

# Entrepreneur Spotlight On...

## SusieCakes Founder Susan Sarich

I may have been a bit more partial to interview Susan Sarich, the founder of [SusieCakes](#) bakery, if not for the fact that my office is across the street from one of her store locations. During lunch, I'll occasionally drop in and let the warm fragrant vanilla and chocolate aromas envelop me while deciding on a tasty baked treat to take back with me – whether I pick a frosted sugar cookie or a mocha frosting filled cupcake, I know that my decision will (mostly) be as easy as pie to make.



Susan Sarich, founder of SusieCakes

While most small business owners wish starting a business would be as easy as baking a pie, Sarich spoke candidly today with me about some of the biggest challenges she faced getting her company off of the ground, especially since the locations are primarily Southern California based. We also discussed some of her biggest inspirations for SusieCakes, how the company is committed to supporting women of all ages with the schedule that works for them, and their brand new company [Pinterest](#) account.

***Deborah Sweeney:*** *In 140 characters or less, describe SusieCakes to me.*

**Susan Sarich:** An all-American, home-style bakery featuring classic desserts (layer cakes, pies, puddings, & cookies), baked on-site, daily from scratch.

***DS:*** *What's the mission behind SusieCakes?*

**SS:** Our mission is "Connecting through Celebration." Cakes are the hallmarks of our celebrations (from birthdays to weddings to baby showers), so the cakes we bake for our guests become celebratory centerpieces for their life's milestones. Our cakes connect us with our guests and in turn our cakes connect our guests with their loved ones.

***DS:*** *Why a bakery? And in more specific terms, why cakes?*

**SS:** I had worked in the hospitality and food service industry for 15 years when I started to form the business plan for SusieCakes. The reasons were two-fold:

The first was that I saw many women leaving the food service industry given the hours that were required and it was difficult for them to have a work-life balance. I also saw many pastry chefs (predominately female) take a lesser role the kitchen than they were capable of. It was my intention to create a business model that allowed women to have progressive careers in food service by providing operational days and hours different than those offered in most restaurants, clubs and hotels. SusieCakes is closed late evenings and holidays, as well as Sundays in most locations.

I also grew up in the Midwest and was fortunate to have spent a great deal of time with both of my grandmothers, who lived across the alley from each other. After school, I sat and talked about my day with them over freshly baked treats – be it a double crust apple pie or a pound cake. It was a very special time in my life that formed the person I am today. Later in life, I inherited their 3×5 handwritten recipe cards, which I knew had to be shared.

In addition, at the time, there was a lack of options in the market for scratch-made desserts as many grocery stores and bakeries were using mixes, trans fats, and artificial ingredients and preservatives in their products. I wanted to create a bakery that would offer the kind of old-fashioned from scratch desserts that conjure childhood memories and simpler times.

***DS: Did you always know you wanted to go into the bakery business? Any background in working with the food and beverage industry?***

**SS:** I always knew I was going to be in the hospitality business from a very young age. I attended Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration and began my career working for Hyatt Hotels. I went on to work for some very forward thinking organizations including Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, House of Blues, and Ian Schrager Hotels – all in the food and beverage arena (restaurants, bars, banquets, room service, convention services, catering sales, and event planning). I intentionally worked for some of the most progressive companies in the industry in order to learn their best practices.

***DS: Were there any inspirations that helped you get started?***

**SS:** Absolutely! My grandmothers were my biggest inspirations – not only did they teach me my work ethic, but also taught me how to follow my aspirations and how to have pride in everything I do. By continually putting all of their family's needs first, they possibly never fulfilled their own dreams or potentials. My awareness of this helped fuel my drive to build SusieCakes as tribute to my grandmothers, Mildred and Madeline, as well as a tribute to all the strong, selfless women of their generation.

***DS: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced early on with your business and how did you work around and with them?***

**SS:** My biggest challenges early on were funding – it was extremely difficult to get anyone to invest in the beginning, given that SusieCakes was an unproven, start-up concept. I had to rely heavily on support from friends and family as well as a bank loan, which allowed me to open the first SusieCakes in Brentwood.

Furthermore, it was difficult for people to accept that a baking concept could be successful in health-conscious Southern California. However, I knew that what I offered at SusieCakes was different and filled a market need. I stayed true to what I was certain was a great concept and did not let naysayers deter me from my plan.

***DS: How do you differentiate yourself from other bakery startups in LA (i.e. Sprinkles)?***

**SS:** We bake entirely on-site and in our display kitchens, so our guests can see the fresh, quality ingredients (European-style butter, sugar, eggs) being used in their baked goods. Many other bakeries bake at a central commissaries, using artificial ingredients and preservatives and then ship their products overnight to their locations.

We're also steadfastly committed to providing a great guest service experience. Each bakery has a full-time Celebration Specialist who works directly with each guest to design their custom cakes. We also call each guest who pre-orders a cake after their event to see how they enjoyed our products. If for any reason at all we do not exceed their expectations, we offer a full store credit. We have standard operating procedures for all aspects of the guest interaction that assures a premium service experience.

***DS: I've read that you are committed to providing women career advancement and growth opportunities. How do you achieve that with SusieCakes?***

**SS:** We are committed to 40-42 hour workweeks for all our managers. I set SusieCakes' operating hours to assure that team members have family and personal time. We are not open late evenings, which allows for women to meet their friends for drinks, have dinner with their husbands, or put their children to bed. We also close early on the eves of holidays (Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve) and are closed on all major holidays, which allows everyone to be with their families on these special days, which is a real rarity in our business. All stores are closed on Sundays as well, except locations where hours are dictated by leases.

The work environment is extremely supportive to women of all ages at various levels of their careers – we employ young women directly out of culinary school, empty nesters re-entering the workplace, and all the stages between.

***DS: You guys have a great social media presence! How do you utilize Twitter and [Facebook](#) to bring in more buzz for the company and customers for the store?***

**SS:** We encourage our guests to share photos of their events on our pages – which builds brand loyalty. We also post fun baking facts and other related baking tips so that our page is not just promotional for SusieCakes, but informational as well. Finally, we can let guests know about upcoming specials or promotions through [these pages](#). We also have a monthly contest where followers can “vote” on their favorite decorated cake and we award the decorator.

We just launched a [Pinterest](#) account last week too! I think this is a great way to continue to build brand awareness and share ideas with our guests. This holiday season, one of our Pinterest boards will be dedicated to featuring recipes, how-to videos, and decorating ideas for a “SusieCakes’ home-baked holiday.”

***DS: What’s your favorite baked good to make and why?***

**SS:** My favorite baked good is our [Celebration Cake](#) which is a vanilla cake with confetti sprinkles baked in and frosted with “SusieBlue” vanilla buttercream – our signature color and the color of my grandmother Mildred’s Pyrex mixing bowl. Not only do I feel a bakery should always be judged on their vanilla/vanilla cake (because it can’t be masked with other ingredients) but I also feel this cake perfectly exemplifies our brand – because it is straightforward, classic, and fun!

***DS: Do you plan to expand to more stores beyond California or become a franchise?***

**SS:** At this time, our 3-year plan includes opening approximately 18 more stores in California from [San Diego](#) to Sonoma (bringing it to a total of 25). All stores are company owned and operated and we do not intend to franchise, but will continue to maintain full operational control to assure all standards are upheld.

***DS: Any new products being unrolled at SusieCakes in the future?***

**SS:** We always roll out seasonal specials monthly (cupcakes, pies, cheesecakes), but our philosophy is “less is more” so we try to keep it simple by keeping our menu consistent for our guests who have their favorites.

***DS: What advice do you have for women looking to start their own companies?***

**SS:** Some of my tips include:

1. Take the time to learn everything you possibly can about your industry and have a solid, thorough business plan.
2. Assure that you have working capital to get you through for the first 12 months.
3. Be a good listener – hear all points of view but at the end of the day, follow your intuition –it is the best tool you have.
4. Give honest and sincere appreciation to those who help you.
5. When communicating, always seek first to understand before seeking to be understood.