Chrysanthemum Cake

Serves 200

1 28-inch-diameter plywood base
2 recipes Royal Icing (royal icing)
7 feet 4 inches of 3/4-inch-wide ribbon
1 30-by-40-inch piece of 3/16-inch-thick foam board
2 each 18-, 12-, and 6-inch round Moist Yellow Cake layers (recipe follows)
1 each cardboard cake rounds in the following diameters: 18, 12, and 6 inches
1 recipe Lemon Simple Syrup (recipe follows)
4 recipes Italian Meringue (recipe follows)
5 recipes Lemon Curd Filling (recipe follows)
8 seven-inch-high clear plastic tapered columns

1. Prepare the base: Working on a flat surface, draw a circle in the center of plywood base that is 2 to 3 inches smaller than the largest cake tier. Using a large offset spatula, spread royal icing over surface between the drawn circle and edge of round plywood board to coat surface smoothly. Tap board on work surface to smooth and eliminate any bubbles. Set aside to dry, about 24 hours. When royal icing is dry, glue ribbon to edge of board, wrapping around to cover entirely.

2. Cut foam board into rounds, one each of the following diameters: 18, 12, and 6 inches. When cakes have completely cooled, place one of each size cake right side up on its corresponding size foam-board round. Place remaining three tiers on corresponding size cardboard cake rounds. Wrap all cakes tightly in plastic, and chill for at least 6 hours. (This makes the layers firm and easy to handle.) Cakes can also be frozen at this point.

3. Remove cakes from refrigerator. If cakes are not level, use a serrated knife to trim the tops off, making sure to maintain a 2-inch height on each cake. Place one of each cake on the corresponding size foam-board rounds, cut side up. Brush the cut surface of the bottom base cake layers generously with lemon simple syrup.

4. Using a medium-large pastry bag fitted with a coupler, pipe soft Italian meringue around the perimeter of each cake that has been moistened with syrup. This "dam" will prevent the lemon curd from seeping out. Fill the 18-inch cake layer with 4 2/3 cups lemon curd, the 12-inch base cake layer with 2 1/3 cups lemon curd, and the 6-inch cake layer with 1/2 cup lemon curd. Place the corresponding cake layers on top of filled layers, cut side down. Brush top layers generously with lemon simple syrup.

5. Using an offset spatula to give each tier a "crumb coat," ice top and sides of cake with a thin coat of soft Italian meringue. This thin layer of icing will seal the cake. Start from the center, and work toward and over the edge, making sure to spread the meringue over the sides of the tier. Let dry at room temperature for 30 minutes.
6. To ice the cakes: Using a clean offset spatula, spread a smooth, even layer of soft Italian meringue, to coat cake entirely. Be sure to cover all exposed cake. The icing should be smooth and uniform.

7. Place the largest tier on the serving platter. Insert four columns, narrow side down, into the 18-inch tier; each column should be 4 inches from the edge of the cake and evenly spaced around the cake. Fill a large pastry bag, fitted with a large star (#869) tip, with a freshly made batch of meringue. Beginning from the center, pipe 2 1/2-inch cones to cover the entire top of tier.

8. Insert columns into the 12-inch tier; pipe 12-, and 6-inch tiers in the same manner as in step 7. When ready to assemble the cake, dab a small amount of meringue onto the top of each column to fasten it to the above tier. Carefully stack the tiers.

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Royal Icing

Makes 2 cups

1 pound (about 4 cups) confectioners' sugar
5 tablespoons meringue powder

1. In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine confectioners' sugar, meringue powder, and a scant 1/2 cup water. Mix on low speed until icing is fluffy and begins to come up the side of bowl, about 5 minutes. Add more powdered sugar as needed to achieve the proper consistency.
Moist Yellow Cake

Makes 4 1/2 cups batter (you will need to make 22 batches)

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened, plus more to coat pans
2 cups sugar
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
4 large eggs, at room temperature
2 2/3 cups cake flour, sifted, plus more to coat pans
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup milk, at room temperature

1. You will need 22 batches total to make the following: two 6-inch round layers, two 10-inch round layers, two 14-inch round layers, and two 18-inch round layers. (One batch makes two 6-inch layers; 3 1/2 batches make two 10-inch layers; 6 1/2 batches make two 14-inch layers; 11 batches make two 18-inch layers.)

2. Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter the baking pans; line the bottom of each pan with a round of parchment paper. Dust pans with flour, making sure to coat the sides evenly.

3. In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream together the butter and sugar until light in color and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add the vanilla extract, and then the eggs, one at a time.

4. Sift together flour, baking powder, and salt three times. Add to egg mixture in three additions, alternating with the milk, and starting and ending with the flour.

5. Pour the batter into prepared pans (filling three-quarters full). Bake the 6-inch rounds between 35 and 40 minutes; bake the 10-inch rounds between 45 and 50 minutes; bake the 14-inch rounds about 1 hour and 10 minutes; and bake the 18-inch rounds about 1 hour and 25 minutes. The cakes are done when the tops are golden brown and a tester inserted into the center comes out clean.
Lemon Simple Syrup

Makes 7 cups

4 cups water
4 cups sugar
1/2 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 2 lemons)

In a large heavy saucepan, bring 4 cups of water and the sugar to a rolling boil. Remove from heat, and add lemon juice. Let stand at room temperature to cool. Set aside. (Can be made several days in advance.)
Italian Meringue

Makes 6 cups

2 3/4 cups sugar
2/3 cup water
9 large egg whites
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar

1. In a small saucepan, bring sugar and 2/3 cup water to a boil. Boil until the syrup reaches the soft-ball stage (238° on a candy thermometer).

2. Meanwhile, in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat egg whites on low speed until foamy. Add cream of tartar; beat on medium high until stiff but not dry.

3. With the mixer running, slowly pour the hot sugar syrup into egg whites, and beat on high speed until mixture has cooled, about 15 minutes. Use immediately. If the meringue is overbeaten or is not used immediately, it will contain too many air bubbles that will make holes when piped.
Lemon Curd Filling

Makes 1 1/2 cups

4 large egg yolks
2 large whole eggs
3/4 cup sugar
1/2 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
Zest of 2 lemons

1. In a small, heavy-bottomed saucepan, whisk together egg yolks and whole eggs. Add sugar and lemon juice. Set over low heat, and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture coats the back of a wooden spoon, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove pan from heat, and stir to cool slightly.

2. Strain curd through a sieve set over a small bowl. Add butter, a piece at time, stirring until smooth after each addition. Stir in lemon zest, and let cool completely.