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Theater food full of delicious-looking fakes

[Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, The](#), Dec 1, 2004 by [LAURA GAWRISCH](#)

Creating believable food scenes in live performances at the holidays -- or any time -- does not generally begin at the grocery store.

With so many performances, it would be impossible to keep buying new foods before every few shows, and purchasing fake theater foods from catalogs can cost hundreds of dollars per item.

Instead, many of the foods for shows such as "A Christmas Carol" are created in the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's props department by props director Jim Guy and his team of prop assistants. Those include principal craftswoman Julia Powell, who made most of the foods for this year's production of the Dickens classic.

The multi-step process of creating food for the stage usually begins with Powell thumbing through cookbooks for ideas. For each food she chooses, she must then select a medium and create a mold. Powell uses anything from clay to hot pourable vinyl to create her faux foods, and the setting time for some of her pieces can be as long as a week. Once set, Powell must look for a color, taking into consideration stage lighting.

"What looks good in (the prop room) might look washed out or too dark under the stage lighting," Guy explained.

When she finally has a color, Powell then gives the food some texture, which she says is the most important part. As she explained her creations, Powell showed how she used a fresh orange, which has very small dimples, to get just the right texture on the turkey she was making. She rolled the orange over the final layer of paint.

"Everybody eats," said Guy, referring to audience members, "so everyone knows what these foods look like. The goal of theater is to mimic life, so it had better look real, or people will notice."

Both Powell and Guy say they are avid home cooks, which helps them make faux foods appear more realistic.

How "real" do the foods turn out?

"Lots of times people come over to what I am working on and pick up a faux piece of candy or something and ask, 'Can I eat this?' " said Powell.

Some food, however, is meant to be eaten on stage. Powell and Guy then need to take into consideration the dietary needs of the actors.

"There are some actors who are vegetarians or diabetics or dieters who are focused on watching their weight and don't want extra calories," said Guy.