

NATION'S Restaurant News

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“End Quotes”

HAVING WORDS WITH

Susan Sarich

SusieCakes

Susan Sarich first opened the SusieCakes bakery in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Brentwood in 2006 with the goal of franchising the brand. It turned out the “retro-chic” bakery, which features such classic Americana desserts as red-velvet cupcakes and six-layer chocolate cakes — all made from scratch in house and based on her grandmother’s recipes — required skilled bakers, and Sarich found she could better control quality by growing the company herself.

And so she has. SusieCakes now includes five locations, with the latest opening in Northern California in January. She envisions the brand as a national bakery chain that eventually will spread the joy of frosted sugar cookies and whoopee pies across the country.

It appears you have a lot of women on your management team.

Essentially all are women. We have an assistant head baker in the Brentwood store who is a man.

One of our core values is the balance between personal and professional, and I think that has been very attractive to women. It was important to me that we’re closed on Sunday and major holidays so people can spend time with their families. Our bakeries open at 10 a.m. and close at 7

p.m., so women with families can get their kids to school. My background is in hotels and foodservice, and I worked the hours for 15 years, and I felt the burnout. I wanted for women to be able to have a career in foodservice without having to compromise their family lives.

Why not franchise?

At this point, I think I want to retain operational control of the company and the integrity. You do run the risk of losing some of that once you start franchising.

The scratch baking is what adds more moving parts than many franchisable concepts, because baking is so precise, and we don’t use mixes or big tubs of buttercream. I never want to have a central commissary and ship things out. Baking on site is important. It smells like a bakery, and it’s warm like a bakery.

We’ve been able to expand and get funding, and we’re going to continue. We’re looking at more sites in Northern California and one more in Southern California. It’s a

FAST FACTS

Hometown: Chicago

Education: Cornell University School of Hotel & Restaurant Administration

Experience: event planning and catering with Hyatt Hotels and Resorts; special-events manager for Chicago’s House of Blues; catering director for Lettuce Entertain You’s Everest Room; director of catering for Ian Schrager’s Clift Hotel in San Francisco; managing partner for Zinc Bistrot in Portland, Ore.

Personal: Susan and her partner, Houston, love to entertain, dine out and travel.



good time to be signing leases, so we’re trying to take advantage of that.

How has your menu evolved since the first store opened?

We have the same core menu, with layer cakes and desserts. Nothing has changed, but it was pretty simple in the beginning. We have added more seasonal specials to add variety. Now we offer pies and cheesecakes that change monthly, as well as seasonal cupcakes. We also have added wedding cakes to our decorated-cake options, and that’s done very well for us.

Why do your classic desserts resonate for consumers now?

It’s as comfort food as it gets. It’s straightforward buttercream. We don’t offer fondant and marzipan, so it’s more affordable, and people are loving it.

Say it’s Grandma’s birthday. In the past, we took Grandma out to dinner, but now we’re staying home. But you still need a cake, and people don’t have the skill set to bake cakes anymore, so that’s where the money is spent. Those events in life go on, and there are cakes on those occasions.

Are you the next Mrs. Fields?

I wish! I don’t know if that will happen, but if it does, it will be phenomenal.

— Lisa Jennings