

Published December 9th, 2009

Republic of Cake Arrives in City of Orinda

By Lee Borrowman



Sophia Hubbell (left) and Ava Tajbakhsh enjoy a variety of cupcakes at Republic of Cake

There are several things that may set Republic of Cake apart from the typical gourmet cupcake shop. Its owners say that ROC is striving for a small carbon footprint; McNiff and Fang use local providers for their ingredients, and will put your cupcakes in a bag rather than a box (although boxes are available for purchase). Fang says that instead of curlicues and artificial additives, he uses natural ingredients. "That doesn't mean we won't have pink frosting," he explains, "but it will be colored and flavored naturally with food instead of chemicals."

ROC also offers an unusual Sweet and Salty line of cupcakes, featuring savory items such as the Mushroom Cheddar Cheese cupcake, and the Sage & Onion Cranberry cupcake. Savory cupcakes were McNiff's idea; Fang made it happen. "There are other savory cupcakes out there; chocolate cupcakes with peanut frosting and bacon sprinkled on top. That's not savory to me. Savory is onions, mushrooms, cheese, sage and thyme; flavors that are intrinsically sweet themselves," explains Fang. McNiff says the savory cupcakes have just as much sugar as a regular cupcake, and they can take people by surprise. "I have to tell you what it is," he says, "If I put a savory cupcake in front of you without telling you, you'll think 'vanilla or chocolate'; you'll take a bite and spit it out." But keep an open mind, and a whole new cupcake experience awaits you.

ROC will also offer daily specials. Fridays, for example, will feature Happy Hour cupcakes (think Tequila Sunrise, with frosting). "Everything will be as fresh as possible; we'll never sell day-old products," states McNiff. Fang adds, "We'll do two bakes each day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon." Bargains can be had at the end of each day, providing there are cupcakes left to sell. Republic of Cake is located at 2 Theater Square, across from Shelby's; 925-254-3900, <http://republicofcake.com>.

Move over, Cake Boss. Orinda now has bragging rights to its very own cupcake bakery. All cupcakes, all the time. Republic of Cake (ROC) opened at Theater Square last weekend, and will hold a grand opening celebration on Saturday, December 12, at 2:00 p.m.

Why cupcakes? Because, according to baker Chih-Chung Fang, "they offer such perfect little bites in endless combinations, and I don't have to share." Peter McNiff, ROC's business manager, believes there's a market for really good cupcakes sold at very reasonable prices. "There are currently two kinds of cupcakes out there," he says, "the Safeway kind, and the \$5 kind." ROC cupcakes range from .85 for a mini cupcake to \$2.75 for a savory cupcake or a very messy chocolate cupcake.

And why now? Long-time friends turned business partners, Fang and McNiff are hoping that cupcakes will be just the ticket to satisfy your sweet tooth in good times and bad. The current economic climate, rather than discouraging them from setting up shop, was actually a motivator. "We watched our property values fall and our investments tank, and we decided to put all of our resources into something we manage ourselves. If we fail, we know who to blame," said McNiff, who spent twenty years in the telecommunications industry. Fang is a reformed molecular biologist who happily moved from the laboratory to the kitchen.



Sam's Very Messy Chocolate Cupcake Photo provided
The Cupcake Outing

Having been raised a "foodie" in Berkeley, a city well known for its plethora of gourmet eating establishments, I laid claim to this article (rank hath its privileges) for two reasons: The cupcake baker extraordinaire, Chih-Chung Fang, worked for six years in one of my favorite Berkeley restaurants, Wendy Brucker's Rivoli. I also saw an opportunity to do something fun with my daughter; this story begged a mother-daughter cupcake outing. The daughter, being in middle-school, prefers not to be seen alone with me in public so we brought a friend along. (I've long suspected the reason it's okay to be seen with your mother when you are with a friend is that you can pass mom off as the chauffeur.)

There were seven varieties of cupcakes on display when we arrived last Saturday morning, so we ordered one of each. We experienced a brief moment of disappointment when none of them were Sam's Very Messy Chocolate Cupcake. "We had a chocolate cake catastrophe this morning," bemoaned Peter McNiff.

We learned that Sam was McNiff's son, a special needs child who died earlier this year at the age of twelve. "He was the most incredible kid," said McNiff, "he went through so much, and never complained." During ROC's first month, 10% of the proceeds from the sales of Sam's namesake cupcake will go to Children's Hospital of Seattle, Sam's second home. In the future, McNiff added, some of those proceeds will go to support local charities that customers feel are important.

Two girls, seven cupcakes:

The chocolate/chocolate cupcake (devil's food cake with chocolate frosting) took an early lead in the taste test, according to our friend Sophie Hubbell. She later decided that the Pumpkin Nut Cupcake (with brown sugar buttercream and candied pecans) was her favorite. My daughter, Ava, declared that the sweet vanilla frosting makes the cupcake, so whether the cake is vanilla, chocolate, or even gingerbread, if it's topped with vanilla frosting you can't miss.

Holiday eggnog lovers take note – the Eggnog Cupcake is for you, complete with a dusting of ground nutmeg.

However, my personal favorite was the Gingerbread and Meyer Lemon Cupcake. The gingerbread was delicious, but it was the Meyer lemon frosting that took the cake, dancing lightly on the tongue and demanding a satisfied sigh of pleasure.

On the way home, Sophie groaned a warning: "Make sure you tell people that it's not a good idea to eat too many cupcakes..."

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