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DISH

Edmonton's cupcakes runneth over

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When I was a child, one of my favourite sweets was the simple cupcake. Nothing pleased me more than spending a day baking tasty little treats. That, and scarfing down about a dozen of the moist cakes topped with sugary, coloured frosting and the occasional sprinkle.



The sweet, simple cupcake has come a long way since my childhood. Back then, you chose between two cake flavours—vanilla or chocolate—and topped it with one of four frostings—chocolate, vanilla, pink or blue. Today's cupcakes, although still sweet, are anything but simple.

A few years back, it might have seemed odd to pay up to \$2.75 each for one of the little cakes. However, with today's masterful creations that could easily be described as works of art, the cost is completely sensible and very much worth it.

Edmonton cupcakeries like The Cupcake Bakeshoppe & Café, the Whimsical Cake Studio and The Cupcake Shoppe offer tiramisu, Creamsicle and mint chocolate cupcakes, or cupcakes filled with Callebaut chocolate ganache (a thicker coating of chocolate frosting). You can buy mocha, mango or Neapolitan cupcakes. You can find cupcakes that taste like green tea.

They're called designer or gourmet cupcakes, and they're everywhere. Betrothed couples are substituting them for the traditional wedding cake, creating layer upon layer of glistening cupcakes, colour-coordinated to match every dress or theme imaginable. Parents are serving them at children's birthdays, preferring the paper-wrapped desserts to the mess of a traditional birthday cake. They're popping up at fundraising events, grand openings, bachelorette parties, baby showers and everything in between.

The options for decorating the perfectly rounded crowns are endless. Pick anything you can think of—daisies, initials, dragons or phallic symbols (oh my!)—and the designers will draw it up in delicate frosting made from creamed butter and icing sugar; 'tis the beauty of the cupcake.

They have become a highlight at many Edmonton farmers' markets, and one visit to the consistently sold-out

Whimsical Cake Studio booth at the 104 Street Farmers' Market left no doubt as to why. At \$14 per half dozen, I got a perfect taste of heaven.

I tried two flavours: Nostalgia, the classic vanilla cupcake topped in blue frosting, and the more risqué Chocolate Peanut-Butterscotch Bliss, with cake whipped from buttermilk and topped with frothy peanut butter frosting and a delightful drizzle of butterscotch. Each was moist and succulent, fitting owner and creator Ailynn Santos's aim to "make the world a little sweeter, one cupcake at a time" perfectly.

She discovered her passion for the sweet little treats while in New York City, where the designer cupcake craze is said to have started. Her months spent there inspired her to return home and open her own cupcakery on Riverbend Road. Santos, a substitute teacher on her days not spent baking, is now creating cupcakes for up to seven weddings in a weekend almost every week of the year.

"When she first opened the store, I thought I might have to call my friends to bail her out and buy her cupcakes. Obviously, I was wrong," smiles her mother, who helps her daughter by working the booth at the farmers' market.

If you want your own order of Whimsical creations, get in line. Whimsical has catered for companies like Starbucks and attended major fundraisers where Santos sells her cakes for charity at up to \$10 a piece. According to Santos's mother, one customer from Toronto even had Whimsical cupcakes shipped out east to be served at his wedding.

Santos is definitely living the sweet life, and a fair number of other trend-savvy business people have set up shop and are finding their own success.

Zedda, owner of the family-run Cupcake Bakeshoppe & Café on Stony Plain Road, also takes great pride in her art. "Cupcakes are about spreading happiness and creating lasting memories," she says. With creations such as "Diva," "Bliss" and "Scarlett O'Hara" dreamed up by Zedda and her daughter, who wouldn't find them memorable?

"We just sit around the table, think about the colour and flavour of each cupcake and then pick a suitable, interesting name. We've even had male customers who've ordered the Diva," she laughs, "so I guess cupcake choice isn't all about the name."

As to Edmonton's flavour of choice, traditionalists should take comfort. Chocolate, according to Zedda, remains the hands-down favourite. She makes her ganache, a thick chocolate topping similar to pastry filling, with pure Callebaut chocolate. "Chocolate, chocolate-mint, double chocolate, chocolate drizzled with vanilla—it doesn't matter. Our customers want it," Zedda laughs. "Two-thirds of the cupcakes we make are combinations of chocolate and they sell out every day." It's a trend that shows no signs of slowing down.

The cupcake may seem old-fashioned, but it's one taste of nostalgia that's making a massive comeback in Edmonton. A word of warning: to place an order for a special occasion, book ahead. Way ahead. Many cupcake shops are already taking wedding orders for summer 2008.

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However, if you're just looking for that perfect treat to satisfy your sweet tooth, consider the cupcake. It will hit that sweet spot you remember from childhood. ▼