How to Make a Wedding Cake on a Budget
As demonstrated by Lisa Sizemore, May 11, 2013. Main Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library

The Bottom Line: how much does it cost?
$167 -$250 (includes first time equipment costs) for a 4 tier wedding cake – serves 130 guests
Additional wedding cakes made cost about $100 for consumables
Compare to wedding cakes that cost $3-10 per serving.

One time equipment investments; you can reuse these several times!
Equipment cost $71 - $150, for a 4-5 tier wedding cake. Smaller cakes are less expensive.

- **Cake Pans. $28.** I have the just ONE of the following round Wilton cake pans: **12”, 10”, 8”, and a 6” pans.** I made one 4 tiered wedding cake and one 3 layer 6” small cake for the How-To Fest. You bake a few different sizes at a time and later bake in the same pans so you have a total of 2 layers per pan.
- **Rotating Cake Stand/Decorator Turntable. $6 - $20.** These are great for easy decorating of each layer of the cake. Really a must! I bought a lovely aluminum one at Tickled Pink Memorabilia Mall (T.P.M) on Taylor Blvd for only $6! They run about $20 at amazon.com.
- **Frosting/decorator set. $15-23.** A simple Ateco set of decorator tips with a 12” frosting bag at amazon.com. An additional 16” frosting bag will cost $8- but it holds a lot of frosting!
- **Frosting spatula. $7 or less.** A Wilton frosting spatula that’s angled and 13” should run about $7. You might pick one of these up in a thrift shop or T.P.M. for a dollar or so.
- **Cake server/knife set. $5 and up.** These can also be found at thrift shops for a great deal.
- **Cake Displays/Stands – do one of the following:**
  - **DIY Small Cake Stand: $10.** Go to thrift/tag shops and find nice glass plate and attach a pedestal candy dish with glue gun or Household Goop adhesive. Perfect for a 3 layer cake and a small topper.
  - **Rustic base:** I bought the wooden rustic base for my small cake at The Crazy Daisy Antique Mall for $4.00.
  - **Simple silver cake base.** $10 for two at amazon.com. Buy one two inches larger in diameter than your biggest tier size. (For example, if your biggest tier is 12”, then purchase a 14” silver base).
  - **Elegant Cake Stand:** $67. For a larger, multi-tiered cake. These usually cost around $30-45 to rent, but will make your simply decorated cake more elegant! Good selections like the one I had at the How-To Fest from amazon.com.

$96 - $100 for consumable costs for making a 4 or 5 tier wedding cake like displayed at How-To Fest:

- **Cake Batter –** I prefer to use Duncan Hines white cake mix and use milk instead of water in the mix and add 1 additional egg. Keep an eye out for great deals on cake mix a month in advance. I paid $1.25 per box, and it makes between 4-5 cups of cake batter. I needed about 42 cups of batter for the two cakes I made. The batter cost me about $35 for the 4 tier cake (including the eggs, milk and oil).
- **Frosting –** to make 4 cups of frosting: use 1 tub of “fluffy white” or “whipped” white frosting in a tub as a base. Add 1 pound of confectioner’s sugar, ½ cup vegetable shortening (like Crisco). Add a bit of milk to get it the right consistency and ½ tsp vanilla to make it taste homemade. The tubs of frosting also go on sale frequently – I paid $1.25 per tub, $1.25 per pound of confectioner’s sugar and 1 tub of Crisco was $5. For the two cakes I made at the How-To Fest, I spent about $33 on 36 cups of frosting. (I used a lot of frosting making the rosettes!).
- **Cardboard “circles.**” These are the base under each tier of cake – you won’t be able to see it. You can buy them cheaply in bulk for each size of tier you are making. Some cake decorating stores will let you purchase them individually. You’ll use several for each layer – they’re helpful in inverting the cooled cake out of the pan, temporarily storing them and then use a fresh one for the actual cake. About $20, should have leftovers for future use.
- **Dowel rods.** $6 for a 4 tiered cake. Essential supports that go inside the cake to hold the above tier without the cake sagging. I like to use Lady Mary/Ateco paperboard dowel rods, 12 for $6 at amazon.com. Can be cut down to fit cake
with serrated edge knife. I also bought milkshake straws at Meijer’s for $1.99 to use on the top two tiers and the small cake instead of paperboard to save money. Use the paperboard ones on the bottom two big tiers.

Making the Cake....

Here’s a great website with photos that demonstrate making a simple wedding cake: http://www.americastestkitchenfeed.com/bake-it-better/2012/01/secrets-to-making-a-wedding-cake/. The main differences with the cake I made are: I used only two layers of cake per tier, I used different sized cake pans to make a 4 tiered cake, I frosted the cake with only buttercream; no fancy fillings, I used paperboard dowels and straws instead of wood, I don’t use masking tape or plywood. In transporting the cake to site, I might use a larger round base such as a Wilton silver cake base that’s 2” larger than the bottom tier and transport in a sturdy box or in a larger cake pan.

- Be sure the cake layers of each tier are level. You may have to trim off some of the cake at the top. One way to ensure level layers that are not too brown on the sides is to use “magic strips” around the cake pan while it’s baking. Those are expensive; I use homemade ones using very damp cloth secured around the pan with straight pins or a safety pin. See these websites for ideas: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QI7TiOm8mFl or http://www.cooksillustrated.com/equipment/overview.asp?docid=26954
- To keep the tiers’ frosting from sticking too much to the cardboard base above it, place some finely shredded coconut or confectioner’s sugar on the area before adding the next tier.
- Keep designs super simple! Believe me, it will look best. Make smaller “practice” cakes in the months/weeks leading up to the big day. This will allow you to get the frosting recipe “right” and help you develop your frosting decorating technique. You *do* need to practice.
- I frosted the How-To wedding cake by covering it in “rosettes” using a star tip. Start icing the sides from the bottom and move upwards. Frost the top part of the tier after you’ve added the next above tier. There are great youtube.com videos demonstrated rosette techniques.
- You can bake the layers a day or two ahead of time to give plenty of time to frost the cake. NEVER frost a cake when it’s warm or out of the oven. Always wait until it’s completely cool. Store cooled layers; wrap with plastic wrap to keep them from drying out.
- There’s a frosting technique called “crumb coat” that works well. You fill the layer of the cooled cake with frosting and then, using a thinner consistency of frosting (water down your buttercream a bit, apply a thin coating of frosting on the outside of the cake and then chill or allow to “dry” to the touch – this minimizes crumbs mixing with the frosting for the final frosting – especially for chocolate cakes that are frosted with vanilla/white buttercream (you don’t want to end up with Oreo cookie looking frosting). When dry, you may frost your cake as planned. I usually make white cakes with white buttercream frosting.
- I line my pans with parchment paper and use a thin coat of Pam baking spray on the inside rim of the pan to ensure the cake will release without sticking to the bottom of the pan. You can also make homemade “pan release” to use instead of Pam. A great simple recipe – 1 part vegetable oil, 1 part shortening, 1 part flour.
- I use a standing mixer to make the frosting. I make a batch and frost; then and make more as I need to while I’m decorating. If I’m decorating the cake at the reception hall. I’ll make several batches of frosting and store them in clean buckets with lids. The frosting will keep for several days if sealed shut.
- You may want to make a few extra cake layers in case of one splitting when you move it to the cake to be assembled. Frosting only when completely cool will help minimize that problem.
- When possible, frost and assemble the wedding cake on site at the reception all to minimize damage to the cake in transport or see wilton.com for tips on transporting a cake.

For more tips and internet links to how-to videos, look for my complete handout on the www.lfpl.org Library website with quick hyperlinks!
How much batter? How much frosting? What temperature do I bake:
http://www.wilton.com/wedding/wedding-cakes/wedding-cake-data.cfm

How many servings per cake?
http://www.wilton.com/cakes/tiered-cakes/serving-amounts-all.cfm

How do I slice a wedding cake to get those servings:

What style of wedding cake?
Join www.theknot.com and view hundreds (maybe thousands!) of wedding cake designs for ideas. Remember, they are made mostly by professionals, so Keep It Super Simple when thinking about designs! You can do a Google image search for “simple rosette wedding cake” to view images similar to the cake I made.

Inexpensive wedding cake toppers:
Great ideas at www.etsy.com to buy or DIY! The examples I had at the How-To Fest:
- Floral arrangement: small glass etched bowl ($1 at T.P.M.) and roses (about $3 worth from Trader Joes
- Cute “Hummel” couple. $1 from T.P.M.
- Vintage traditional bride and groom. $1.50 at Yesternook.
- Bejewelled initial letter, $.75 at a yard sale.
- My fav – DIY cake picks...look at designs and recreate or download image, print on card stock and tape to thin wooden skewers.

Great internet links on wedding cakes:
• http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOWBiiehJ9JY – a YouTube video of assembling a simple wedding cake. She’s the author of one of the books on display: Wedding Cakes You Can Make
• http://judyscakes.blogspot.com/ - Judy, a blogger from Utah, makes beautiful cakes and has great photographed steps of her cakes and recipes.
• http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5iQH3WUhmo – YouTube video on creating a “rose swirl” to cover cake – similar to what I did at the How-To Fest.
• 3-part YouTube video on making a wedding cake: (almost an hour of view time total)
  Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G834WQZuh3o
  Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc9ETHb3ZuQ
  Part 3: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-abBMPsiBug