



SUGAR ART

*By Charlene Campbell
Photos by Craig Thompson*

David Watson is an artist. He creates colorful, fluid sculptures that can be tall and majestic or small, intricate and fragile. His medium is not that of Fenton, Steuben or Chihuly, yet he can replicate them all... in sugar. Pulled, blown, spun, molded, poured or cracked, sugar has an artistry all its own and Watson has mastered it. To look at it you probably wouldn't know the difference between it or a piece of glass, but when you reach out to touch the smooth surface you feel a slight tackiness your finger isn't expecting.

As a chef instructor at Pennsylvania Institute of Culinary Art's Le Cordon Bleu program, Watson is a dedicated educator and humble sculptor. Although he has studied under Norman Love and Ewald Notter during his career as well as taking back to back gold medals for his sugar work from the American Culinary Federation, he still chips in to make a holiday cake for a faculty party and has encouraging words for each graduating student that seeks him out before leaving for their externship.

Once just a student himself, Watson had to almost campaign in order to receive instruction in the art. Twenty years ago he attended a food show and came across a table of all kinds of sugar sculptures created by John Echard, a world traveled pastry chef. He had never seen anything like it and asked Echard if he would teach him how to create the magical pieces he was instantly mesmerized by. Echard refused. The next year Watson returned once again and asked Echard for lessons, again he was turned away. The third year Watson armed himself with a different approach. He took out his checkbook and told Echard to fill in

the amount it would take to obtain lessons from him in sugar sculpting. Echard finally agreed and told Watson that he wanted to make sure he was seriously interested in learning the process before he invested the time in teaching him.

"No one gets anywhere in this life without help from someone else," Watson adds. "I've never looked back." He credits that meeting for bringing a joy into his life like no other. Two decades later he is still adding to his technique to keep up with new influences. He has traveled as far as Paris for inspiration. Once at the Coupe du Monde de la Patisserie he saw a sugar sculpture so large that it was a scale replica done of a leopard sitting in a tree.

Watson is quick to give credit to European chefs working in this country for bringing the art back into vogue. "For years you didn't see it, but then a lot of grand hotels started bringing in old world European pastry chefs who were very talented in sugar and chocolate work and the food channels started covering sugar competitions." Sugar's use dates back to BC times in the Far East and was a coveted staple to many early civilizations. Sugar even has a place in movie history as it was used for stunt glass on the set. Shattering with the look of real glass, but without the degree of sharpness found in broken glass.

It's that rich history and fascinating beauty that compels David Watson to find new challenges for his work. He is even taking a glass class to discover techniques that may carry over to his sugar work. He is always expanding on the possibilities.