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## Sweet treats // High-end cupcakes are turning up everywhere

**Author(s):** Maureen Jenkins **Date:** September 29, 2004 **Page:** 1 **Section:** Food

There's something about the cupcake - that small frosting-topped treat that brings back memories of fifth-grade birthday parties and Grandma's stove-warmed kitchen - that never seems to go out of style.

But lately, this portable sweet thing has become a bit of a celebrity, what with guest-starring on HBO's "Sex and the City" and becoming a hot seller in bakeries from Seattle to the Big Apple.

Low-carb diets and fat grams be damned. Folks are having their cupcakes and savoring them, too.

About five years ago, "Sex" helped popularize the cupcake with the Cosmo-drinking set, making it another must-have accessory for the show's legions of worldwide fans. These days, urbanites across the nation are satisfying their cupcake jones, devouring simple vanilla and chocolate ones as well as more grown-up versions infused with lavender, creme brulee and even chili. While it's true that New York launched the national adult cupcake craze a few years back when bakeries across the city jumped into the mix, Chicago's no exception to the trend. Here, area pastry chefs are adding their own twists to these hand-held classics.

"To me, it's a real comfort dessert," says Judy Contino, pastry chef and owner of Bittersweet in Lakeview. "There's a certain amount of comfort when you're eating something you remember as a child."

At Southport Grocery and Cafe in Lakeview, "I hear it when people come to the store and say, 'A cupcake. I haven't had one of those in years,' " says owner/chef Lisa Santos, "whose store bakes and sells about 750 cupcakes weekly, including those at The Book Cellar and The Grind in Lincoln Square and Intelligentsia Coffee's two locations. "It conjures up home and memories of something your mom or grandmom used to make. I mean, who doesn't love a cupcake?"

They're portable, satisfying desserts that don't require the formality of a fork and knife. Bakeries like Bittersweet fill special cupcake orders for weddings, baby and bridal showers, and did strong picnic business this summer with red, white and blue-decorated versions. Plus, when serving large groups, "You can have variety and not just one big cake," Contino says.

Thanks to their appearance on the third season of "Sex and the City," cupcakes from Manhattan's Magnolia Bakery became virtual celebrities themselves. Not only do customers queue down the street daily for these \$1.75 sweets, but tour buses packed with fans of the now-defunct show make regular stops.

The show's "producers and writers lived in the West Village, and Magnolia Bakery's in the West Village," says HBO spokeswoman Angela Tarantino. "The writers really wrote to make the characters real. If Carrie Bradshaw's a journalist in New York, she'd know about Magnolia Bakery and know it had great cupcakes. The show was about New York, and that's such a New York experience."

As popular with locals as with tourists, Magnolia even draws "Sex" actors like Kyle MacLachlan (on the show, Charlotte's ex-husband, Trey) to its doors, Tarantino says. Stars get no special treatment here, though -- Tarantino says MacLachlan was mobbed by bus tour fans while he waited in Magnolia's infamously long line.

Magnolia owner Allysa Torey never has seen the cupcake episode featuring "Sex" characters Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) sitting outside her bakery and chatting about Carrie's latest love interest. Torey -- a former '50s jazz singer who opened her shop in 1996 -- says Magnolia's cupcakes already had become somewhat legendary before "Sex" featured her studio apartment-sized 750-square-foot shop. But now, "We pretty much bake 24 hours a day. There are cupcakes coming out of the oven at every moment."

Simplicity reigns here, as the only choices are \$1.75 vanilla and chocolate cupcakes with vanilla (albeit some with pastel colors) and chocolate frosting. A bakery that stays open until after midnight on the weekends and is busiest between 8 and 10:30 p.m., Magnolia's cupcake success started on a fluke.

"The truth is, we just had some extra [birthday cake] batter," says Torey, whose latest book, *More from Magnolia: Recipes from the World-Famous Bakery and Allysa Torey's Home Kitchen* (Simon and Schuster, \$27), publishes next month, offering recipes and hints on baking the perfect cupcake. But what makes them great, says Torey: "The ratio of cake to icing is better in a cupcake than in a cake."

As much a part of Americana as baseball and bluegrass, cupcakes have been a dessert staple for decades. "I remember when I was a child, cupcakes were always part of retail bakeries," says Nick Malgieri, an internationally renowned pastry chef and James Beard Foundation cookbook award winner who grew up in New Jersey during the late '50s and early '60s. But way earlier -- as far back as the second half of the 18th century, says Malgieri -- individually baked fancy pastries were common, especially in places like France. And in the years between World War I and II, he says, baking powder and flour pamphlets aimed at American housewives "were loaded with cupcakes with pink icing."

But "for about the past 10 years, people are getting back into the homey stuff," says Malgieri, a former executive pastry chef at *Windows on the World* during the late 1970s and early 1980s who just finished writing his seventh book, *A Baker's Tour*. "I have a feeling a lot of it is people feel eating a cupcake is virtuous, like eating a muffin. I think it comes back to the fact they're not so bad."

"If you're going to veer off [your] low-carb or no-carb diet," Malgieri says, eating a cupcake is more acceptable "than an 800-calorie piece of cheesecake."

For the past 11/2 years, **Jill Prescott** has operated a classical French culinary school in Chicago's Merchandise Mart. In her "Introduction to Baking" class, she includes a recipe for an elegant, cupcakelike lemon biscuit (pronounced bis-KWEE). A type of sponge cake, the biscuit gets filled with lemon cream, coated with a lemon meringue buttercream, and topped with a bit of candied lemon.

"A cupcake is basically a kind of homemade petit four from France," says Prescott, who hosts PBS' "**Jill Prescott** Ecole de Cuisine," a show where she offers professional cooking tips for home chefs. "That's very French, whereas the cupcake has the reputation of being very homey. I'm a fan of individual desserts if they're done well. What I try to do is show [students] how they can make a simple classic dessert but make it elegant and pretty."

At places like BomBon in Pilsen -- a bakery owned by former Topolobampo sous chef Luis Perea and wife Laura Cid-Perea, former pastry chef at Frontera Grill -- cupcakes get a decorative twist. Made mostly as special-order requests, cupcakes at BomBon often are used to create tiered wedding cakes.

"Depending on the event," Luis Perea says, "you can [bake] a cupcake with little small, fresh flowers on top of it, or use a sugar flower or piece of chocolate."

A bakery known for its upscale desserts, Bittersweet spans the gamut when it comes to cupcakes. "We bake cakes every week, so we always finish off the batter with cupcakes," Contino says. "We're always just playing with them many different ways. Filling them with lemon curd, or [filling] an almond cupcake with dark chocolate mousse." Most popular here are banana, carrot and moist chocolate versions where "typically we dip the cupcake in a chocolate ganache. That kind of seals it and then we add the buttercream" frosting.

At the Hearty Boys Caterers' cafe, unique cupcake varieties are the rule. "They kind of morphed as time went on," says co-owner and chef Dan Smith, whose cafe has offered cupcakes for the past several

years. "I'm a restless chef." Versions here include an orange blossom cupcake that "has a kind of fruity perfume," and a bit of orange zest in its mascarpone frosting. Then there's the best-selling chocolate chili cupcake.

"As it's finishing, you get a little bit of a bite in the back of your throat," Smith says. "It's just a bit of a surprise at the end." He says his cupcakes appeal to folks who equally love their comfort factor and appreciate the Hearty Boys' grown-up twists on these classics. But kitsch is cool, too -- with the presidential election ahead, Smith expects to bake special-order cupcakes with Texas Republican (perhaps chocolate chili?) and New England Democrat themes.

But what's really required for a great cupcake?

"The bottom line is pure ingredients," Smith says. "Real butter. If you're going to use herbs or spices, use the best you can. Pure vanilla instead of imitation." The Hearty Boys' nontraditional cupcakes aside, "You don't need to have an elaborate list of ingredients to have things that are really great-tasting and of good quality."

Adds Luis Perea of BomBon: "It's got to be fluffy and a little moist inside."

Nick Malgieri believes that a quality cupcake recipe "will have a good amount of butter, eggs and a fairly high sugar content." Also key when making chocolate or devil's food cupcakes, he says: don't overcook. "They're small and delicate, and don't need a long time to bake."

Of course, there's the all-important frosting.

Malgieri prefers those boiled with egg whites and sugar, whisked gently and fluffed into a light, airy meringue. "You don't have to have a ton of butter in the topping, that's for sure."

Says Cindy Levine, whose Sweet Mandy B's bakery near Lincoln Park's DePaul University campus averages 400 buttercream-topped cupcake sales daily: "The ratio between the icing and cupcake is important. We tend to frost them pretty heavily. Sometimes, [customers will] even ask for an extra spoonful."

At Southport Grocery and Cafe -- which prides itself on offering "modern, simple and fun food experiences" -- cupcakes' buttercream frosting is real basic, owner Lisa Santos says. There's just butter, powdered sugar, milk and vanilla -- not even sprinkles.

"It's very simple, but that makes them taste so good," Santos says. "There's nothing funny in it." Her vanilla cupcakes are made from egg whites; her semisweet chocolate ones get an infusion of moisture from sour cream added to the mix.

Both Bittersweet's Contino and Southport Grocery's Santos recently visited the Big Apple, and both were amazed at the ongoing strength of bakery cupcake sales. And that's pretty impressive for a place where the hottest new thing gets stone cold in a New York minute.

"My feeling with restaurants, bars and food establishments in general is if they become too trendy, at a point, they have to fall," says Magnolia Bakery's Allysa Torey. "I don't think [cupcakes are] trendy in the same way. It's not like they're going out of style. More people are just enjoying them, and that's a good thing."

Maureen Jenkins is a freelance writer now working in Italy.

Where to find them

The cupcakes were created at these Chicago bakeries:

\*BomBon

1508 W. 18th (312) 733-7788

\*The Hearty Boys

3404 N. Halsted

(773) 244-9866

[www.heartyboys.com](http://www.heartyboys.com)

\*Sweet Mandy B's

1208 W. Webster

(773) 244-1174

LAVENDER CUPCAKES WITH ROYAL HONEY BUTTERCREAM

MAKES 12 CUPCAKES

For the cupcake

1 2/3 cups all purpose flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

3 large eggs

1 7/8 cups sugar

1/2 cup milk

1 tablespoon dried lavender blossoms

6 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

For the buttercream:

6 large egg yolks

1/3 cup honey

1 pound unsalted butter at room temperature

1 cup confectioner's sugar

To make the cupcakes, mix the flour, baking powder and salt together in a small bowl and set aside.

In a large bowl, beat the eggs with the sugar until they're a pale yellow. Add the flour mixture and beat until smooth.

Next, measure the milk into a microwave-safe glass measuring cup, add the lavender blossoms and put it in a microwave set on high for 2 minutes. This will scald the milk. Add the scalded milk (along with the

lavender) to the batter in a slow stream, beating until well-combined. In the same glass measuring, melt the butter in the microwave. Add the melted butter to the batter along with the vanilla. Beat until well-combined.

Line a muffin tin with paper cups and fill the cups about three-quarters of the way up with batter. Place the cupcakes in a pre-heated 350 oven for 20 to 30 minutes or until the tops are golden and the cupcakes spring back to the touch. Remove from the oven and let cool.

While cupcakes are cooling, make the buttercream. Beat the egg yolks with an electric mixer until they're a pale yellow.

Meanwhile, put the honey in a microwave-safe glass measuring cup and microwave it on high for 3 minutes until it boils. Slowly start adding the honey to the egg yolks in a steady stream, beating constantly. (Don't let any of the honey fall on the beaters or you'll be wearing it!) Continue to beat the egg mixture until it's cool to the touch. Cut the butter into small pieces and gradually add it to the mix. Once all of the butter is incorporated add the confectioner's sugar and beat until perfectly smooth.

To assemble the cupcakes, work from the outer edge and swirl the buttercream toward the center, ending in a soft peak. Garnish each cupcake with a fresh lavender blossom.

Note: We found lavender blossoms at Whole Foods.

Also, you may, as we did, have batter for more than 12 cupcakes.

The Hearty Boys

Nutrition facts per serving: 608 calories, 41 g fat, 24 g saturated fat, 260 mg cholesterol, 57 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 148 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

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