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by SERENA BRAHNEY hair and makeup by HEATHER BORRAH
photo assistants JORGE CRUZ and MARIO SANCHEZ styling by MARY BETH SALES

PULSE / SCENE

CUPCAKE WARS

A LOOK AT THE FLAVOR
BEHIND THE FROSTING

Sure, frozen yogurt has its following. And bacon certainly has been enjoying its 15 minutes. But nothing — really, nothing — holds a (birthday) candle to the power of cupcakes. These bitty baked goods are more than a mere culinary trend — they're a national obsession.

Here to feed that need is a committed crop of pastry pros, men and women who toil in the name of shrunken treat perfection. They're groundbreakers, tastemakers and well, cake bakers, unified by their fervor for frosting. 944 steps into the kitchen with a few purveyors to discuss bringing sexy back to baking, and why Angelenos should have their (cup)cake and eat it, too.

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Susan Sarich, SusieCakes

When it comes to cupcake creation, there's one question Susan Sarich always asks herself: "Would Grandma serve this?"

"If the answer is no, it's not going on the menu," says Sarich, the owner of bakery mini-chain SusieCakes. The guiding principle helps keep her semi-eponymous shops true to their all-American roots. "It's very 'back to basics,'" she says. "I like to keep things simple. Simple is better, always."

It's a debatable mantra, certainly, but for SusieCakes, it's proven the key to success. In four years, the company has amassed as many locations in Southern California, with a fifth planned for San Francisco in early 2010. "There were a lot of people saying 'you're crazy, no one's going to buy this stuff,'" she recalls. "But I just never listened to the naysayers, because I knew in my heart that it would be a viable concept."

That concept is one built on the neighborhood bakeshop of yore, "where

the guy behind the counter knew your name, and you'd go with your mom to the dry cleaners and then get your smiley face cookie," Sarich says. At SusieCakes, however, it very well may be Sarich who knows the regulars' names, and what they're requesting is cupcakes. A lot of cupcakes.

"I want to be behind the counter in every store, taking every order," she says. But because she can't be, Sarich has trained her staff to place a premium on customer service. "It's genuine for us, and I think that people get that feeling when they come in here."

When it comes to SusieCakes' cult following, the proof is in the pudding. And in the pies. And the cookies. And, most definitely, in the cupcakes. "They're uncomplicated," says Sarich of her mini wonders. "They're straightforward, and they're all-American. Betty Crocker-esque. But better."

The cupcakes are also Sarich's gateway dessert, the means for reeling in to-be-loyal clientele. "It starts with people coming in for a cupcake," she says, and before they know it, they're ordering celebratory cakes left

and right. "Once they see the quality of the product, they're more inclined to say, 'Oh, I'm going to get the sheet cake for Bobby's birthday.'"

If SusieCakes all sounds a little too sugar and spice, consider this: Those seemingly harmless cupcakes are like the alcohol of the baked goods world. They're a mere introduction to something bigger, badder and more expensive. What better addiction to develop than to a frosting-licking-good, cup-sized cake?

With traditional flavors (chocolate, vanilla, red velvet and more) and ingredients (flour, butter, sugar, eggs), the effect is, in Sarich's words, "the real deal." So don't start thinking you'll one day find something wild in a SusieCakes treat. "People say, 'It looks like a bake sale' [or] 'they look like cupcakes my mom would make,'" Sarich says. "That's a compliment to me." For those seeking less conventional flavor pairings, Sarich says, "There's no ginger in the apple pie ... and there is no lavender-infused cupcake." Grandma simply wouldn't stand for it.

www.susiecakesla.com



Photo by Zach Coco
Dress by Li Carl