

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Cupcakes take the cake

By Mia Stainsby
April 7, 2010



Cupcakes have dodged the bullets of fickle tastes and kept on reproducing in recent years. They've even spawned a reality TV show, *The Cupcake Girls*, which you might have read about in *The Vancouver Sun* on Saturday.

I do my bit. I eat my share of cupcakes. For one thing, they make my little friends Ben and Brianna crazy happy when I arrive with cupcakes. And I've been honored with the title "Auntie Cupcake." Now how cool is that?

I'd sooner eat cupcakes than a regular cake, which you eat on a plate with a fork and napkin. That's too high-maintenance for me, whereas the cupcake is not only personalized and portable, it's much more pleasing to the eye. With the right amount of frosting and piping, it's a visual come-on.

In Vancouver, Cupcakes, the first dedicated cupcake store, opened in 2002, and their windows with armies of cupcakes released surpassed memories of Grandma cupcakes. Eight years later, there are dedicated cupcake stores within striking distance whenever the need hits.

Cupcakes, the store, is now in three locations and has three franchise branches with plans to spread out across Canada (see cupcakesonline.com for store locations). Another cupcakes-only venture with branches, Big City Cupcakes, started up two years ago; it's now 20-store strong around B.C. and their cupcakes are available in some Blenz Coffee locations as well. (See bigcitycupcakes.com for store locations.)

The Clever Cupcake (2985 Northern Ave., Coquitlam) opened just over a week ago and owner Juan Escobedo has faith in cupcake love. "It's a symbol of childhood," he says. He grew up in Mexico City but his Spanish grandmother used to make them, he says. Can health food and cupcakes coexist? Well, that's what he's shooting for. He doesn't use processed sugar and although he won't give away recipe secrets, he says he uses natural sweeteners, like fruit. His cupcakes also have no trans fats and no preservatives or artificial anything.

At Tracycakes (2636 Montrose Ave., Abbotsford, and 15015 Marine Dr., White Rock), owner Tracy Dueck says their newly introduced gluten-free cupcakes are flying out the door. "People who can't eat wheat want their treats, too," she says. The one-third-sized Babycakes are daily sellouts, too, she says. As testament to cupcake mania, when her lease at a Fort Langley store location ended and she had to close, locals drove to her White Rock store for their fixes and while there, begged for another store in Fort Langley. It's on the way, she promises.

Jennifer Funk of Sweet Retreat, which specializes in wedding cakes, says about 40 per cent of

their requests are for cupcakes. For one thing, they're about half the cost of a wedding cake and they eliminate the need for cutting fees at the venue. In addition, she says, "They're cute!" (She doesn't have a storefront but can be reached through www.Sweetretreat.ca.)

Craig McDougall of Frosting Cupcakery (which opened last June at 20226 Fraser Highway, Langley) says cupcakes are eaten at weddings, unlike traditional wedding cakes. "People used to walk up to the wedding cake, say it's nice and keep on walking. Cupcakes are magnets at weddings." There's a variety of flavours of different designs and colours so everyone can have their pick. His store hosts cupcake decorating parties for kids with lessons on how to decorate them, he says. He's also working on creating small boxed mini-cupcakes as take-home gifts for wedding guests.

Lyndsay Sung, an art teacher at Arts Umbrella, saw the artistic possibilities in cupcakes. "I'm definitely drawn to the vintage esthetics," she says. Her creative, personalized and clean-lined cupcakes jump-started Coco Cake Cupcakes, her online business (cococake.com), although she often sells at the monthly Blim Community Market at Heritage Hall, too (she'll be there on April 25). "I've never advertised. It's all word of mouth," she says of the appeal of her sculptural fondant and buttercream designs.

And what's a cultural phenomenon without online excitement? Cupcakestakethecake.com has an international list of cupcake stores should you be traveling and crave a cupcake or two or three. The names of the hundreds of stores say it all: Cupcake people are cute, sweet and sassy. Butch Lane, Buttercup, Ladybird, Let Them Eat Cupcakes, Make My Cake, Polka Dot, Two Little Red Hens, Baby Love, Back In The Day, Bee Sweet, Butter & Me, Back In The Day Bakery, Batter Up, Cakewalk, Hello Cupcake (get it, Hello Kitty fans?), Sift: A Cupcakery, Sweet! By Good Golly Miss Holly, Pink Moon and Toot Sweet are some of them. But the name that, like a cane, would hook me from stage left and pull me right into the store would be Kickass Cupcakes.

But there's something of a mystery in all this talk of cupcakes. Why haven't restaurant pastry chefs pushed the borders on cupcakes and offered some creative cupcake options? I have repetitive cheesecake and lemon tart syndrome. And if I want to postpone dessert, it will survive a trip home so much better than sorbet.