

Let Them Eat This: Applewood Bacon Cupcakes, Noah’s Ark, and Tasty Cake Creations

RACHEL AQUINO



WRITER’S COMMENT: In Professor Pamela Demory’s Advanced Composition 101 course, one assignment asked us to document and feature one person. I decided to interview the owners of the “Let Them Eat Cake” bakery in downtown Davis. Thank you Paulette, Brittany, and Chelsea Coffman for sharing your personal narratives with me and for reinstating my devout love for cupcakes. Their bubbly personalities and colorful stories made for great material. Also, thank you Professor Demory for pushing my writing to limits I could not have imagined for myself. Through your guidance, I found my own creative voice. Writing about cupcakes is truly as fun as eating them.

—Rachel Aquino

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: I’m used to getting fascinating stories from my students in response to my standard profile assignment in UWP 101 (Advanced Composition). But Rachel’s essay offered something new—a profile of not one but three people, and of a restaurant as well. Rachel gives us basic information about the people and the place, folds in plenty of amusing quotations from her interviews with the bakers, tops it all off with a decadent amount of delicious description, and presents it to us in a style that is light and inviting. My favorite thing about this essay is Rachel’s use of sensory detail. She has truly taken this lesson to heart—the essay is so full of sights, sounds, smells, and oh-my-god tastes that every time I read it, my mouth waters. I forget about critiquing the writing—I’m trying to decide which cupcake to try first: the dark chocolate-with-cognac Edgar Allan Poe, or the chocolate-pecan-and-bourbon Big Easy—“too many cupcakes, so little time,” indeed!

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

THERE'S A RAZZLE-DAZZLE TO THE CUPCAKE BUSINESS. It lures people. It entices people. Paulette Coffman, along with daughters Brittany and Chelsea, aren't just any cupcake bakers. They are culinary cupcake innovators—masters of *les petits gateaux*. Although the details of their recipes are a family secret, three solid ingredients make their Davis “Let Them Eat Cake” bakery one confection even Marie Antoinette couldn't resist.

Ingredient #1: Familial Ties.

TAKING AWAY THE ABILITY TO BAKE from the Coffmans would be like taking away the ability to bike from Lance Armstrong. For the Coffmans, baking is not a tradition, it's a genetic inheritance from Paulette's grandmother. “She was the grandmother that baked everything from scratch, the bread that we ate, everything.” Grandma Coffman taught Paulette everything she knows. When Brittany and younger sister Chelsea came along, “they were itty bitty with aprons on and flour all over.”

Baking is the center of Coffman family gatherings and holidays. However, one infamous cake stands out. For Brittany's birthday one year, Paulette wondered how she could top previous years.

“So what kind of cake do you want?” Paulette asked.

“I want a cake that says ‘aloha’,” Brittany replied.

Whew! Paulette was relieved. “Yes! It's so easy!” she thought. She told Brittany, “Okay, so Mommy will make you a round cake and what color do you want me to do for the letters on top?”

“No, Mom—I want an A, and an L, and an O as separate cakes,” explained Brittany. Forget those typical sheet cakes adorned with plastic toys. She wanted not just any luau-themed cake but specifically for Paulette to emphasize the word A-L-O-H-A, and to bake each letter as one cake.

“The cake was like seven feet long. It was ridiculous. It was tropical, it was pink, and it was just crazy,” Paulette recalls. It's this creativity, though, that pushes the Coffmans to break the conventional forms of baking.

Holiday gatherings are a hit at their house. At Halloween, kids flock to gobble up their creations. And at Christmas, while other families eat store-bought gingerbreads and drink cocoa by the fire, the Coffmans engage in a 200-cookie decorating marathon—no repeats allowed.

Showdown that, Bobby Flay! Their drive and unique insanity for baking is not a hobby. It's a way of life.

Ingredient #2: Tasteful imagination.

YOU WOULD THINK THAT THE USUAL cupcake ingredients—eggs, flour, and butter cream frosting—would be boring. Not for the Coffman girls. Paulette, the “crazy cupcake flavor genius,” welcomes the challenge with such ease because everything around her is an inspiration. Her pure imagination and creativity combine in a magical, spell-like way. For example, one night Paulette was trying to create a Mardi Gras-themed cupcake. “So I’m doing this word association thing. Mardi Gras, New Orleans, Jazz, Bourbon Street, you know, the Big Easy . . . Bourbon, *BOURBON* Street! Bourbon, we’ll make a Bourbon cupcake and call it the Big Easy!” It became a dark chocolate pecan-filled cupcake covered in chocolate ganache. It was a huge hit.

Paulette explains that there really are “too many cupcakes, so little time.” Even their favorite authors and movies are sources for ideas. If you took a bite out of Edgar Allan Poe, would he taste like dark chocolate with cognac? Or could you imagine Shakespeare as a Grand Marnier liqueur, oozing orange marmalade and topped with orange-flavored cream cheese? The “Let Them Eat Cake” menu adapts to their creative imaginations. Paulette’s favorite cupcake, “The Raven,” honors Edgar Allan Poe. It was inspired by the person who lays a rose and a half empty bottle of cognac on Poe’s grave every January for his birthday—it was an instant best-seller. Because it was so popular, they brought it back in February and renamed it the “Annabel Lee,” after one of Poe’s most famous love poems. Shakespeare is Brittany’s favorite. A cupcake was released on April 23rd, 2010, his birthday. She added gum-pasted violets because it was Shakespeare’s favorite flower. But who could forget Jane Austen? Chelsea is working on one cupcake to commemorate her. Ever heard of that vampire movie blockbuster, *Twilight*? Try sinking your teeth into a white chocolate cupcake with cinnamon red-hot frosting. Jacob, a human turned werewolf from the movie, is a darker shade of frosting with a bit of red dribble as blood. With each new creation, the Coffmans are conscientiously celebrating other artists in their own interpretive pieces of delectable art.

Now, your week won’t be complete until you’ve had a special cupcake flavor. If you miss the TGIF surprise, don’t worry, there’s a Saturday

surprise. Every Wednesday is Flavor of the Month day, which lets them “sneak in those extras, that creativity that’s eating away at us.” In April, don’t think about eating the “Topsy Bunny” before Easter mass. It’s a reinvention of Easter Brunch, a mimosa flavor with champagne and orange juice. A “dark, dark, dark, chocolate chipotle prototype with spice to it” and a *crème brûlée* flavor are coming soon.

It’s a real push of the envelope when they add Applewood bacon—*bacon!*—to chocolate cake. A devout bacon lover with a slashed pig tattoo on her arm asked Paulette for a bacon cupcake. After a bacon/maple syrup trial, Chelsea thought of bacon and chocolate, like a sweet and salty sea salt chocolate. It was famous at once. Customers bought it and loved it. Even *Good Day Sacramento* featured the concoction on a news segment.

The Coffmans’ kitchen is like a cupcake laboratory. Every recipe has to be tested and tried until it’s perfect. When people ask about the flavors, the girls want you to trust their instincts: who knows? maybe you’ll end up liking them.

In addition to cupcakes, the Coffmans also create full-on cakes. Once, they designed a Harry Potter Hogwarts cake that was so huge it wouldn’t fit in the refrigerator. For a bat mitzvah, one family had requested an edible Noah’s Ark. The Coffmans rolled out the frosting of the ark to make it look like wood paneling. Nothing is off-limits to their baking adventures, not even a castle, orca whales, aliens, records for 50s birthday parties, Pac Men, or *Madeleine’s* straw hat.

Ingredient #3: The secret ingredient.

LOVE FOR EACH OTHER AND A LOVE for baking drives the mother and daughters to bake fun into every morsel. Together, they mesh ideas very well, having a collective passion for cupcakes that is impossible to imitate. Their work ethic comes in a rare form: they come up with so many creative ideas, and then they follow through with them—no matter how silly they might be. Once, they were even offered a business deal, but because it would only let two of them work, they refused it immediately. They couldn’t imagine all three of them not being able to work together.

As with any other business, their motivation could stem purely from the drive for fame and fortune. But it’s not like that at all. It’s a business based on their relationship with each other, their passion for baking and, most of all, the fun they have together. Because it’s a family

business, people can relate to them on a personal level. They have a love for their customers—and the community, donating extra cupcakes to Davis Community Meals and local elementary schools.

Paulette, Brittany, and Chelsea bake batches of cupcakes every day. But at the end of the day, it's not about the success, the money, or even the cupcakes. Chelsea admits that she loves “being here (in the store) with my two best friends every day. I couldn't imagine a better way to work.”