

Small-Business Profile

Cupcake bakery finds recipe for success in Las Vegas

By Danielle Birkin / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Success has been sweet for Pamela Jenkins, a self-described foodie who has perfected the nostalgic and whimsical treat, the cupcake, and has based a booming business on her inherent proficiency with batter and frosting.

Jenkins is the owner of the Cupcakery, a boutique cupcake bakery she co-founded in 2005. With myriad sophisticated flavors such as Kir Royale, Boston Dream and Chocolate Passion, Jenkins has carved out a lucrative niche and attracted a loyal clientele, proving that cupcakes are no longer just a childhood treat.

A native of Texas who grew up baking with her grandmother — “That’s what women do in the South, they cook,” Jenkins said — she moved to New York City, after high school, and was struck by the resurgence of boutique cupcake shops, which was fueled in part by the ladies of the hit series “Sex and the City.”

“There was a trend in cupcakes and I think it came from Sarah Jessica Parker eating cupcakes from Magnolia Bakery,” said Jenkins, who moved to Las Vegas in 2004 to attend UNLV. She had studied anthropology and Spanish literature — “and those don’t go hand-in-hand with cupcakes” — but found that many of her credits would not transfer, so she found a job as executive assistant to Tim Poster, then-chairman of the Golden Nugget.

On a slow day at the office, she read an article

about a woman in San Francisco who was selling cupcakes out of her home, and Jenkins was struck with inspiration. With the rise of specialty cupcake shops across the nation, she figured a cupcake bakery would be well received in the Las Vegas Valley, so she set about testing many of her grandmother’s recipes for large-scale production.

“It took about a year,” said Jenkins, who founded the Cupcakery with two friends who are no longer involved with the business. “I didn’t think 10 years ago that I would own a cupcake bakery, and I never expected in my wildest dreams that it would take off as quickly as it did. We sold out the first day and the second day, but we only made about 600.”

With just two people doing the baking and frosting, Jenkins said she worked around the clock for the first few months of operation, as most small-business owners have been known to do. As the marketing guru of the group, she said she contacted everyone she had been introduced to

while working for Poster, and started sending out brochures and products.

“I don’t believe in a ton of paid advertising unless I can get a good deal and trade some cupcakes for it,” Jenkins said.

The Cupcakery’s location on South Eastern Avenue now averages about 1,500 cupcakes a day — that’s 125 dozen. Each treat costs \$2.50, with one dozen cupcakes available for \$28, and custom cakes selling for as much as \$75 a

The Cupcakery

Owner: Pamela Jenkins

Founded: 2005

Address: 9680 S. Eastern Ave., Suite 100

Type of business: Boutique cupcake bakery

Workforce: 13



Brittany Tirabassi fills an order at the Cupcakery on Eastern Avenue near Silverado Ranch Boulevard. PHOTOS BY LEILA NAVIDI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

dozen.

Jenkins said the company’s mixed assortment box of one dozen cupcakes is a top seller.

“People love variety and it’s akin to a box of chocolates — there’s something for everybody,” Jenkins said.

Popular flavors include Southern Belle, red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting; Oh, My Gosh-Ganache, vanilla cake with a chocolate truffle center, topped with vanilla and chocolate buttercreams; and Boston Dream, yellow cake, Bavarian creme filling and a cap of chocolate ganache.

Residents of Summerlin can now enjoy easy access to Jenkins’ creations, as a new location recently opened at Lake Mead Boulevard and U.S. 95. An additional bake shop is in the works in Dallas as well.

Jessica Hirshon, marketing director of Pat Clark Enterprises, was one of the original cupcake testers when Jenkins was perfecting the recipes.

“Pamela and I go way back, so I have been testing stuff since before the bakery opened, and needless to say, I have been frequenting since they opened,” Hirshon said. “I’ve seen the place swamped with a line around the corner. It has been so busy I have jumped behind the counter to help out.”

Although the Cupcakery is successful — “The return on my investment has been great,” Jenkins said — she has faced several challenges in running it, including gender discrimination.

“I think women business owners always face a bit of a challenge,” she said. “I deal with a lot of men searching for equipment or in construction and they think I’m some stupid little girl whose sugar daddy finances her business, and that’s hurtful. It’s really tough proving to people that I’m not stupid and I can bargain with you for this oven. You’d think in today’s society you wouldn’t have to deal with, ‘What are you silly girls thinking opening a cupcake bakery?’ but I’m laughing all the way to the bank.”

Other challenges include staffing.

“We live in Las Vegas where people are making \$100,000 as cocktail waitresses and don’t have the gumption or drive to work hard in a place like this,” she said. “With the generation



The Strawberry Shortcake cupcakes feature layers of strawberry and vanilla cake topped with a layer of strawberry buttercream and a dollop of heavy cream frosting.


right under mine the work ethic is ... poor, and it’s insane. I don’t know what happened. People think by standing there and being present they are doing their job. Fortunately, we don’t have huge turnover, and we have managed to find a great team. We have a fun place to work.”

Having worked a wide range of jobs herself, Jenkins strives to be the best boss she can be.

“We’ve all had jobs with nightmare bosses, and people should never have to do that,” she said. “No matter how bad your day is, it takes more energy to be rude and a jerk than it does to be nice and mellow. We wanted to have a business that would make people smile and happy.”

Jenkins advised other entrepreneurs to pursue their dreams, but to be prepared to marry their business.

“You can’t go in thinking you will work 9 to 5,” she said, adding that such a misconception contributed to the demise of the original partnership. “It’s like having a newborn baby — you have to bust your ass and care for it and nurture it 24 hours a day. You have to watch every person — and every cupcake — going out the door, and you have to be prepared to give up your personal life and all social activities. Your whole life changes as an entrepreneur, and a small business will fail in a heartbeat if you are not there at the beginning.”



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 and Panel Discussion**

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 Noon to 1:30pm
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Moderated by Bruce Spotleson, Publisher of In Business Las Vegas