

Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Dec. 10, 2013

Chef teaches class on decorating gingerbread houses

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The Miami Herald



Max Reed / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Amelia Lazarus, 6, a 2-year gingerbread class veteran, builds her home with some of her favorite candies, like Skittles, during a gingerbread house workshop at Miami Dade College's Miami Culinary Institute on Saturday, Dec. 7, 2013 in Downtown Miami, Fla. Amelia and her brother Aden, 9, built two homes: one for their family and another to share with friends.

For the holidays this year, you can make your own gingerbread house at the Miami Culinary Institute, instead of putting together a pre-made one from a kit.

At the two-hour class, dozens of bowls of candy and icing are provided for decorating, and everyone is encouraged to be as neat or as crazy as they want. The culinary school, a part of Miami Dade College, hosts two gingerbread classes, the last of which is Saturday at 10 a.m. on the downtown campus.

Many parents brought their kids, who had as much fun eating the candy as they did decorating with it. Melissa Munoz, 8, snuck pieces into her mouth as attached other pieces to the house.

“I wanted to put it on the gingerbread and eat all the candy,” Melissa said.

Each person begins with a pre-constructed gingerbread house, baked by instructor and chef Charles Jennings. He explained that the houses must be made beforehand to give the icing holding them together time to dry.

Jennings spends the class checking on each person's house periodically, offering up help on how to pipe different patterns with icing, how to use candies to make different objects, and offering words of encouragement. When one of the houses collapsed, he helped put it back together, joking around to keep the pressure off.

“It's a reconstruction,” Jennings said. “It's gonna be on an episode of Flip This House.”

The chef is, most of all, determined for people to enjoy themselves.

“By the end I want you guys to have so much fun you can't contain yourselves,” Jennings told the class.

Jennings himself is a gingerbread-house-making expert, once having made 300 one holiday season. He has built everything from a train station with a model train made out of chocolate, to the Neuschwanstein Castle, the model for Disney World's Cinderella castle.

The gingerbread class was part of the Miami Culinary Institute's "Culinarium" classes, which give people the opportunity to learn to cook in a fun, stress-free setting. The classes range from \$45 to \$800 for a series. They include "Date Night" dinner cooking classes, which feature dishes such as seared scallops and fennel salad, to classes on wine, or how to put fondant on a cake.

Several people came back after having a great time making gingerbread houses last year. Melissa Lazarus brought her two kids, Aden, 9, and Amelia, 6.

"The kids loved it," Lazarus said.

Lazarus was happy the class worked with a homemade cookie.

"We usually buy those kits, and the gingerbread is dry," she said. "And this is fresh. It tastes good. You wanna eat it."

Johanna Toussaint signed up because she had never made a gingerbread house before.

"It's fun. I don't consider myself very artistic, but it's nice to do something for the heck of it," Toussaint said.

Toussaint's sister, Irene, was excited to be finally making a gingerbread house.

"When you think of gingerbread, you think of holidays, and we've never done it," she said. "It's the perfect opportunity to do it."