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COAST-TO-COAST

Cupcakes



By Kendall Egan



Elana Amsterdam



Erin McKenna



Kyra Bussanich



Kim Ullner

Once seen mainly as a lowly children's birthday party staple, cupcakes have catapulted to gourmet status. And the cupcake craze is catching on everywhere.

Take a look around and you will see cupcakes on lovely pedestals in bakery store windows, filling shops devoted completely to these single-serving treats, and crowding out cakes in the supermarket. They are even making Wall Street news as Crumbs, the largest cupcake retailer in the US, recently began selling its stock to the public.

And best of all, gluten-free cupcake lovers are not being left out. Coast-to-coast gluten-free options abound.

We pulled together four gluten-free cupcake experts to get the scoop on this tasty trend and find out why they think this quintessential American treat is enjoying new popularity.

ELANA AMSTERDAM is the author of *The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook* and the soon to be released *Gluten-Free Cupcakes*.

ERIN MCKENNA is the founder and owner of Babycakes NYC, a New York City gluten-free bakery. She is also the author of the cookbook, *Babycakes: Vegan, (Mostly) Gluten-Free, and (Mostly) Sugar-Free Recipes from New York's Most Talked-About Bakery*. Her second cookbook, *Babycakes Covers the Classics*, will be released soon.

KIM ULLNER is the founder of 1-2-3 Gluten Free baking mix company. 1-2-3 Gluten Free offers vanilla and chocolate cake mixes and a spicy pan-bar mix, each of which can be used to make two dozen cupcakes (not to mention a variety of other products).

KYRA BUSSANICH is the owner of the gluten-free Crave Bake Shop in Portland, Oregon. She was the runner up on a December episode of "Cupcake Wars," an extremely popular show on The Food Network.

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KENDALL EGAN: What pushed the lowly cupcake into the limelight as a pop culture icon?

ERIN: I think it all started with the HBO series, *Sex and the City* and *Magnolia Bakery*! (The main characters in the show were spotted at *Magnolia Bakery* eating cupcakes.) I think today, in this economy, it is a simple pleasure. Babycakes has grown in a down economy because people aren't traveling or shopping as much but a cupcake is an affordable treat.

ELANA: They're optimally sized, cute and nostalgic in a way that brings back the memories of childhood birthday parties.

KIM: Cupcakes really do bring out the kid in all of us. They are portion controlled, easy to pick up and fun to eat!

KYRA: I think cupcakes represent happiness and celebration. We can indulge without our wallets or our waistlines suffering.

KE: There are two schools of thought on the cupcake. Either they are the perfect delivery vehicle for frosting or they are the right-sized proportion of cake and frosting. What do you think? Is it one or the other, or both?

ELANA: For me, cupcakes are the optimal vehicle for frosting.

KYRA: It depends on the frosting! I grew up thinking I didn't like frosting but what I didn't like was the powdered sugar and shortening blend that bakeries called "frosting." I make a French and Italian meringue butter cream that I think works in perfect proportion to the cake.

KIM: I really enjoy the cake and the frosting, so I think a cupcake is the perfect proportion of both.

ERIN: Not only is it the right-sized dessert, cupcakes for a party offer more flavor variety. A cake is one flavor, but if you serve cupcakes you can offer multiple flavor combinations.

KE: Let's talk about some of the ingredients you use in your gluten-free cupcakes other than flour.

KIM: One thing we are committed to, as a company, is a variety of options for consumers. For example, in the 1-2-3 Gluten Free Yummy Yellow Cake Mix, the consumers may choose their own sweetener. If agave nectar or honey is preferable to refined sugar, the consumer can decide. We have recipes on every box so that if someone wants to use a mix to make a marble, coconut or pumpkin spice cupcake, they can add their own ingredients.

KYRA: I use sweet cream butter and high quality vanilla and chocolate. It's important to me to buy fresh, local ingredients so I work with local farmers. I believe you can really taste the difference between a cake that has been made with farm fresh eggs versus one made with eggs that may have sat in a refrigerator case for some time. Because fresh ingredients are so important, I also try to steer people away from berry flavors unless it is the summer.

ERIN: My cupcakes are gluten free and vegan. I use agave nectar instead of processed sugar. I use coconut oil, which is a really good fat. Since my cupcakes are also vegan, I use applesauce too. We roast the apples daily in the bakery and make our own purée. Even though we have grown, I still make my cupcakes in small batches and try to pack in as much nutrition as possible!

ELANA: I use butter, sugar and eggs but I do not use processed sugar. I rely on agave nectar but some people use honey instead. I also like grape-seed oil as a substitute for butter because there are a lot of people out

there looking for gluten-free recipes that are also dairy free. One ingredient I do not use is xanthan or guar gums.

KE: Great segue. Let's talk about your gluten-free flour blends.

ERIN: I use garbanzo-fava bean flour, brown rice flour and potato starch and arrowroot in my cupcakes. And I use coconut flour to make frosting.

KYRA: I use different flours for different products, but my favorites include millet, quinoa, tapioca, sweet rice and sorghum flours.

ELANA: I use coconut and almond flours because they taste great. Almonds are packed with protein and the flour is amazingly nutritious. Coconut flour is very high in fiber.

KIM: We created a blend of rice flour and potato and tapioca starches. Our mixes are made right here in America in a dedicated allergen-free facility.

KE: Describe the creative process to invent new flavor combinations.

KYRA: I draw inspiration from everywhere. For the "Cupcake Wars," I started thinking about the holiday constants when I was a child—a thermos of hot chocolate after skiing, hot apple cider after we picked out the Christmas tree, drinking eggnog by the fire while playing board games. Memories inspired my beverage-themed cupcakes—Peppermint Hot Chocolate, Apple Cider, Eggnog and Chai Spice in that competition. A new ingredient at a grocery store or a meal out at a restaurant can spark an idea.

ELANA: Kids can be a big help! In fact, my boys went through my list of recipes to make sure that I had included every single type of cupcake in my new book that they wanted.

KE: Erin, I think you are the original gluten free cupcake baker. What happened when you opened your doors in 2005?

ERIN: Five months after we opened Babycakes, *New York Magazine* named our cupcakes the best in New York City. It wasn't the best vegan or gluten-free cupcakes, it was "the best cupcakes." I worked 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week to keep up. We primarily grew by word of mouth. People would bring a box to parties or events and then when just crumbs were left, they told everyone that they were gluten-free and vegan. Business tripled and I had to hire two more people, which was also a big deal for a new business. I ran on adrenaline and we worked our butts off, but I was so grateful and so happy.

KE: Kyra, what happened after you were on "Cupcake Wars?"

KYRA: The phone started ringing off the hook. I think the voice mail filled up within an hour. I had thousands of emails from people all over the country telling me they had rooted for me and asking to order cupcakes. It was right before the holidays, which is always busy anyway, but this was crazy. It was really validating. That's why I love doing this.

KE: All of you sort of fell into your gluten-free baking roles via an alternative path. Elana, you were pursuing a career in cooking and nutrition when a diagnosis steered you to GF cooking.

ELANA: I had studied cooking and nutrition in my twenties and I have been baking since I was a kid. My son and I were both diagnosed with celiac disease so out of necessity, my cooking changed. I was still interested in creating healthy and nutritious recipes, but they now needed to

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be gluten free. I threw myself in the gluten-free culinary testing ground and created recipes that pleased my toughest critic, my husband! I was asked for my recipes from non-celiac family and friends for the taste! I had written for publications like *Shape* magazine and *Parents* magazine, and I now write recipes for my website, elanaspantry.com, so cookbooks were logical next steps.

KE: Kim, you had a diagnosis as well?

KIM: That's right, I need to eat a gluten-free diet. I felt I could do without good baked goods. But when my nieces and nephews needed gluten-free food as well, then it became really important for me to create good, gluten-free baked goods. I am a lawyer by training, which really only helps me read business contracts in my new line of work! I am partners with my mother, Carol Ullner, and neither of us has formal training as bakers. We do a tremendous amount of research into the roles different ingredients play, and we have learned a lot by trial and error. We conduct our taste tests with gluten-free and gluten-eating children and adults to be sure our products have the right texture and taste. The enthusiasm for our mixes has been gratifying.

KE: Erin, you started in the fashion business . . .

ERIN: I did, as a stylist. I was gluten free and vegan and could not eat the beautiful treats that came from Magnolia Bakery at fashion shoots or events. I started in my apartment kitchen trying out recipes using the healthiest ingredients I could find. Once I got the recipes right, I knew I wanted to open a bakery, and I wanted the bakery to have a certain feeling and to tell a story. I have new uniforms designed every year and I was "styling" the bakery to tap into all the senses. It was a very creative process to get the nostalgic theme just right.

KE: Kyra, you are a "classically trained" baker who attended Le Cordon Bleu pastry school, even though you could not eat the beautiful treats you created. How tough was that?

KYRA: I was already gluten free when I started, but there was very little awareness about gluten-free lifestyles. I could only sample a handful of products, like Crème Brûlée or Panna Cotta. I'd come home from class hungry and then try to recreate gluten-free breads, cakes and cookies. Le Cordon Bleu taught me the function each ingredient plays so it helped me to switch out the flours for other ingredients and still have a light, fluffy product.

KE: Time for my lightning round of questions with quick answers! What is the most important "rule of thumb" you would give to the home chef for making a perfect cupcake?

ELANA: Check your oven temperature, if a recipe says a cupcake will need time in a 350 degree oven then it is really important that your oven maintain that temperature!

ERIN: Measure properly and make sure all of the ingredients go from the cup into the bowl!

KYRA: Have your ingredients at room temperature so they incorporate into the batter more easily.

KIM: Use an ice cream scoop to put batter into the cupcake pan so they are uniform in size and bake evenly.

KE: What is your favorite cupcake flavor combination these days?

KIM: Carrot cake cupcakes with cream cheese frosting.

ELANA: Banana Split.

ERIN: Brownie cupcake with mint frosting.

KYRA: Snickerdoodle, cinnamon cake with cinnamon French butter cream.

KE: Because anyone who has ever baked a gluten-free baked good has had a flop in the kitchen, would you share a flavor combination that never quite made it out of the test kitchen?

ERIN: Chocolate cupcake with lemon frosting—that went nowhere!

KYRA: A vegan, sugar-free lemon cupcake. It took me several attempts to get the baking soda/vinegar ratio right to create the rise that eggs provide.

ELANA: I called it the Sunrise Cupcake which was made with turmeric. It did not make the book!

KIM: When it was time to find an egg-free recipe for our Yummy Yellow Cake Mix, I tried pureed chick peas which had worked before in brownies. Let's just say, it was like eating a hummus cake. We went with a different egg replacer.

KE: How many cupcakes do you eat per day?

ELANA: At least one, sometimes it is a savory cupcake but there are days when all I want to eat is my German Chocolate Cake cupcake!

ERIN: I test the batches that come out of the oven, so it probably equals one and a half cupcakes a day.

KIM: Well, it really depends on the day!

Kyra: WAY too many!

Kendall Egan is advertising manager for Gluten-Free Living. She and her son, Brett, follow a gluten-free diet. So, she has made countless gluten-free cupcakes. Her favorite is terribly unoriginal Devil's Food chocolate cake with chocolate frosting.

Get your own cupcake

If you are now craving a cupcake, here's where to find the cupcakes, mixes and cookbooks created by Elana, Erin, Kim, and Kyra.

Elana Amsterdam's *Gluten-Free Cupcakes* goes on sale April 26, 2011. It is available for pre-order on Amazon.com.

Erin McKenna's *Babycakes Covers the Classics* goes on sale April 12, 2011 and is available for pre-order on Amazon.com. The original Babycakes cookbook is available on Amazon and in bookstores. Go to babycakesnyc.com for more information about her shops.

If you would like more information about Crave Bake Shop, go to cravebakeshop.com. Look for Kyra Bussanich's cookbook later this year; she is busy writing her recipes now!

For store location, product information and more recipes using the 1-2-3 Gluten Free line of mixes, see their website 123glutenfree.com.