

Perfect cupcake turns out to be complicated challenge

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The Edmonton Journal

Wednesday, August 30, 2006

EDMONTON - THE VENDOR: Ailynn Santos, Whimsical Cupcakes

THE PRODUCT: 23 regular flavours of iced cupcakes, plus an additional 20 seasonal flavours, and a variety of cookies

THE MARKET: St. Albert and Downtown City Market, both on Saturday

THE BACKSTORY: Ailynn Santos was teaching Grade 6 in New York City when she saw her future in a cupcake.

"There were cupcake shops everywhere," she says, recalling the sudden, Martha Stewart-driven trendiness of the long-neglected cupcake. "Cupcakes were what everybody wanted."



CREDIT: John Lucas, The Journal
It took Ailynn Santos two years to develop her batters.

They quickly became what Santos wanted too, but she was a talented amateur baker with no professional training. Accustomed to teaching classrooms full of children, she got busy and taught herself to bake by the trial-and-error method.

"Lucky for me, I have a large family to eat the errors. My partner, Ken, calls himself my quality-assurance man, but the customers who meet him at the market call him Mr. Cupcake."

It took Santos two years to develop her basic dark and light batters. Lacking the science background of a trained baker, her biggest challenge was the somewhat unpredictable nature of cake baking.

"It was tough, discovering for myself exactly what each ingredient does, and why, and what to expect from it."

She wanted the basic cupcake to be light. If it's too dense, it's no longer a cupcake, but a muffin. At the same time, the feather-light cupcake had to be moist, never dry or crumbly.

She's achieved most of what she wants in a good cupcake, but there's always more to learn. In December, she'll head for Toronto to take a course with cake expert Bonnie Gordon.

"I love teaching, but this is important too. It's something just for me. I love the look on people's faces when I hand them a cupcake. It's like they're little kids again."

With cupcakes, the icing is half the fun, but it, too, was a challenge.

"Not too soft, but still substantial enough to stand up on the cake. It couldn't be runny, but not gritty either."

As well as the conventional buttercreams, she does (by special order) Swiss meringue frostings or French meringue frostings.

"The difference is all in the process. Tasting it, I doubt if most people could tell which meringue is which. But both are labour intensive, temperature sensitive, and a lot more trouble than a buttercream."

She prefers the Swiss meringue, which is less likely to crystallize (go gritty) during the gentle cooking process.

Santos loves to do special orders. A recent order was for the 102nd birthday party of local celebrity Harriet Winspear.

"She chose buttercream icing in natural colours -- soft pastels, mint green, delphinium blue, buttercup yellow, raspberry pink..."

With the coming of autumn, Santos changes her flavours to include seasonal specialties.

"I call one of them Fall in Love. It's a chocolate pumpkin spice cupcake with a Swiss meringue frosting, possibly ginger, but I haven't decided for sure -- I like to surprise people."

Another fall cupcake is So Sappy, a vanilla cake with a thick swirl of maple buttercream icing.

Long before the busy Christmas rush, she hopes to have found just the right space for a retail shop. In the meantime, you can contact her through www.whimsicalcupcakes.ca.

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