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The sweet reality of cupcakes

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DIY from the television to your home

Cupcakes. What's not to love? They're perfect pretty mounds of sweet deliciousness that bring a smile to everyone's face. One lick of the sugary, creamy frosting and you're sent into a heavenly tailspin of kid-like nostalgia. Not to mention a sugar coma! Cupcakes are happy. Cupcakes are simple. Cupcakes offer an escape from reality. And for these reasons, Vancouver's Heather White and Lori Joyce decided to build an empire around the petite dessert with their retro-styled retail bakery, Cupcakes, which happens to be the focus of a new 13-part docudrama, *Cupcake Girls*, premiering on the W Network.

It was back in 2001 in New York City when the two childhood best friends were both working. The girls always knew they wanted to work together, but the type of business didn't come to fruition until they experienced the dark times in the city on Sept. 11 and in the days afterward. One afternoon the duo desired a sugary pick-me-up, and found a sweet escape in an NYC bakery where people were walking out with boxes of cupcakes. A light bulb went off in their heads and thus began their dream business which they launched in 2002 in Vancouver, something White says is the first cupcake bakery in North America.

"We want everyone to experience an escape when they come into our store and have the feeling like you are standing inside a cupcake," she explains over the phone. "Technically we were the first ones to open up in North America. There were always people who make cupcakes and eaten cupcakes, but there was never a destination of a brand or concept around a cupcake. The fact that we've been able to inspire other people to the same thing has been exciting from our perspective."

With an expanding franchise of six locations in Vancouver and an all-female staff of more than 50 employees, the W Network first approached the girls to do a show focusing on women entrepreneurs. Once the execs realized Joyce and White were much more than a simple story about a sweet fix, they quickly began filming this interesting new series about the quirky best friends' mission to dominate the cupcake world one Sweet 16 vanilla cupcake at a time.

Cupcake Girls isn't your average baking reality series like *Ace of Cakes* or *Cake Boss*, mainly because Joyce and White, though savvy business and marketing experts, really know nothing about the food industry. But that's a bonus when it comes to the fun of this show.



The series really goes behind the scenes of this booming business, showing viewers that the cupcake business is far from a piece of cake.

“Lori and I are not bakers,” Joyce says. “We didn’t want our show to be about something that it wasn’t. We don’t stand around our bakery and argue about who is baking what. We really focus on what we’re best at. There’s a lot of stuff in business that comes up spontaneously, so the show details with us overcoming those challenges.”

With a motto that “well behaved women rarely make history,” these strong women are determined to make their presence known in the baking world, but struggle to manage their ever-expanding chain of cupcake stores. With their young, unpredictable female employees – including a hilarious transgender woman named Cadence and White’s stubborn father/delivery boy – this show is a bumpy road through their business mandate but it also reveals some very personal battles Joyce and White face with issues of alcoholism and infertility.

In the debut episode, we see what it takes to juggle these personal tribulations and maintaining business as usual. While frantically trying to make some crucial wedding deliveries, White, a no-nonsense businesswoman is also a recovering alcoholic turned triathlete, has to deal with possibly firing her father for being a careless delivery man. Joyce on the other hand, seems to be the merrier of the duo, and goes under scrutiny for going to an in vitro appointment in her mission for motherhood over delivering an important order. When employees fail to show up during the second episode, Joyce and White endure a staffing crisis and take over hiring from their managers in hopes of finding a more reliable staff. Eventually they are forced to work the counter together, a not-so-easy task for these moguls.

The Cupcake Girls is a sweet adventurous romp that will have viewers salivating for sugary snacks. But with the recent explosion of cupcake trends, including a few similar series on TLC and the Food Network in the works, are we ever going to see this craze fade away? I know here in Toronto we have an overabundance of cupcake bakeries, but Joyce and White guffaw at this sentiment.

“People at the beginning asked us that,” says Joyce. “My response has always been cupcakes are as trendy as a doughnut because they’ve been around just as long. It’s like the bagel trend in the ‘80s. It’s not going away. But at the same time there will always be the people like us who stay innovative and evolve to survive. Having competition encourages us, which is a good thing.”

When I told Joyce and White that I will be testing out cupcake recipes in my own mission statement to become a better baker, they offered some tips for a novice like me.

“Don’t be afraid to do cupcakes from scratch. People always go the easy route and buy cake mix. When you bake from scratch, there’s a lot more enjoyment. Instead of using oil, use butter for a full flavoured cake instead of a cake that stays moist for an unhealthy amount of time. Become good at your base – vanilla and chocolate – and get creative with your frosting. Add peanut butter, add caramel, add instant coffee or cream cheese. Keep your bases simple and get creative with how you fill it and what you top it with.”

How could I resist the advice from the queens of cupcakes?

Cupcake Girls premières with back-to-back episodes on Sunday, April 4 at 9 p.m. ET/PT on W Network.