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Misha's Cupcakes: One woman's homemade 'mommy track'

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BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ
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With an MBA in her back pocket and post-college travel and job hopping behind her, Misha Kuryla-Gomez had a career path in mind.

"I thought I would climb the corporate ladder some day," she says.

But then, in May 2005, she gave birth to baby Ella, and, like many, many mothers, found that her priorities had changed.

"I really got into being Mommy," says Kuryla-Gomez, 32. "I just wanted to hang around my daughter. The thing is, I don't know why it happened because I had never been that way."

So when her husband told her she had to find a job to shore up the family finances, Kuryla-Gomez decided to put her Florida International University graduate training to work. Her business plan was based on a secret chocolate cake recipe, lots of flour and butter, endless hours in the kitchen and a firm belief that most people, regardless of age, love to indulge in a cupcake every now and then.

The idea was to bake a few dozen a day and bring in enough money to stay at home with her then 3-month-old daughter. To her surprise, Misha's Cupcakes took off, turning a profit within months and outgrowing her home kitchen in less than two years.

Today, the company has a cult following and a kiosk at Dadeland Mall. It supplies a dozen cafés and restaurants and turns out as many as 3,000 cupcakes on any given Friday. Kuryla-Gomez manages seven employees and a bakery-office complex in a warehouse district off Bird Road in southwest Miami.

"I never really thought this would happen, but I feel blessed," she says. "I'm lucky I found something I love and that makes me money."

The cupcakes have earned fans for their rich flavor and melt-in-your-mouth moistness. The



RONNA GRADUS / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Misha Kuryla-Gomez, creator of Misha's Cupcakes, enjoys some of her creations at home with her two-year-old daughter, Ella.

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CUPCAKE LOCATIONS

Misha's Cupcakes is at 7344 SW 48th St., Miami; 786-200-6153. The Lix by Misha kiosk is across from the Coach store at Dadeland Mall, 7535 North Kendall Dr., Miami. Find more retail outlets and an online order form at mishascupcakes.com.

MORE TREATS

It took a while, but South Florida finally got on the national cupcake bandwagon. Here are more sources:

Buttercream Cupcakes & Coffee, 1411 Sunset Dr., Coral Gables; 305-669-8181, buttercreamcupcakes.com.

Dots Treats, 305-778-2031, dotstreats.blogspot.com.

Stella's Sweet Shoppe, 305-479-9089, stellassweetshoppe.com.

Sweetcakes, 8425 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; 786-228-7944, sweetcakesedibles.com.

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advertising is low-key -- just a website (mishascupcakes.com) and word of mouth -- but the message aims straight at the sweet tooth.

"They are so incredibly tasty," says Jill Ezell, a retired business owner who began ordering the cupcakes for parties and as gifts after tasting them at a neighbor's house.

"And they're fun and easy. You don't have to cut them or make a mess. They're ready to eat."

The cupcakes come in standard size (\$2.25) and a mini version (\$1) that diet-minded customers appreciate. Kuryla-Gomez makes no apologies for the calories.

"I use whole everything," she says. "I don't do low fat. It's a dessert. I want to make it naughty."

The cupcakes come in 10 flavors, from cookies and cream to coffee liqueur, with vanilla the hands-down favorite and chocolate the runner-up.

Kuryla-Gomez is in her commercial kitchen by 5:30 a.m. six days a week, mixing cake batter and later taking orders and greeting walk-in customers. Employees make the buttercream frosting and deliveries.

She tries to leave by 1 p.m. to pick up her daughter at preschool. She's in no hurry to expand, she says, because she doesn't want to lose precious moments with Ella.

"You can never get that time back."

One recipe, in particular, is a closely guarded family secret.

"My mother used to make this chocolate cake that everybody absolutely loved, so from the very beginning I knew that was what I had to use," she says.

Kuryla-Gomez grew up in Coral Gables, the middle of three children and the only daughter of Michael and Helen "Happy" Kuryla. Her father had "a huge, *huge* sweet tooth," so her mother was constantly baking desserts.

"My earliest memories are of eating cookie dough," she says. "I loved eating the raw stuff, especially the whipped butter and sugar."

It dawned on Kuryla-Gomez that she could parlay that happy past into future earnings when she heard a National Public Radio story in August 2005 about Sprinkles, a California cupcake retailer.

"The bulb went on," she says. "That's when I started messing around with my mother's recipe."

Her husband, Gardo Gomez, and their extended family were her first taste-testers. She scored an order for 100 cupcakes after taking a batch to her sister-in-law's Halloween party. As word of her home-based business spread, she shifted her supply shopping from Publix to Costco.

Her big break came after she donated cupcakes to a breast-cancer fundraiser. A friend who tasted them there convinced Christina Marzouka to try out Misha's Cupcakes at her Morning Call Bakery in South Miami.

"They were an immediate hit," Marzouka says. "The product was unbelievable. People went crazy. I sold out every day."

Morning Call continues to order 200 cupcakes a day, and they're usually gone by 3 p.m. Marzouka's personal favorite is marble, though the red velvet "is very hot now."

Kuryla-Gomez soon added other wholesale customers, including the Van Dyke Café and Books & Books. She bought a commercial oven and two more refrigerators to keep up with the orders.

After working 11-hour days to get through the 2006 Christmas rush, and then finding that business didn't slow down in January, she added staff and space. She opened the Dadeland kiosk last summer.

These days, a week's supplies -- delivered by truck -- includes 900 eggs, 240 pounds of chocolate, 150 pounds of sugar, 600 pounds of confectioners' sugar and 200 pounds of flour.

Kuryla-Gomez thinks about opening a retail store -- maybe several -- but fears losing not only time with Ella but quality control.

"I make the batter the exact way it should be made and I check every order that goes out of here," she says. "I know I have to get out of the kitchen and look for new customers, expand, but the kitchen is what I love."

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