

DAY IN THE LIFE

Bakery On Board

LOOKING TO MAKE LIFE A LITTLE SWEETER, TWO SISTERS ARE THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND A TWISTED CUPCAKE BUSINESS

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk

It's 10:27 a.m., and the Pink Diva has barely stopped at a Norfolk business when an SUV pulls up behind it. The woman inside jumps out and heads to the Diva's side window. She has to have her cupcake fix first, before the office workers form a line. Cassandra Ayala and Tracy Busching don't blink—they're used to this kind of stalking. As the owners of the Diva, a Ford van painted pink with fun brown circles and a huge cupcake and named by customers, the sisters have been stopping at Hampton Roads businesses and events since September 2010.

The cupcakes were Tracy's idea; selling them from a van, Cassandra's. For years, Tracy has baked rich, dense mini-cakes with unique flavors and given them away. Cassandra sat behind a desk as a real estate broker and grew a bit bored. Looking for a new challenge, she suggested Twisted Sisters Cupcakes, a traveling cupcake bakery of sorts, in July 2010. Within weeks, the two purchased a van, secured a business license and applied for the necessary permits (a feat about as easy as climbing Mount Everest, given the business' uniqueness and the cities' varying laws). Now they and their staff head out five or six times a week delivering pre-orders and satisfying sudden sugar-cravings. Follow them on Facebook or Twitter (@TSCupcakes), and you'll know where they plan to be each day and what cupcakes they'll be selling.

Or you can try your luck and do what Dawn Marshall did and keep your eyes peeled. While Marshall had been following the business' posts on Facebook for about two months, on this particular steaming hot morning, she just happened to spot them as she was driving near Naval Station Norfolk.

"They're the best," Marshall explains. "I started driving real slow when I saw them and waited until they turned on their signal so I could see where they were going."

Someone in line chuckles—she's been guilty of stalking once or twice, too. She



Twisted Sisters Cassandra Ayala (left) and Tracy Busching pose with their tasty products outside the Pink Diva.

tells the woman next to her that her daughter was afraid they'd get killed one afternoon as she made a sudden U-turn on Indian River Road.

The line never stops as Ayala takes the orders and Busching fills them. Some customers are well prepared—they've stopped by before or checked the menu on Facebook. Others require a bit of time. For newbies, Ayala squats down and slides open a Diva Sampler—a plastic container with the six cupcakes they're offering this week. You can buy one for \$3, mix and match for \$3 each or buy the six flavors in the sampler for \$15. The cupcakes are as creative and bold as the truck—Tiramisu, vanilla cupcake soaked in espresso and Kahlua syrup with a mascarpone Swiss meringue frosting topped with cocoa powder; Grammy's Chocolate Pie, chocolate cupcake with a crushed oreo bottom, pudding filling and vanilla Swiss frosting and chocolate swirls; Black Cow, root beer cupcake topped with creamy Madagascar vanilla Swiss frosting; Southern Belle

Dressed for Memorial Day, red velvet cupcake topped with cream cheese frosting colored with red and blue stripes; Spotted Jersey, chocolate chip cupcake with chocolate butter cream filling and Colonel Klink, German chocolate cake topped with caramel pecan coconut frosting.

While the line is moving quickly, Ayala can't be described as a task-oriented order taker. Instead, she's your best friend, constantly smiling and saying, "How am I going to spoil you today?" or "Girl! How are you?!" and refusing to play favorites ("I like them all," she insists when someone asks for a recommendation.)

The cheerfulness comes naturally, but don't write off Ayala as a cheerleader. She's a motorcycle-riding chick, and on her side of the van's center console, there's a pack of Marlboros and a lighter. Not that anyone has seen her smoke in the van. Most likely they're for a break time, out-of-the-van, when refueling.

Busching appears to be the silent partner, at least today. Ayala asks if she heard

the order and with a nod, Busching bends into one of the huge blue coolers or turns to a baker rack, grabbing what's needed and placing the order in a container. If she has to move a few things or something falls, she doesn't react. Mishaps will not be seen or heard by the customers. She wants the cupcake-buying to be an "experience"—no commotion, just delight.

The van is thus decorated accordingly. The back of the two seats are covered with aprons, cupcake lights are strung so the customers can see them, and signs hint at the sisters' priorities: "Because nice matters," "She believed she could so she did," "Sisters make the best friends." The 40-something sisters (who look alike with brown eyes, brunette hair and high cheekbones) say they've always been close, relying on each other during frequent childhood moves down the East Coast from Maine to Virginia.

"Mom did her best to take care of us," says Ayala. "There were times when we'd pack our stuff in black garbage bags, and we didn't have a new home to go to. It made us sensitive to helping others."

Ayala remembers one situation when

a boy bought a cupcake but his friend didn't. She figured it was because he didn't have any money, so she gave him one. She looks for opportunities to team up with organizations for fundraisers and has recently helped the March of Dimes and the We Promise Foundation, which supports children facing illnesses and other hardships.

Giving away cupcakes and donating profits makes sense to the sisters, but they're definitely not pushovers. In the early afternoon, Busching encounters a customer who makes her roll her eyes ever so slightly. Ayala has driven the Pink Diva to the Lake Wright cul de sac, a few miles from the Norfolk airport, after stopping by DePaul Hospital. It's just past noon, near 95 degrees, and the air conditioner is dead. They wonder if anyone is willing to risk heat stroke and venture out of the office. Five minutes later, they see that sweet sugar trumps the sizzling sun—lots of men step up to the window, and lots of Diva Samplers slide out. Busching starts counting the remaining supply. Sometimes they sell up to 600 cupcakes a day, but with the heat and the iffy air conditioner, they've cut the stock

they carry on board in half.

"We encourage pre-orders so no one misses out," says Ayala, "but few do it."

Busching and Ayala hear an out-of-ordinary customer at the same time. She's come to the passenger window, mistaking a guest on board for an employee.

"Do you have a low-carb cupcake?" she asks.

Cassandra hands another Diva Sampler through the side window, reaches to her right to grab something and steps to the left to the passenger window.

"No, we don't," she says cheerfully.

"Do you ever *think* about it?" the woman presses.

"No, because we can only do six kinds a week; that's the room we have," says Ayala. "But I have a little something for people with allergies and different tastes."

She hands the woman a grape lollipop and receives a smile and "thank you" in return.

As the woman walks away, Ayala goes back to the side window, and Busching points to the roof. A cut-out skeleton smiles down at her, the words "OMG—Eat a cupcake!" next to the skull. **HRM**

Life has many choices. Thank you for choosing us for your jewelry needs.



MADISON JEWELERS
simple. elegant.



ELMA • GIL
Bridal Venetti



5304 Providence Road • Virginia Beach • 757-200-0609 • www.madison-jewelers.com