# The cupcake abides



Ken Hively / Los Angeles Times

#### By Mary MacVean

JUNE 3, 2009

ike a Hollywood ingenue, cupcakes have been exposed every which way -- high-end and low, fancy and down-home. But unlike those pretty young things, the cupcake's time in the sun goes on and on.

Cupcakes may seem so 2004, but these little paper-clad stars just keep soaking in the love.

"They're even more popular. I think it's just going to continue," says Nichelle Stephens, who with two friends runs a blog called Cupcakes Take the Cake.

In fact, their popularity may even outlast the star who helped set off this craze: Sarah Jessica Parker, whose "Sex and the City" character -- Carrie Bradshaw -- is seen wearing knee socks and devouring a pink-frosted

#### cupcake outside Manhattan's Magnolia Bakery.

"I don't think you can be angry eating a cupcake," says Tara Settembre, who once lived near the Magnolia Bakery. Since she moved to L.A., she has organized 25 meet-ups at "cupcakeries" around Los Angeles. Her online cupcake group has nearly 500 members.

There are obvious reasons for why people love cupcakes. There's sugar and butter. They remind people of childhood bake sales and birthday parties. And, as my own little cupcake told me, with his teenager's knowing tone: "Mom, they have a perfect cake-to-frosting ratio. And you can hold them."

### To each his own

No forks, no plates, maybe just a napkin. You don't have to share. No leftovers. At a bakery, everyone can pick their own flavor. Cupcakes are easy to make and can be decorated for any occasion you care to consider.

And don't discount the thoroughly modern influence of the Internet, where people talk about cupcakes, share pictures of cupcakes, offer recipes for cupcakes and organize competitions and gatherings.

"They're an icon of the American bakery. People want to find something real and natural and true," says Elfie Weis, a Frenchwoman who has been so entranced that she's considering opening a Paris branch of her Mar Vista shop, <u>Hotcakes Bakes</u>.

"They're totally cute. Cookies are boring. Cupcakes are kind of flashy," says the "Milwaukee Cupcake Queen," Sandy Ploy, a Los Angeles native who started an Iron Cupcake challenge that has spread to places around the globe on the ground and online. "There's nothing endearing about a brownie." (Hold your fire, brownie lovers.)

Even if your appetite shrinks at paying \$3 or more for one cupcake (I could make a dozen for that), they're still a pretty cheap luxury. Can't afford my mortgage, maybe, but a cupcake? That I can swing.

Cupcakes, says Candace Nelson, who owns the five Sprinkles Cupcakes shops with her husband, are "the lipstick of the food world -- a little pick-me-up that people still can afford."

At Nelson's shop in Beverly Hills, where about 1,000 cupcakes a day are sold -- not to mention those whoneeds-cake "frosting shots" in little paper cups -- Estela Castillo of Westchester gushes over her favorite, a vanilla-frosted vanilla cupcake, which she loves for "the denseness, a nice, dense, yummy cake. . . . I could go on and on." And then there's the rather less obvious attribute, says blogger Stephens: "You can have a cupcake the same color as your nail polish!"

## Pretty in pink

Yes, cupcakes can be a pretty girlie treat. Often sold in shops decorated with pink and green or in boxes topped with flowery decorations, cupcakes make a fashion statement akin to grown women carrying Hello Kitty handbags, says food blogger Cathy Danh.

Unlike a purse, however, a cupcake habit comes with calories, though fans tend not to focus on them.

"A cupcake in its cute little box doesn't seem as detrimental to your waistline," Danh says.

Even the Retail Bakers of America, on its official list of a baker's dozen reasons behind the cult, notes that cupcakes are "somewhat indulgent, yet sensible because they are portion-controlled."

Just ask Nicole Winhoffer, a personal trainer who says she has a daily Sprinkles habit. When I suggest that's a lot of cupcakes for someone who is as fit as she is and ask if she knows how many . . . she interrupts before I can get the words out, with, "Yes, 497 calories." (For the record, Nelson says she does not have an official calorie count.)

Cupcakes have become one of those generic gifts -- high status but not too personal, says Genevieve Ostrander, who owns Delilah Bakery in Echo Park. During the December holidays, Ostrander says friends told her, Hollywood mailrooms were piled floor to ceiling with gift boxes of cupcakes. At least it's not fruitcake.

At Johnny Cupcakes on Melrose Avenue, they're not even cupcakes. Not real ones, anyway. The decor is fake ovens, bakery cases, aprons, pastry boxes. The store stocks T-shirts with images that use cupcakes to replace pop icons -- the skull and crossbones, the Statue of Liberty's torch.

You can eat your cupcake and wear it too.

Granted, some people might be tired of cupcakes. A colleague who brought some to a recent dinner party in Manhattan was greeted with this: "Oh, thanks. How third grade."

Was that supposed to be an insult? Come on, childhood is part of the point. And besides, nutrition-conscious schools have outlawed cupcakes.

"I actually am in love with what my friends call the chemical cupcakes" -- supermarket ones sweet enough to make your teeth seize, Ostrander says.

#### **Grown-up pleasure**

But despite the popularity of basic chocolate or vanilla, don't mistake cupcakes for kid-only food. Try blueberry-Port cupcakes or "cuptails" flavored like margaritas. Or tiers of elegantly iced wedding cupcakes.

And Martha Stewart is chiming in with some -- surprise, surprise -- labor-intensive decoration and presentation ideas in her book "Martha Stewart's Cupcakes," published Tuesday. These include graduation cupcakes topped with cookies made to look like diplomas (tied with blue sour candy ribbons), cupcakes covered in piped grass icing with little marzipan ladybugs, and cupcakes frosted to look like little chicks.

And then there's the Obama "cupcake cake" from Polkatots Cupcakes in Pasadena.

The winner of the 2009 L.A. Cupcake Challenge, an event that drew 450 people, the shop makes goodies that look like decorated sheet cakes but actually are dozens of nestled cupcakes.

One of their creations is a knockoff of Shepard Fairey's Barack Obama portrait in red and blue, which took about 100 cupcakes, says one of the shop's owners, Alma Tarriba.

There also is a scarlet mystery in cupcakes: Why do customers fall for red velvet?

"We've tried to figure that out and we can't," says Brogan Faye, an owner of <u>Yummy Cupcakes</u> in Burbank and Santa Monica.

#### mary.macvean@latimes.com

Copyright © 2016, Los Angeles Times