

Sweetheart Plaque

From time to time you will see articles in the Newsletter that deal specifically with some of the techniques which you can choose from for the certification test (abbreviated in my head as "the certs"). For this one we will be working with modeling chocolate, also called candy clay and chocolate paste. This is a chocolate or candy melt based product, not a fondant or gumpaste, because this is a chocolate skill. There are other skills which make use of fondants and gumpastes and you can use your favorites there.

Start by making your modeling chocolate.

14 oz. candy melts

1/3 cup corn syrup

Heat the candy melts in the microwave for 30 seconds or less at a time. The microwave heats objects from the inside out and it is very easy to burn your candy melts before you realize what is happening so start with 30 seconds, stir the melts and see how they look. You may need to do a couple of 30 second bursts and then reduce the amount of time to 15 seconds until the candy melts are completely melted and smooth. Stir well between heating sessions.

Once the candy is melted, add the corn syrup and stir some more. The mixture will be grainy at first and you will think you have done something wrong, but you haven't. Keep stirring until the mixture is too thick to stir any longer. Pour onto a piece of waxed paper and leave it be for four hours or overnight.

After it has completely set up, knead by hand until it is smooth and has absolutely no lumps. I usually make several small patties of the chocolate and store it in a Ziploc™ bag. The reason for making several small portions is that when you want to work with the chocolate you will have to knead it again to warm it up – smaller bits are easier for me to work.

You can also purchase modeling chocolate already made if you don't want to make it yourself. I refer to this medium as modeling chocolate whether it is made with white or chocolate melts.

Your chocolate can be colored by using paste, gel or powdered colors just as you would gumpaste or fondant. I generally store each color in a separate sandwich bag and then put all the sandwich bags into a larger Ziploc™ bag and then in an airtight container.

Some general guidelines before we begin: modeling chocolate is temperature sensitive. The warmer it is the closer to liquid it becomes. If you have hot hands, you will need to allow some extra time for letting the chocolate cool off when it becomes too soft. If you are working in a hot environment it helps to have a small cooler with some blue ice in the bottom. Put something on top of the blue ice so you can set your chocolate on it from time to time to firm up again. You do not want it directly on the ice and its condensation. It may also be helpful to have an ice pack that you can hold in your hands for a bit and cool them off. Conversely, if you are working in a cold environment, you will need something such as a heating pad set on low so you can put your chocolate on it occasionally to warm it up.

A general rule of thumb is that warm chocolate will be softer, stickier and have a harder time holding its shape. Cold chocolate will be just as difficult in its own way. It will hold its shape, but you will not have long to work with it before it tears, crumbles or breaks rather than bends. I have very cold hands and I find that I really like the ambient temperature to be between 70 and 75 degrees. That is what works for me. Experiment with the medium and see what works best for you. I live in a very drafty old house which we heat with a wood stove and my work room is on the other end of the house so modeling chocolate or chocolate in any form can be a real challenge in the colder months. A space heater can be a good answer for this situation, and so can a spouse with warm hands who is willing to sit there and hold the next color you will need.

When you are working with chocolate of any kind fingerprints are always a concern. I generally wear non-latex plastic gloves and remember to "polish" any flat pieces after they are cut by burnishing it with my hand and allowing what heat I have in my hands to smooth out any surface imperfections. While we are on the subject of polishing..... always, always, always clean up your edges.

Use your finger tip or whatever tool works best for you, but clean up the ragged edges that are left after a cut has been made. All other things being equal in two competition pieces, the piece with the cleanest edges will most likely take the ribbon. In the “certs”, you will not receive full marks for work with ragged edges. I want to be very clear that I am differentiating between competition pieces and certification pieces. The “certs” are not a competition. It is an adjudicated live skills test. You are not given marks by being compared to your neighbor. Your work will be adjudicated by comparing the sample you produce against a perfect example of the skill you are presenting. It does not matter two hoots what your neighbor puts out. The adjudicators look only at your work. In competition pieces judges look at all the pieces in that division and category, and while they still judge your piece against a perfect example of that technique, they also have to decide which piece in that division and category has the least areas of imperfection and, shows the best, most advanced use of the technique. It is to this piece that they award the ribbon.

The technique that I want to illustrate in this article is called chocolate inlay. A plaque is made from modeling chocolate and then shapes are cut out from the plaque, recut from another color and then replaced in the holes created in the plaque. To make your plaque, you will need a rolling surface and pin. You will also need something on which to put your plaque so that you can work with it, set it aside and come back to it. Even if it will eventually be placed right on a cake I find it helpful to be able to clear the workspace right in front of me when I want to. In order to make sure your plaque is of even thickness you may want to place dowels on either side of your chocolate and roll over the top of them.

This chocolate inlay is one of the skills candidates can choose for the certification test so I am going to incorporate those guidelines in this project. For the test your plaque must be at least 5" in diameter and your design

must cover at least 50% of the surface. You will need to use at least two colors of chocolate and incorporate at least three different elements. I have multiple colors in this design, a heart shape, two leaf shapes and two different flower shapes on a 6" plaque so I have exceeded the requirements. I would note here that I am working with miniature cutters, most of which are about 1/4" and during the test it will make your life easier if you use slightly larger cutters. This skill is worth two points in the test and while even the one point techniques are important, the one and two point skills carry those values because they are easier and/or quicker to do than the more involved three and four point techniques. For the test, the skills have been divided up into point categories ranging from one point to four points. The one point skills are, as I said the easier or less time consuming. The four point skills are more difficult or more time consuming. Each candidate must choose eight skills on which to be adjudicated. They must choose at least one skill from each of the four categories and the skills must total 21 or 22 points across all eight skills. In the first section of the test candidates may receive up to 100 points, ten points for each of the eight skills chosen, ten points for the smooth covering of a tier (Styrofoam™ or cake) in buttercream and ten points for the same skill in fondant. So you can see that all the skills are equally important in your final score.

Now that you have your chocolate rolled out to a uniform thickness, cut the plaque with either a cutter or a template. I used a plaque cutter made by Jem Cutters that happens to measure 6" across. I find myself using this particular cutter for lots of things as it is just the right size.



Sweetheart Plaque

(Continued from the previous page)

The next step is to use a small heart cutter to cut several of the replacement color, in this case light pink, so they have a chance to firm up after the pink color has been rolled out. Now use the same cutter to cut heart shapes in each of the large scallops. Because



these cutters are considered micro cutters, they are not very tall. That will make it necessary to either cut the plaque from very thin modeling chocolate or find a way to get the cutter back out of the plaque. I found that just pushing the cutter all the way through the plaque and out the bottom was very effective and I was able to do this without breaking the plaque because the ambient temperature was pretty low, hence the firmness of the plaque. Once you have the heart cut from each of the scallops you can replace them with the pink hearts you cut from the pink chocolate. I generally rub my fingertips together until they are slightly warm, put my fingertip on the heart cut out and then place it into the corresponding hole in the plaque. Pressing the shape gently into place will allow the shape which still retains the warmth from your finger to bond to the plaque.



For the wreath part of the plaque, start by cutting the ivy leaf shapes from some avocado colored chocolate and some of the other leaf shapes from grass green and chartreuse green. Set them aside and cut the ivy leaves from the plaque. Replace the cut out ivy leaves with the avocado green ones. This is your back layer. Next use the other leaf shape to make cut outs from the plaque, overlapping some of the new shape with some of the ivy leaves. This makes a second layer. Repeat this technique one more time for the darker purple daisies. Apply another set of petals and cup them slightly to give more dimension to your work. For the centers of the flowers I elected to use some premade pearls. Now, make some more leaves to add in around the flowers. Keep adding flowers in different colors over the top of the leaf layers. Add some more 3-D leaves until you are happy with the arrangement. If glue is needed for the pearls a tiny drop of corn syrup or royal icing works nicely, but make sure that the glue does not show on the finished piece.



The last couple of things that I added to the plaque were the bow (also a Jem Cutters product) and the pearl dragees around the outside of the wreath. I dusted the bow and the lighter pink flowers with some luster dust. I also used a tip to emboss the circles in the scallops of the plaque. Embossing the edges with a design of some sort and/or using crimpers are common ways to help finish off the design.

If you are taking the certification test, you will be making a three tiered cake, a single cake and a piece of sugar art not on a cake. A plaque like this one would fit nicely into many designs. The adjudicators will be looking for: intricacy and depth of pattern, use of color, the cleanness of cuts and edges, precision in the cuts and uniform thickness of replacement pieces as well as the incorporation of the plaque into your overall design. For the test your pieces do not all have to have a central theme, but each piece should show some evidence of thoughtful design rather than simply being a "sampler" piece on which you display several different techniques. You may bring colored modeling chocolate to the test, but you may not bring in any cut shapes as the chocolate does not need much time to set up after you work with it. For the purposes of the "certs", only modeling chocolate made from candy melts or chocolate and corn syrup are allowed on this skill. Chocolate fondants or mixtures of chocolate fondants and gumpaste are not allowed. Since the "certs" are a timed test, I will say again that using larger cutters is a good way to go. Be careful that you design your pieces in such a way that you use those skills at which you are most proficient and can do quickly so that you do not run out of time. For a competition piece, go ahead and knock yourself out with those micro cutters, they are lots of fun and allow a very complex scene in a comparatively small space.

As always I am happy to answer questions. You can reach me at frotusbush@gmail.com or (503) 985-3133. 🍷

