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Republic of Cake at Home in Orinda

The moment we've all been waiting for – Chef Chih Fang shares a recipe!

By Susie Iventosch



Ava and Amanda enjoy cupcakes and milk on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

Photos L. Borrowman

Just the thought of cake puts a smile on my face! I am not sure if it's because it tastes so delicious, or if it's a happy reminder of cheerful celebrations, but I do love cake—especially with frosting. This is precisely the reason my friend and I wandered into Republic of Cake after a recent lunch outing.

Inside the shop, we found two more smiling faces. Proprietors Peter McNiff and Chih-Chung Fang loved the idea of cake so much, they completely changed careers to open the Orinda cupcake business last December.

When cupcake chef Chih Fang graduated from Cal with a degree in molecular and cell biology, he was pretty excited about the future. He took a job in a lab, diverting DNA into bits and pieces to study the presence of enzymes, or some such technical stuff. He had really enjoyed all of it in theory, until he found himself working in a lab eight hours a day. To make his days more enjoyable, he decided to learn how to cook and looked forward to the end of each workday, when he could scour his favorite markets for interesting things to create for dinner.

"As a molecular biology student, I didn't have much time to cook," Fang said. "I always liked to bake, but it was always out of a box, like Duncan Hines."

When he finally decided to learn to cook real food, he said he took a very scientific approach. He would pick up things like arugula and rosemary, take them home, and start experimenting.

"Half the time these experiments turned out great," he commented, "but the other half... not so good!"

One time, he says he took country style pork ribs and wrapped them in foil with rosemary, soy sauce, garlic, and scallions and cooked them for about an hour in

the oven. Success! He rather enjoyed this dish. Then, wanting to learn more about different meat cuts, he bought a London broil and threw it in a pan with handful of arugula and garlic. He sautéed the meat to an inedible, tough texture, and the arugula caused the dish to become much too peppery.

"It was terrible, so I threw the whole thing out and opened a can of soup!" he remembers.

Every night Fang tried something new. He absorbed himself in cookbooks and always enjoyed looking at glossy food photos.

"The best part of my day was looking forward to going home to cook," he said.

Eventually, he knew he had to change careers and began handing out resumes to restaurants in Berkeley.

"But no one ever called me back because I had no restaurant experience," he pointed out.

Until the day he had the good fortune of being offered a one-day try out at Rivoli Restaurant in Berkeley. He worked as a pantry chef on the salad and dessert lines. At the end of the night, they gave him dinner and sent him home.

Fang waited for a couple of weeks, but never heard any news about his try out. Then, one day, he got up the nerve to call the chef on the off-chance she had forgotten about him, and in fact, she had. The molecular biologist landed his first paid cooking stint!

Chih Fang said he was really not very good in the beginning, but after six months or so, something clicked and he knew he was on his way to becoming a bona fide chef. Still, pastries and baking called to him and while working full-time at Rivoli, he spent his days off as an intern at Chez Panisse to learn more about the fabulous world of desserts.

"Chez Panisse was great," he said. "The desserts were basic, not

complicated, but they used only the best ingredients. Because they were so basic, they wanted perfection, and I really learned to refine my skills."

Meanwhile, Peter McNiff, a longtime telecommunications consultant, was becoming disenchanted with his career and after one miserable day of work, he joked to a group of friends that some day he was going to open a cupcake shop.

"Everyone laughed," Fang said. "But soon thereafter we went to a party and I took cupcakes, which set the stage for a serious look at running a cupcake business. I was skeptical, but Peter was dead-serious."

And so, after all the regular hassles of formulating a business plan and finding a location, the molecular biologist and the telecommunications expert followed a dream that landed them in Orinda's Theatre Square. As a result, one can always see many smiling faces brushing in and out of the Republic of Cake to pick up a delectable morsel of happiness!

"Life is too short to do something you don't enjoy," Fang said. "We have really enjoyed establishing our business in Orinda, and the community has been great to us – very supportive!"

*Every month Republic of Cake selects a different children's charity to support by contributing 10 percent of the sales from Sam's Very Messy Chocolate Cake. This cupcake is dedicated to Peter's son, Sam, who passed away last year at age 12. He loved to eat and enjoyed this messy chocolate cake most of all.

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Chih's Orange Cardamom Cupcakes with Honey Whipped Cream

Makes about 14 servings.

CAKE INGREDIENTS

- 1 stick unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons finely grated orange zest
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/8 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup fresh-squeezed orange juice
- 1 tablespoon heavy cream

CREAM INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1/4 teaspoon orange blossom water, almond extract, or vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoon orange blossom honey



Cupcake chef extraordinaire Chih-Chung Fang mixes up a batch of chocolate frosting.

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Mix butter, sugar, and zest (lightly packed) on low speed using the paddle attachment until even, then on high until light and fluffy. Scrape down with spatula periodically to even out mixture.
3. Combine eggs and vanilla in a separate container. Switch mixer to medium speed, and gradually add eggs to butter mixture, only adding more when the previous mixture is well incorporated.
4. Stop mixer, and scrape down bowl and paddle with rubber spatula. Beat on high until mixture is smooth and fluffy again. Stop mixer.
5. Put flour, salt, baking powder (sift or use a sieve to get rid of lumps), baking soda, and cardamom together in a separate bowl. Whisk by hand to combine. Combine juice and 1 tablespoon cream in measuring cup.
6. Add 1/3 of the dry ingredients to the butter mixture and mix on slow until there are just a few streaks of flour left.
7. Then gradually add in 1/2 of the juice mixture and mix until just mixed in. Stop the mixer and scrape down the bowl and paddle.
8. Repeat steps 5 and 6, and then 5 again.
9. Stop mixer and scrape down bowl and paddle one more time. Use spatula if necessary to give batter a mix to make it even.
10. Divide batter amongst 14 paper-lined cupcake molds.
11. Bake at 350 degrees for 15-18 minutes, until the tops feel firm to the touch but still soft and spongy.
12. When cooled, gently remove cakes from pan.
13. In the meantime, combine heavy cream, extract, and honey in clean bowl.
14. Whisk until the mixture forms stiff, but slightly drooping peaks. Towards the end, add more honey to taste as necessary.
15. Serve cupcakes with a dollop of the whipped cream.
16. If you'd like, you can garnish the cupcakes with a drizzle of honey, a bit of freshly grated orange zest, or a light sprinkling of cardamom.

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