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FOOD DRINK TREND

BY JANELLE NANOS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HEALEY



A FROSTY RECEPTION? Penny Karas (*top*) is Dupont Circle's new cupcake queen. But her chic boutique, Hello Cupcake, faces some stiff competition from high-end cupcakeries across Washington.

LET THEM EAT CUPCAKES! *A new batch of DC bakers rises to the occasion*

Put your personal trainer on speed dial and call in the cavity cavalry: the cupcake queens have arrived. Seemingly overnight, the city's confection selection has multiplied. It began with Georgetown Cupcake, with its Lilly Pulitzer-pink boxes and its line sneaking down the block. This past April saw the birth of Couture Cupcakes, a catering company whose cupcake bouquet comes topped with candy handbags and ladybugs. Hello Cupcake joined the chic clique this July—and more storefronts are on the horizon. With their arrival comes inevitable comparisons and a sugarcoated question: Whose recipe is best?

"I think that there's room for all of us in this market," says Penny Karas. But you can tell she's a little nervous as she pushes open the door to her new Dupont Circle boutique. As workmen hang drywall, she whips out a rendering outlining white Carrera marble countertops, crystal chandeliers and colorful jewel boxes hovering in the windows, displaying her cakes like diamonds in a *joaillerie*. The space is designed by Bill Bonstra, her husband and a star DC architect. Then she unveils her kitchen.

Karas is the owner of Hello Cupcake, and the latest domestic goddess to market the individual cakes, immortalized by *Sex and the City*, as luxury items. The cupcake was once a metaphor for a different kind of desire: For childhood nostalgia or a tiny, diet-be-damned treat. But in a slumping economy, it is becoming an upmarket splurge, a reflection of your exquisite taste.

While cities across the country were debating frosting-to-sprinkle ratios, DC had to bypass the danishes, éclairs and pastries served at standard bakeries to find its coveted cupcakes. Not that these bakeries weren't doing their best to make the most of the trend. Baked & Wired, a seven-year-old Georgetown fave whose signature is cupcakes served in parchment paper, raffles off a giant cupcake (which, in another era, might be described as a cake) every Friday. Crowds gather to see who wins. "We're more of a true bakery, but we cater to that crowd," says owner Teresa Velazquez.

And after lawyer-cum-baker Warren Brown opened CakeLove, his cupcakes quickly became the most requested item. "People feel like it's their right to have a cupcake," he says. "But if it doesn't live up to their expectations, their heart is ripped out." To fulfill the cravings, Brown recently opened the cupcake bar at his Love Café, where patrons can select their own cake bases, frosting flavors and toppings. It's fairly safe to say that those little cakes have greased the pans of his flour-based empire—he's now the author of a cookbook and the host of the series *Sugar Rush*, airing on the Food Network.

HAPPY ENDINGS: 1. Georgetown Cupcake's sweet treats sport swirly Seussian frostings. 2. Sophie LaMontagne and Katherine Kallinis hope to take their Georgetown cupcakerie to new nabes soon. 3. Couture Cupcake's whimsical wares have taken flight. 4. Baker Paola Domenge is a Picasso of the pastry set.



But it was not until chic sisters Sophie LaMontagne and Katherine Kallinis stealthily opened their store off M Street last February that DC had its first exclusive cupcake outlet. With only a small photocopied sign in their window, word of their red velvet, vanilla and mocha marvels spread fast. The sisters attribute their quick success in part to the year they spent tweaking their designs. They sought to establish an instant accessibility (foregoing cutesy names so men would be comfortable ordering) and a “professional, streamlined” look to their baked goods that fits in with DC’s personality. Their tiny storefront quickly became “a waiting room for cupcakes,” says LaMontagne. They now bake more than 2,500 each day.

Sitting at their store’s only table, LaMontagne wears a black Georgetown Cupcake T-shirt, Kallinis, a zebra-print dress and lemon yellow cardigan, looking like the frosting to LaMontagne’s cake. Kallinis once worked for Gucci and wiggles a toe in Chanel sandals as she discusses their brand. “We wanted to be the Louis Vuitton of cupcakes,” she explains. “Vuitton uses the best leather. We use the best ingredients,” LaMontagne, who worked in private equity, finishes her thought. “We wanted to focus on one thing and do it well.” Suffice it to say they’re succeeding. They’ve appeared on the *Today Show* and both



the Ritz-Carlton and the Nationals are serving their cupcakes. Next up is a delivery service—in a logoed Range Rover, no less.

“It’s not ‘*Hellllooooo*’ cupcake,” it’s ‘Hello Cupcake,’” Karas explains, switching her voice from sultry to sunny. However you say it, Hello’s business model comes from the same mold as Georgetown’s, and Karas says her plan was to be the first of the batch. But she’s confident that her Dupont Circle location will have heavy foot traffic. She’s committed to being “green.” And as a former PR executive and the daughter of restaurateurs, Karas has the experience to serve up her 50 flavors, which more than doubles the sisters’ current selection. Hello’s fanciful flavors include vanilla gorilla, triple coconut and the peanut butter-and-banana velvet Elvis. Her architect husband’s designs for her space showcase a modern aesthetic that reflects the evolution of the city. “For so many years DC was very traditional in terms of design, but now you’re seeing so many cool, modern buildings,” she says. “It’s really the right time for my modern bakery.” So much so that she’s already bugging her broker about securing a second location.

If Georgetown and Hello are boutique brands, then Couture Cupcakes is the bespoke tailor of the cupcake circuit. Cupcake “designer” Paola Domenge, a connected local social who daylights as a marketing consultant for a jewelry store, makes “refined cupcakes” named for her friends. The “Duracell” is after a redheaded boarding school classmate. She has no storefront, bakes at an off-site kitchen and caters to individual tastes. “I can tailor to someone who wants something different,” she explains. Her designs are flecked with butterflies and sugar beads. She spends evenings sculpting lilacs and ladybugs out of fondant, or cultivating a dozen candy roses in a box lined with actual moss. (“Presentation and taste is everything,” she says.) While the others consider expanding, Domenge is “reaching for a different clientele. I don’t think the people who enjoy my rum raisin are the same people who would enjoy a vanilla cupcake with cream cheese frosting,” she says. “The people who just want a dozen cupcakes for the counter of their office, almost like a Dunkin’ Donuts.” She nonchalantly tosses her curly red hair. “A friend of mine says I’m a cupcake snob, and I’m like, *I am!*”

So do they seem worried about the influx of competitive cupcakeries? “Everyone will have their favorite,” reasons Karas. “We’re totally different in every way—except for the fact that our product is the cupcake,” says Domenge. “People probably saw the lines and thought *I can do this too*,” offers LaMontagne, attempting to explain the tasty trend. “But it’s not always glamorous,” warns Kallinis, before click-clacking back into the kitchen. ■

Baked & Wired, 1052 Thomas Jefferson St., NW; *CakeLove*, 1506 U St., NW; *Couture Cupcakes*, www.couture-cupcakes.com; *Georgetown Cupcake*, 1909 Potomac St., NW; *Hello Cupcake*, 1351 Connecticut Ave., NW.