cake toppers," she said.

Ironically, Martin's own cake topper isn't part of her collection because she didn't have one when she was married.

"We had a pretty bundle of fresh flowers on top of our wedding cake,"

she said.

And while her daughter, Sydney, 13, enjoys seeing what new cake topper she's found, Martin said she has no expectations for dipping into the collection for personal use.

"When it comes time for Sydney to get married, I'll leave it up to her whether she would like to borrow one of my vintage toppers or start a new tradition all her own," she said.

That may include selecting one of the more unusual toppers now available on the market, such as the wedding couple dressed in baseball attire or driving away in a car.

"I love the fact that today's cake toppers set the tone of the wedding," said Martin. "They're a personal statement of the bride and groom.

Whether the couple's into golfing, rock climbing, football, fishing or camping, there's a wedding topper for everyone."

They may even inspire someone to start a collection of their own down the road, she said.

"If they're not already collecting these, someone will be someday. Seems unusual, but who would have ever thought I'd have a collection like this?" Martin said.

Wiley Wolf: 419-427-8419,  
jeanniewolf@thecourier.com

**See related story and instructions for making a cake topper on page T5**