

Cupcakes in the City: A Prairie girl opens shop

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Up until about a year ago, Jean Blacklock was most in her element when she was strategizing with colleagues and helping clients with their wealth management portfolios. With a successful career in a large financial services company in downtown Toronto, Blacklock's days were spent in meeting rooms and penning an estate planning tome. These days, the blonde and petite lawyer isn't far from Bay St., but her surroundings couldn't be more different. Standing in a large open-concept kitchen that smells like the inside of a warm cupcake, Blacklock spent a morning earlier this week sourcing out chocolate-covered espresso beans. "Every day is different," Blacklock grinned.

Blacklock's journey started out on the kitchen counter of her mother's kitchen long before she was tall enough to reach for a spatula. In the summer of 2009, after leaving her job and getting married, Blacklock began tweaking recipes for the 14 varieties of cupcakes that now line the wall behind the counter at [Prairie Girl Bakery](#).

"The fall after I left the bank, I took a mediation course because I thought the more common sense thing to do after you've been in law or banking is learn to be a mediator, but I just couldn't stop thinking about running my own business and doing a bakery," Blacklock told [OurFaves](#).

It's now four weeks into Blacklock's entrepreneurial leap of faith and so far, so good. Business is consistent and growing steadily. "Knock on wood - I'm not counting my chickens before they hatch, but so far, it seems to me like when you do what you really want to do, often it works out," she said.



What's the story behind the Prairie Girl name?

I grew up on a farm just outside of Saskatoon and my family is still in Saskatchewan. So coming from the Prairies is just my roots. When I was looking around for a name, I thought why not make it into a personal name that reflects my background. It's worked out well because it's kind of a fusion of big city and country roots...I think a lot of Canadians have come from somewhere else.

You were writing an estate planning book at the same time you were planning Prairie Girl Bakery. The projects couldn't be more different. How did you balance the two?

I love being busy and I'm pretty Type A. So until about a month ago, I was able to do both. But as soon as we opened the doors here, it just became impossible to do both. Two weeks ago, on a Thursday night, I was doing a presentation to clients about my book. And that morning, I was running around delivering cupcakes and then that night, I had to change into a suit and do a presentation on estate planning and I thought, 'I can't keep this up. I can't do both things.'

I think I'm just going to focus on the bakery now. As much as I love estate planning and talking about it, I have to give it a rest for a little while.

So it's just cupcakes. What would you say to those who feel the cupcake market is already a little over-saturated in Toronto?

I did tons of research in cities across North America and it puzzled me as to why Toronto, the largest city in Canada didn't yet have a cupcake store focusing on on cupcakes presented in a beautiful way in downtown Toronto. I just couldn't understand it. Calgary does, Vancouver does, New York does. I thought I could do this really well and I could get that niche. That's why I wanted to focus and I don't think it's a trend that's ending. I think that people always love cake and icing.

And my business is growing every day, which kind of supports my research. I don't want to come across sounding cocky - I'm not at all. I'm very grateful for every customer who comes in the door. I think there's lots of opportunity.

Where did the recipes come from?

I developed them. That was part of my work over the last couple of years and my family and friends and colleagues at the bank ate a lot of cupcakes.



What would you say is the philosophy behind Prairie Girl Bakery?

That's easy. Every person that comes in the door and tastes our cupcakes - I want them to be happier after they leave this store or taste a cupcake than they were before. Happy because we're happy here and we give really great service and happy because the product is so delicious. Pure delight. That's my goal.

What's one cupcake you'd want every person who comes here to try?

There are two of our icings and everyone that tastes them can't believe how good they are. One is a peanut butter icing on the chocolate cupcake or the banana cupcake. And the other is the strawberry icing. You get this rush of strawberry flavour.

Some people are wondering why a Prairie girl isn't serving up more traditional Prairie delicacies like peanut butter marshmallow squares or Sex in a Pan.

I've seen comments on the name too and I guess when I chose the name Prairie Girl Bakery, it was a reference to myself, not the baking. My intention's not to do Prairie baking. I'm just a Prairie girl. Our tag line is to live one cupcake at a time and I think we do it really well.

Now that you've had a career in law and finance and have opened up a cupcake shop, would you say one is your calling or is this the cherry on top of your career?

I love both those phrases. It is the cherry on top, but I also feel really at home in the entrepreneurial world. I really love it. I love my other work too, but when I come here in the morning and it's already smelling like this, and I'm meeting people and hiring staff, it's fantastic. I love it. It's much more dynamic than any kind of job where you go from meeting to meeting. It's very cerebral and you plan strategies and you're doing all those things. Here, you have to think on your feet and it's fast-paced.



How and from whom did you first learn how to bake?

My mom and both my grandmothers. And both my parents were always very supportive of my love of cooking and baking. I was subscribing to [Gourmet](#) and [Bon Appetit](#) magazines from the time I was 10. Having parents say that what you're doing is good makes you want to do it more.

Do you have any baking secrets you've cultivated over the years?

It's not a secret to me, but I find with baking that the result is a whole lot better if everything is room temperature.

What's one piece of kitchen equipment that you covet in the bakery and at home?

In here, a rotating oven. I covet it so much that we're going to get it. The racks go around. It's supposed to be really good for cupcakes.

At home, I don't covet anything, but what I like the most in my kitchen is without a doubt my Kitchen Aid mixer. Anyone that's serious about baking has to have a Kitchen Aid mixer.

What are you best known for baking at home?

Right now, it would be cupcakes. Before that, I would say cheesecakes. I make a really good pumpkin cheesecake. I've also made a really good Turtle cheesecake that the kids love a lot.

How important was family in helping you make all this come to life?

It's everything. From my mom and dad who are now deceased encouraging me in the first place, and being small business owners themselves. I'm Andrew (Blacklock's husband) who's been there 100% in terms of investing, investing, investing for over a year - pouring money into graphic design, the Website, leasing this place without one dollar of revenue and him saying I could do this. It's a great thing. And just on the weekend, my sons from Calgary were here and they're just so excited for me. It's everything. I can't imagine doing without that.



How do you define success? How do you know you've reached it?

Success to me is that feeling of knowing inside that you've done the right thing and that you've done it well. It's not other people saying that or financial success or getting a promotion.

Would you say you've reached that point yet at the bakery?

Yes. I get an email where people say how happy we've made them and that they love the store. I do think it's successful, but success is a never-ending thing. I don't say it's successful and then rest on my laurels. I if think we keep on this track of pleasing our customers, it will be even more successful.

Do you wish you started Prairie Girl Bakery earlier in your life and career or are you glad you did it at this point?

It's perfect now. I'm putting to use everything I've learned in my business career. I don't think I could have done it earlier.



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