

BY WENDY RUBICAM | PHOTOS BY JAMES PATRICK

FOR THE  
LOVE OF  
*Cupcakes*

Sprinkles Cupcakes founder,  
Candace Nelson, talks about  
how the sweetest rewards come  
from doing what you love





We all know where to go in Scottsdale when we're craving a sweet something—maybe Belgian dark chocolate cake with bittersweet chocolate frosting or Madagascar bourbon vanilla cake with lemon coconut cream cheese frosting—all in a sweet little cupcake. Of course, we mean Sprinkles Cupcakes, oh so conveniently located just across from Scottsdale Fashion Square Mall. Who would have guessed that cupcakes would become the go-to guilty pleasure that has skyrocketed in popularity around the world?

Sprinkles Cupcakes founder, and judge on the Food Network's hit show *Cupcake Wars*, Candace Nelson, and her husband, Charles, both left careers in investment banking and sunk their life savings into their first cupcake boutique in Beverly Hills in 2005, never dreaming that their culinary creations would start a revolution.

"There's no way I would have ever imagined there would be a show devoted to cupcake bakeries around the country and the fact that there are cupcake bakeries around the world now emulating what we have created," Nelson admits. "I think we thought that the idea had what we call 'legs,' but I don't think we realized how long those legs were. And they're still growing!" she says with a laugh.

The Scottsdale Sprinkles boutique is one of 10 locations for the thriving company which just launched a new website, [www.ilovesprinkles.com](http://www.ilovesprinkles.com), and is in the process of developing a new ice cream concept.

Nelson took her inspiration from her great-grandmother, a 1930s restaurateur who passed on a love of baking and cooking to her mom, and in turn, to her.

"It just became something that I loved to do as a personal passion and hobby and so when I was at a crossroads in my career, I really had to look inward and ask myself what it was I really wanted to do." What she did was hop on a bus every morning and head to cooking school to see if baking was a good fit for a next career step. "That was really my first test for myself," she explains. "And I definitely passed with flying colors because I loved working with my hands and doing something that was tactile, and literally loved being elbows-deep in flour and chocolate and sugar."

When they considered the long and "excruciating" hours they had put into their banking careers, Nelson says she and Charles realized, "Maybe we should be spending most of our waking hours doing something we're passionate about, rather than logging hours and waiting to do what we love on the side."

Of course, a business background in working with startup technology companies gave Nelson and Charles a leg up on developing a successful business, but friends told them they were crazy to sell only cupcakes, especially in the age of no-carb diets.

"And then, beyond that, my closest friends told me, what are you doing working with your husband? It's a ridiculous idea. All of it's ridiculous and that is the stupidest idea of all," Nelson says, laughing.

"THERE'S NO WAY I WOULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED THERE WOULD BE A SHOW DEVOTED TO CUPCAKE BAKERIES AROUND THE COUNTRY AND THE FACT THAT THERE ARE CUPCAKE BAKERIES AROUND THE WORLD NOW EMULATING WHAT WE HAVE CREATED."

The partnership has flourished in more ways than one, and now with 1-year-old and 4 ½-year-old children she says, "We definitely co-parent and co-manage. He is absolutely amazing. We both have the same goals, so we back each other up."

Nelson has come a long way since completing cooking school and baking cakes for friends out of her kitchen. As a culinary celebrity and head of a cupcake empire, does she still actually get to bake? "My baking goes in waves, and basically it's recipe development at this point," she says. "When I am testing for new flavors that are coming down the line, that's when I spend my time in the kitchen. I'll spend two weeks trying to perfect a recipe and be tasting all day long, then I kind of have to take a little break," she confesses.

Although baking is her first love, she has truly come to enjoy all aspects of her business, explaining, "You have these visions for your business to grow to a certain point and then you realize all of a sudden you've come a long way from what actually got you there in the first place. For me, I like having a variety of challenges, so the fact that I can put on my marketing hat and my PR hat and my charitable hat and media hat and also be in the kitchen makes my life even richer."

When scouting for new locations, Nelson says that Scottsdale was a natural fit. Charles had grown up visiting Scottsdale regularly and graduated from ASU. "We thought it would be a perfect place—there's such a great food culture in Scottsdale. It's amazing how vibrant the restaurant scene is here, so we thought it would be a natural place for Sprinkles," she says.

The dry desert climate meant recipes had to be adjusted and new packaging designed. "We developed these Ziploc bags so that when people took their cupcakes home and set them on the counter they wouldn't be hard as a rock," Nelson explains. "That was a new development in Scottsdale that we hadn't had to do before."

The charitable aspect of Sprinkles has been in place from the beginning planning stages, says Nelson. "If we are lucky enough to be a thriving business, we're going to give back to the community in which we operate," she says with conviction.

In Scottsdale, the company donates regularly to Wesley Community Center, Waste Not and UMOM, and has actively participated in numerous charitable causes since opening their doors. Nelson says to be on the lookout for a special initiative at the Scottsdale store.

"I will hint that there is an Arizona-based celebrity that we are working with right now, and we are looking to partner up and develop a special charitable new cupcake which will launch in the Scottsdale store," she confides.



Sprinkles also gives away cupcakes every day to Facebook and Twitter followers who are among the first to arrive in the shop and whisper the secret words of the day.

"There's the charitable aspect and then there's just the fun aspect of our business of selling cupcakes. The whole idea is that you can't take it too seriously. It's a cupcake shop and it's supposed to be fun," she explains. "The key is just having a sense of humor and realizing that we're selling cupcakes; we're not necessarily saving lives."

Although they may not be saving lives, Nelson does feel that the cupcake craze is perhaps shaping lives, especially through the reach of *Cupcake Wars*. She is especially pleased that food programming is inspiring children across the country. "I have a lot of kids who watch the show, and are inspired by it. They go home, they bake, they try to emulate something they've seen on the show...and so I think that's my favorite thing—to realize that it's a fun show, it's entertainment, but it also is potentially creating a next generation of bakers," she says.

Between time spent in front of the camera, developing incredible new flavors, launching new locations and raising a family, what is life really like for Nelson?

"I would say balance, kind of like my recipe development, doesn't necessarily all come within a single day. It kind of comes over time," she shares. "Some things come up where you really have to work hard and then because I am ultimately in charge of my own schedule, I will take some time off work."

She admits that when you are doing what you really love, things fall into place and even the longest of days feels easy. Thinking back to the early days of Sprinkles, she recalls, "As soon as I shifted gears, even though I was working really long hours and it was physical work and it was hard, it felt like I was rolling downhill because it was just a pleasure for me. It just felt like what I should be doing."

*Wendy Rubicam can be reached at [www.rubicamwriting.com](http://www.rubicamwriting.com)*