

Christy's Cakes Keep Customers Coming Back

Brownsville, TX – Cristy Camargo is one happy baker for many good reasons. Customers who come into Cristy's Cake Shop tend to gasp with delight and start smiling when they see the dozens of luscious cakes in lighted refrigerated displays along three walls. They buy 200 freshly made cakes every day, on average. With a Web site online, created by her son Michael, customers across the Valley are ordering the prized cakes for special occasions, as are people from Panama and Germany who are getting married on South Padre Island.

Christy's Cakes' home-like red brick building with leaded glass windows and green awnings reflects the business' start 19 years ago, in the Camargo home several blocks away. That's how the business got the nickname, the House of the Best Cakes. Camargo remembered her first big cake sale—Father Juan Nicolau came to her kitchen and asked for a cake to serve 1,200 people. “He said he wanted a cake as big as the kitchen table. And when it was ready, we couldn't get it out the door. I thought I would die,” she said in Spanish, now able to laugh at the predicament. Camargo cut the cake into manageable pieces, got it out the door and re-assembled and re-decorated it. But that event prompted her to make sure her new bakery had double-wide doors to get out big cakes.

When Camargo decided to relocate to a dedicated bakery building 10 years ago, she told her architect it had to look like a house. The construction adds to the bakery's charm. Even the architect admitted, “This building has a life, a personality, of its own. And it smells very good.”

Camargo's decision a few years later to double the size of that building ran into an obstacle: her bank turned down her loan application—despite her years of successful business and a stellar reputation—because she had children soon to enter college and credit card debt. Her accountant Moises Gomez told her to apply to SBA for a loan. With SBA backing, Cristy's Cakes got a loan from Texas State Bank to cover the expansion, but Camargo insisted on a short-term seven year payback rather than the 15 year one offered. She is paying off that loan easily, she noted.

Camargo planned to add more employees after expanding the building, but she found that having additional ovens and enlarged work spaces for mixing cakes, cooling cakes, decorating cakes and storing them let the business operate more efficiently. Cristy's has 10 employees, several of them professional people who decided they love cakes the way their boss does. The first crew comes in early to start baking cakes, others arrive later to start decorating them: making fanciful child-pleasant birthday cakes, and creating cakes for every other occasion.

Christina Camargo, born in Zacatecas, Mexico, grew up in a family that owned several bakeries in Matamoros. She earned a degree in education and began teaching. But one thing got in her way. “I love to make cakes.”

Married and living in Brownsville, her friends would call to ask her to make cakes and the business grew from there, beginning with recipes from her mother before Camargo began developing her own. Cristy's cakes are all beautiful to look at and they taste light

and not too sweet. The perfect cakes are the reason the shop sells on average 200 cakes a day, seven days a week. Cristy's signature cakes might be the ones with fresh glazed fruit on top and the tres leches. The business now makes about 18 dream wedding cakes every weekend, too.

Camargo's children grew up working in the business, although they are in college now in Austin and Boston. "My husband, Balmaro, had a job elsewhere, but 10 years ago I asked him to start working with me full time. We are a family who works together."

Camargo remembered the first time Cristy's sold out of cakes: the first Valentine's Day in the new shop. "I couldn't believe it. When we opened, there was a line outside waiting for cakes with hearts and roses. It was a marvelous experience. By five in the afternoon, not a thing was left on the shelves." That includes the huge walk-in coolers where the day's cakes are placed before being rotated to fill the display cases.

Cristy's Cakes has the clientele and the reputation, and now the Web site, to grow larger, but it is more important to Camargo to have a consistently excellent product than to be the biggest cake maker. She takes personal responsibility that all the wedding cakes and quinceanera cakes turn out exactly as ordered by the bride or the honoree. (Those are the only cakes that Cristy's will deliver.) That makes it hard to get away.

Nonetheless, Cristy Camargo repeated, "I'm happy," and she looks like she is thrilled with how her life has turned out—thanks to her faith and her hard work. She has been named SBA's Small Businessperson for 2006 and was honored at a ceremony in late April. SBA has a poster at the Brownsville airport spotlighting Cristy's Cakes. She and her business has been featured in national magazines.

Camargo enjoys going to local schools for career day. "I tell them it's a career that I like because cakes make people happy." Cakes are part of every baby shower, birthday and holiday, she said, noting she has even made birthday cakes for pet dogs. Of course, all the kids want to come work for her.

Cristy's is pulling in customers now from San Antonio and Houston. "For one thing, we are more economical, but our cakes are also more flavorful."

In the House of the Best Cakes, where fresh flowers sit on the counter, customers come and go with a smile. Those smiles only get larger as they bit into a justly famous Cristy's cake.