

EAT

# Deconstructing Australia's Most Instagrammed Dessert

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As a tourist, I am predictable: I am sugar-driven. Guava Danish and hot churros in Mexico City. Shaved ice and slippery mochi in Tokyo. The first time I went to Sydney, I rode a bus to Bondi Beach with a bag of Australian supermarket sweets on my lap. I toured the botanical gardens and walked around the Sydney Opera House, and then I planned the afternoon around a trip to Black Star Pastry in Newtown, so I could eat a slice of Christopher Thé's famous strawberry-and-watermelon cake.



Bobby Doherty for The New York Times. Food stylist: Maggie Ruggiero. Prop stylist: Rebecca Bartoshesky.

“Famous” is not an exaggeration. I’d been hearing about this cake for years, catching glimpses of it on my social media feeds and on food blogs. It looked so pretty in well-lit photos, but as a snack, it remained a mystery. The top was a bright cobble of cut strawberries, pistachios and dried rose petals. The cake itself was a slice of watermelon — raw, ripe watermelon — sandwiched between soft almond dacquoise the color of wet sand and whipped cream flavored with rose water. Watermelon seemed like such a dangerous addition to a structured cake, with its crystalline, icy texture and its excess of moisture. How could it work?

Thé first made the cake as a one-off, for a friend's wedding, more than a decade ago. And though he didn't know it would become an unofficial national treasure, a must-stop on the Sydney tourism circuit, he did know how to make a beautiful cake: The tender dacquoise, a light sponge made from meringue mixed with ground almonds, could easily absorb any extra moisture, and become even more delicious in the process. The watermelon, cut not too thick, gave structure, and a different kind of sweetness, even as it gave in easily to a fork. The rose water in the cream wasn't overpowering, only gently floral, and the decoration on top was colorful and celebratory. In 2011, Thé's cake took off on WeChat, the Chinese social media app, and in 2012, it did the same on Instagram, where users shared pictures and dutifully hashtagged them.

I've been thinking about the piece I had for exactly three years, in fits and starts, wondering how to write about it. The problem was that it was way too pretty to try making at home — one of those dishes that would forever be disappointing people if I adapted the recipe, because it couldn't possibly turn out as it did in the picture, the way Thé and his cooks do it. Over the 10 years they've been making the cake, they have become even more precise, building the layers up so the cake is neat and its lines are parallel and the fruit is a perfect pink stripe.

But then, I wasn't still thinking about this cake because of the way it looked. The cake's success didn't hinge on its looks at all. It was really about the soft, mellow flavors of rose, watermelon and cream coming together, and the range of textures just starting to melt into each other. So much so, that maybe my version, cobbled together at home in Los Angeles, didn't need to be a beautiful layered cake at all.

So just as they do at Black Star Pastry, I prepared the basic components — cut fruit, whipped cream and baked cake. But then, instead of building a cake, I cut the pieces up roughly and layered them in a glass dish, more like a trifle. It wasn't a replica, and there was no risk of this becoming the world's most Instagrammed cake adaptation, but contained like this, the cake worked just right, bringing home a little taste of Sydney's sweetness.

**Recipe:** Watermelon-Rose Trifle