Guide to Airbrush Cake Decorating

Airbrushing makes cake decorating easy and convenient. If you plan to decorate cakes regularly at home or professionally in a bakery, purchasing an airbrush is a great investment. You can create virtually any design using your airbrush, and there are several types of icing with which airbrush artists may choose to work. This gives you versatility in your cake decorating, so try a little of everything. You’ll soon decide which surfaces work best for you, and with a little practice you’ll develop a nice repertoire of cake designs from simple lettering and stencil work to intricate portraits and scenery. In this guide we’ll go over some basics of how to airbrush a cake to get you started, and even move into some tips to help even advanced decorators.

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1. Cake Decorating Equipment

Airbrush

Step one when learning how to airbrush a cake is to choose the proper tool. A dual-action, gravity feed, internal mix airbrush will work best for most cake decorators. It’s versatile enough that it can be used to create a variety of designs, and changing colors is easy enough that it won’t slow you down.

If you’re interested in airbrushing for large scale production cake decorating where you’ll be applying general color to larger sheet cakes instead of working with fine detail, a single-action, siphon feed, external mix airbrush would work fine. Nevertheless, your gravity feed airbrush should work fine for applying general overall color to your cake.

Some airbrush kits will include multiple airbrushes so that you can use whichever best suits your needs from one project to the next. This is a great option if you’re working in a bakery.

When decorating cakes, you must use an airbrush that is only used with food colors. Never use an airbrush that has been used with paints other than food colors. Even if you thoroughly clean the airbrush, this can be dangerous.

Air Source
When it comes to cake decorating, go for a tabletop air compressor with a tank that gives you at least 30 psi so that it can handle just about any job in your bakery. A regulator will allow you to adjust air pressure appropriately. While these do create some degree of noise, you shouldn’t lose any customers over it. If any level of noise is absolutely not an option, then a gas cylinder like a CO2 tank would work fine.

Whatever you do, make sure that your compressor is oil-less. Oil compressors cannot be used when airbrushing food or skin, as oil may get into the air hose and then make its way into your airbrush and onto your surface. Some recommend a moisture trap to avoid this, but you’re safer with an oil-less compressor where introducing oil onto your surface isn’t even an option.

**Airbrush Holder**

Beginners might overlook this piece of equipment, but it’s actually quite handy and helps to keep from spilling food color out of the color cup. You should always clean your airbrush after use and never leave food color in the color cup, but if you’re putting it down for a second or two, an airbrush holder allows you to do so without emptying the cup. It also keeps the airbrush from falling if it’s laid carelessly on the table. Airbrush holders may hold multiple airbrushes, or just one. Choose appropriately.

**Air Hose**

Most airbrush kits that include an air compressor will also include a hose. Kits intended for cake decorating may include a vinyl hose, but you could also use a more durable braided hose without sacrificing flexibility.

If you’re purchasing a hose on your own, we recommend a short braided hose no longer than six feet in length. You could even go shorter if you’re working in a set area. Of course, if you’re moving throughout the bakery, a longer hose is a plus.

**Manifolds**

Simple cake decorating probably doesn’t require a manifold, but if you’re in a busy bakery that does a lot of airbrushing, a manifold may be useful. A manifold allows you to hook up several airbrushes to one compressor for quick and easy access. More strain is not placed on the compressor simply by connecting multiple airbrushes to it, but if you use multiple airbrushes at once you will add that extra strain.

One thing to remember about manifolds is that if you do choose to use one, make sure that the pressure available with your air source is adequate. Using multiple airbrushes at once will reduce the pressure available to each. Your air source has to offer enough pressure to offer each airbrush adequate pressure. Regulators may be used to adjust the air pressure with each airbrush.

**Cleaning Items**
We’ll talk more about cleaning your airbrush later, but for now make sure you have the following available when changing colors.

**Water Bottle**

You have to get any excess color out of your airbrush and color cup before adding a new color. To do this, dump any excess color from the color cup and spray excess color from the airbrush onto a cloth or into a bowl (mentioned below). Then add some water from your water bottle to the color cup and spray onto your cloth or into your bowl. Continue this until you are spraying nothing but water.

**Cloth/Paper Towel**

Having a spare cloth or paper towel on which you can spray excess color allows you to see when all of the color is removed from the airbrush. The cloth is also good for testing the new color to make sure it isn’t compromised by the previous color before you apply it to your cake. You’ll also probably mix colors to create new colors at some point, and having that spare cloth to make sure your color is where you want it is very handy.

**Bowl of Water**

In the same vein as the cloth/paper towel, a small bowl of water is great for emptying excess color from your airbrush when changing colors. It can help you save area on your cloth so you have more room to test colors before using them. Even if you use the bowl to empty excess color, you should still spray your cloth at least once before adding your new color to the airbrush to make sure any leftover from the previous color is gone.

2. **Food Colors**

This is an obvious one, but one worth mentioning. Only use edible airbrush food coloring when airbrushing cakes and other edible items. Use food colors intended for use with an airbrush. Amerimist and Kopykake are popular airbrush color brands and work quite well for cake decorating. If you’re unsure if a certain paint or color can be used with food, don’t use it. Food colors will be appropriately labeled so that you know they’re for use with foods.

Also, as we mentioned earlier, do not use an airbrush that has been used with non-edible paints even if you’ve thoroughly cleaned and soaked it. When decorating cakes or any other edible items, use an airbrush dedicated to airbrushing food.

**Color Schemes and Mixing Colors**

Learning about the different color schemes can help you as an airbrush artist, especially when pairing colors or fading one color to another. Airbrush artists may find themselves in a situation in which they do not have a color they need or have trouble finding a certain premixed color. In such cases it helps to
have a general knowledge of mixing colors to create others. See our *Guide to Color Schemes and Mixing Colors* for guidance and detailed information.

### 3. Airbrush Safety

Airbrush safety is important even when you’re working with food colors. These are non-toxic, but the overspray can still get into your lungs and that’s never a good thing. Anybody who’s airbrushed a cake will attest to color getting into their nostrils. If it’s getting into your nostrils, it’s getting into your lungs. Wear a mask or ventilator when you airbrush no matter what type of paint or color you’re using. A respirator designed for painters works best.

Also consider a spray booth. These collect overspray as you airbrush and move it through a filter so it doesn’t get in your lungs and doesn’t coat the rest of your kitchen. Spray booths come in all sizes so you can use them while airbrushing any type of cake from a small round cake to wide sheet cake to a tall wedding cake.

### 4. Public Liability Insurance

If you’re setting up a cake decorating business, look into public liability insurance. This offers protection for your business, and many customers will feel more comfortable if you have it. Check with your local and state government regarding requirements for licensing and permits.

Look at a few different insurance companies before you settle on any. Ask an insurance company you trust if they have a plan that fits your needs as a cake decorator, and take your time when comparing the different plans available.

### 5. Basic Airbrush Strokes and Shading

Cake decorating, or any airbrush application for that matter, requires that you first learn certain basic strokes and shading techniques. This will help you get a feel for using your airbrush, and will lay the foundation on which the rest of your skills may develop and grow.

Refer to our *Airbrush Painting-Basic Strokes and Techniques* tutorial. It goes over the basic strokes like the dot, line, fade line and dagger stroke, and even teaches you how to shade and add drop shadows.

### 6. Cakes for Airbrushing

The best cakes for airbrushing are those with rolled fondant or buttercream icing. You can use your airbrush to color whipped icing such as that commonly found on cupcakes, too. Royal icing, marzipan and gum paste are other materials that may be airbrushed; these are commonly used to make edible flowers and other items.

*Rolled Fondant*
Rolled fondant can be used in many ways. It’s flexible, easy to shape and color goes onto it well. For cake decorating, fondant is typically draped over the cake. You can apply a light buttercream icing before covering the cake with the fondant. Most roll the fondant up onto their rolling pin and then unroll it over their cake. You could also slide a cake circle under the fondant and use that to position it on your cake. Just slide it off of the circle so it drapes over the cake evenly. Smooth the fondant over your cake using a smoother. Trim away any excess fondant hanging off of the bottom of the cake.

You can purchase ready-to-use rolled fondant at a local supermarket, or you can make your own. There are a lot of fondant recipes online or in forums.

**Buttercream Icing**

White buttercream icing works very well as a surface for airbrushing. You need to make sure you aren’t too close to the surface, though, because you could blow a hole in your icing if the pressure is too high. Turn the pressure down a bit if you have to get close for fine detailing work. Make sure that you give the icing time to crust over before you begin airbrushing. Otherwise the color will not go on as well.

Buttercream icing mixes are readily available at supermarkets. You can make it from scratch, too. Search online for a buttercream icing recipe, or ask a friend or family member. Chances are somebody you know will have a good one.

**Icing Color**

White icing works best for most cake designs. The reason is fairly obvious: it gives you a blank slate on which colors show up well. If you were going to airbrush a predominantly black design (Darth Vader cakes are popular for children’s birthday parties) it’s usually best to start with a chocolate buttercream icing. If you choose a white icing and apply black food color, it may end up gray.

7. **Cake Airbrushing Tips**

Are you ready to put your airbrushing skills to use and start decorating your cake? Once you master the basics of how to airbrush a cake, you’re ready for the next step.

**Use Your Airbrush Only for Cake Decorating**

Do not use an airbrush that has been used with paints or inks that are not safe to eat. Even if you have thoroughly cleaned the airbrush, do not use one that has been used with paints that are inedible. If you’re unsure if your airbrush has been used with unsafe paints or inks in the past, don’t use it. Get a new one.

**Practice First**

Don’t skip the airbrushing basics tutorial. Make sure you’re comfortable using your airbrush before you start decorating your cake. Inexperience with the airbrush is a good way to ruin an otherwise beautiful
cake. It’s better to ruin a spare piece of newsprint or cardboard. You might make a mistake on your first few tries with a cake, but don’t let it be because you didn’t take the time to practice and master the basics.

_Have a Plan_

Before you start airbrushing your cake, take some time to figure out the design you want to put on the cake and practice on a piece of paper or cardboard. You might get away with winging it after you’ve had some practice, but for now go in with a plan.

_Use a Turntable or Lazy Susan_

This comes in handy when creating a base overall color for your cake. With the cake in constant motion, it helps ensure an even spray over the surface of your cake. If you’re creating lines or decorations on the side of your cake, a turntable is an excellent tool. With the airbrush about six to eight inches away, spin your turntable and use smooth, even strokes and take your time. Fill in any light spots when you’re done.

_Use Stencils_

Professionals use stencils all the time. There’s no reason you shouldn’t either. You’ll find stencils in a variety of shapes from holiday designs to patterns that fit just about any theme. For example, if you want to make a cake for Valentine’s Day, use a white icing on your cake and airbrush a light pink color over the entire cake (remember, use a turntable!). Pick up a heart design or two and use your airbrush to create some nice red hearts.

8. **Airbrushing Portraits On Your Cake**

One common type of stencil used when airbrushing cakes is the portrait. Portrait cakes are very popular and if you can master this you’ll instantly increase your repertoire of cake designs.

Refer to our Airbrush Portraits guide for a step-by-step tutorial.

9. **Freehand Lettering on Your Cake**

Most prefer to use icing when including lettering on their cake, but you could certainly use the airbrush to write messages, too.

When creating freehand lettering you need to get the airbrush closer to your cake to create finer lines. When you do this, however, you might blow a hole in the icing if the pressure is too high. You might set your air pressure around 20 psi when airbrushing a typical design on your cake, but when the airbrush is closer to the cake you need to turn it down to around 10 psi.
Like anything else, it takes practice to perfect freehand lettering. There are so many styles of writing that you should practice one or two you find appealing. Once you master a couple you can use these to write messages on your cake. Check out our *Advanced Lettering* guide for information on the different lettering styles and more information of how to use lettering with airbrushing.

**10. Airbrush Stencils**

As a cake decorator, you'll end up using stencils to lay your designs. Stencils come in several kinds of designs from lettering, to border designs, to designs for kids' birthday parties, to just about anything you could imagine. For more on stencils for cakes see our guide, *Using Airbrush Templates for Fast, Professional Results*.

**11. Freehand Border Ideas**

What’s appealing about airbrushing, or any other art form, is that you’re allowed to use your creativity. There is no defined set of rules for how to airbrush a cake, although if you’re decorating a cake for a customer you should follow any guidelines they give you. The following is a list of common border designs to get you started. Embellish on them, alter them, or create your own.

**INCLUDE GRAPHICS FOR EACH BORDER DESIGN**

*dots*

You can place dots around your cake to create a simple border. You could make all of the dots the same size, alternate between large and small dots, or mix it up even more. You may even have differently colored polka dots bordering your cake.

*lines*

Lines are another basic airbrushing skill, and they can create very nice borders. Use a couple analogous colors spaced evenly around your cake, or try another color scheme.

*fares*

Fade two analogous colors so that you cannot tell where one begins and the other ends. For example, fade blue into violet, green into aquamarine, etc. You might consider framing your fade with a couple of lines.

*scallops*

A scalloped border appears as a series of curves around your border.

*wavy border*
A wavy border is simply a wavy line that runs along the edge of the cake.

**Themed Cakes**

If you’re decorating a cake for a particular event like a holiday, you might try to incorporate a few holiday-themed designs into your border. Draw a couple of lines (use appropriate colors—red and pink for Valentine’s Day; red, yellow and pink for Mother’s Day, etc.) and then include a few holiday designs around your edges. Use stencils of hearts, flowers, etc.

Sports-themed cakes can be popular for Super Bowl parties, little league banquets, etc. Use the appropriate team colors around the border, and consider incorporating stencils like footballs, baseballs, basketballs, soccer balls, etc.

**Be Creative!**

These are merely suggestions. Use them, or don’t use them; it’s up to you. Try a combination of these border types to make it your own. You could even choose to create your own border not mentioned here. Some choose to include piping around the edges to complement their border.

**12. Step-By-Step Cake Decorating Airbrushing Tutorial**

One of the most popular designs for cakes is scenery. As daunting as this may sound it’s actually very doable with a little guidance and practice. A nice piece of scenery can create many different moods. You may opt for a serene sunset, a clear spring day, a gloomy ominous scene for Halloween, or countless others. In our example we will create a sunset scene, but you can use these general ideas and techniques to create just about any design. You will need a palm tree stencil to complete this design.

**Preparation**

1. Prepare your airbrush by loading your first color and setting the regulator to the appropriate pressure level (about 15 psi).
2. Gather whichever colors you’ll need so they’re nearby. Keep a water bottle close, too. This will be used to rinse the airbrush between colors.

**Create the Horizon, Waves and Water**

3. Using the edge of a piece of paper for guidance, create a blue horizon line.
4. Add some light, slightly angled lines to your water for waves.
5. Lightly shade the ocean area blue.

**Change Colors**

6. Change colors from blue to yellow. Follow steps 7 through 11 to do this.
7. Empty the color cup into a bowl of water.
8. Spray any excess color into your bowl of water.
9. Add water to your color cup and spray this through your airbrush into the bowl of water.
10. When the water sprays clear, empty the remaining water from the color cup and spray any excess water into the water bowl.
11. Add your yellow color, testing it on a clean cloth to make sure it is not compromised by the blue.

**Create the Sun and Sky**

12. Create a soft yellow dot in your sky for your sun.
13. Then lightly spray yellow streaks across your background, sweeping with your airbrush to create soft colors.
14. Change colors from yellow to pink. (Refer to steps 7 through 11.)
15. Add some pink to your sky, and add a little to your water. The pink mixing with the yellow creates an orange, while pink mixing with blue creates a lavender color.

**Note:** You could add some detail to the cake by putting clouds in your sky. Just spread out a cotton ball, hold it up to your cake and spray pink at its edge.

**Use Your Palm Tree Stencil**

17. Change colors from pink to black. (Refer to steps 7 through 11.)
18. Set a palm tree stencil on the left side of your design.
19. Spray the exposed areas of the stencil with black.
20. You can add a few birds in the sky using black. These may be created by drawing a small, stretched-out lowercase ‘m’.

**Add Lettering**

21. Use black to add lettering, too. Choose one of the styles of freehand lettering, or use stencils. Try to write in an area that will not overlap too much with the black palm trees or birds.

Be creative with your scene. This is your work of art. There are no rules dictating exactly how to airbrush a cake (save for those dictating health and safety) or what you can and cannot do with your design.

**13. Cleaning Your Airbrush**

It’s important that you clean your airbrush regularly. That means cleaning it between every color, at the end of the day, and periodically giving it a thorough cleaning. Instructions for this can be found in our *Complete Guide to Cleaning Your Airbrush*. Make sure that you refer to the cleaning instructions that pertain to the type of airbrush that you’re using, i.e. siphon feed or gravity feed.