

March 16, 2010

<http://detroitnews.com/article/20100316/BIZ/3160333>

## Nostalgic cupcake craze is prepared for long stay

*KAREN DYBIS**Special to The Detroit News*

Tiny, tasty and seductive, the gourmet cupcake is strengthening its hold over dessert lovers with specialty bakeries spreading over the region's real estate -- and waistlines.

Just Baked, a Livonia-based cupcake shop, is doubling its size, with two new locations joining stores in Novi and Ann Arbor. One store opens in Royal Oak on Wednesday, and another in Troy's Somerset Collection opens next month.

Meanwhile, the Cupcake Station is feeding its expansion through franchising. Kerry Johnson, Michigan's original cupcake king, is launching his franchise business across the Midwest in April.

Johnson believes the Birmingham cupcake shop could have as many as 10 franchisees by year's end.

A retail trend that originally blossomed on the East and West coasts has firmly settled here. The recent additions are part of a larger trend, with cupcake kiosks, catering companies and bakeries springing up across Metro Detroit.

The basic recipe may be more than a century old, yet the cupcake has never been hotter or more relevant. In a down economy, cupcakes are a treat many can afford. It has become the Lady Gaga of the dessert world: fashionable, unpredictable and worth watching.

"Cupcakes level the playing field when it comes to big-city foodie trends," said Nichelle Stephens, co-editor of Cupcakes Take the Cake, a Web site and blog devoted to the tiny treats. "Cupcakes are more accessible and often more affordable than molecular gastronomy or whatever is the new thing on 'Top Chef.' "

Cupcakes have been a lifesaver of sorts for many retailers, food and otherwise. Johnson sold more than 15,000 cupcakes -- at \$2.75 a pop -- over Valentine's Day weekend. Nationally, Cold Stone Creamery's sales skyrocketed when it began selling ice cream cupcakes in 2009.

People are replacing traditional cakes with the miniature version for every occasion: birthdays, baby showers, weddings, dinner parties and themed events such as St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

It's "a cost saver," said Pam Turkin, who opened Just Baked with husband Todd in 2009. "You should see a bride's face when I tell her she can get a wedding's worth of cupcakes for \$300 instead of a cake for \$3,000. We're booked through March 2011."

Renee Jakubowski, a Grosse Pointe Park mother of three, is throwing a cupcake-themed birthday party for her 1-year-old daughter, Avery. While the toddler covers herself in frosting, Jakubowski said the older children will indulge in decorate-your-own activities with toppings including gummy worms and turtle-shaped sprinkles.

"They're going to be a hit at my party," Jakubowski said.

According to food historians, cupcakes began in 19th-century England. People baked cakes in small molds or ramekins to make teacup-size servings. In the United States, cupcakes became a classic at children's birthday and school parties because they were an ideal individual portion.

While bakeries have long sold cupcakes, specialty shops began popping up in the late 1990s. The first credited cupcake store was New York's Magnolia, which started in 1996 and gained fame when the gals from "Sex in the City" ate its treats on TV.

The West Coast soon had its own chains; Sprinkles launched in Los Angeles in 2005. Michigan's first cupcakery, Johnson's Cupcake Station, opened in 2006.

What distinguishes these cupcakes from their predecessors are their size, variety and caloric content. The gourmet cupcake spills over its paper base like a monstrous muffin. Their frosting tops resemble buttercream beehive hairdos, a tribute to the towering power of sugar and shortening.

Then there are the flavors. Just Baked has the Fat Elvis, a banana cake cupcake covered with peanut butter frosting and homemade ganache. The Cupcake Station's Mocha Latte is a chocolate cake filled and frosted with espresso buttercream frosting and topped with coffee beans.

Megan's Cupcakes sells the decadent tiramisu cupcake, a white cake drizzled with a syrup made from Kahlua, espresso and chocolate syrup, topped with mocha buttercream frosting and garnished with chocolate shavings.

At the Chocolate Bar Cafe, patrons adore the red velvet, banana split, carrot and pina colada, owner Lisa Corbin said.

"It's been a phenomenon," said Corbin, who began selling specialty cupcakes at her Grosse Pointe Woods ice cream shop at her husband's urging. "They've become our everyday bread and butter."

Not to ruin anyone's sugar buzz, but cupcakery critics say the trend eventually will go the way of dog bakeries, clay-painting shops and make-your-own dinner joints.

Only time, and people's wallets, will tell.

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