



Is it a cupcake or is it a muffin? Only the icing gives it away.

FOOD

Not So Guilty Pleasure

IF ONLY SOMEBODY COULD GET THE CUPCAKE RIGHT

By Corby Kummer

CLOYINGLY CUTE CUPCAKE shops may seem passé in New York, but they continue to thrive there, and new ones seem to open across the land by the month. Silly and disappointing as most of these shops are, the craze is worth keeping—if only, like the audiences at La Scala, to keep applauding till the performers do better.

A good cupcake has all the frosting you really want at a birthday party but can't ask for. It's celebratory but restrained, a suitably small indulgence for tough times. And, surprisingly, a cupcake can be a smaller indulgence than a wholesome-seeming muffin: under the icing, as any baker knows, there's practically no difference.

Far be it from me to advocate eating Hostess cupcakes: they symbolize the industrial depredation of anything homemade, the triumph of Big Baking Brother (perhaps in his death throes: Interstate Bakeries, the company that makes them, Twinkies, and Wonder Bread, has been in bankruptcy since 2004). And yet a Hostess cupcake has 180 calories. A blueberry muffin at a typical Starbucks has 360—the same amount

as a lavishly iced Starbucks chocolate cupcake. The un-iced chocolate cream-cheese muffin has 440. Might as well have a breakfast you'll enjoy!

Cupcakes may be largely icing-delivery vehicles, but the cake shouldn't be cardboard and the icing shouldn't be grease—twin concepts few artisan bakers (*artisan* being the new word for *homemade*) seem to get. Cooked French buttercream, which many of them choose (it shows off Technique), is not a suitable cupcake icing. It's oily. It smears. A simple glaze—think Hostess, but with good chocolate—is. And best is the simple icing that for many people evokes childhood: butter beaten with confectioner's sugar and milk and vanilla, light-textured and creamy but with a satisfying snap when you bite into it. Because this icing, when made with shortening, says “cheap supermarket cake” to artisan bakers, they shun it.

New York's Magnolia Bakery, which used this icing to launch the craze, gets it right—but its cake has almost no flavor, as a blindfolded tasting with my 14-year-old niece proved. Neither of us could tell the difference between vanilla, chocolate, and red-velvet cake, which

to be fair never tastes like anything—it has a bit of cocoa and a lot of food coloring, and seems to be popular for its usual cream-cheese icing. And all the samples, though fresh, were dry. (When people say that homemade cupcakes are always better, they generally mean fresher. Most homemade cupcakes start with a mix.) Buttercup, started by a disaffected Magnolia founder, had much better cake but less-interesting icing, and better than both was another Magnolia offshoot in the city, Sugar Sweet Sunshine.

You have to get over the names. Then you have to get over the novelties, like the rum-soaked Mojito with lime icing and the corn-dog-style mock Twinkie at Kickass Cupcakes, a typically whimsical and cheery shop in Somerville, near Boston. The only just-right cupcake I've found so far was at Baked and Wired, a hip Georgetown café. The plain white icing on its “birthday” cupcake (pictured here) had exactly the right crackle when I bit into it, and the chocolate cake was moist, airy, and not too rich.

The main difference between a cupcake and a muffin is a light, open crumb, Flo Braker, expert baker and author of the new and long-awaited *Baking for All Occasions*, told me. She has reformulated a recipe in her book for *Atlantic* readers, for maximal lightness; you can find it at www.theatlantic.com/cupcakes.

The real culprit keeping cupcakes from fitting my definition of “health food” is less the icing than the plague of plenty that has invaded the entire food industry: portion size. Joanne Chang, a Boston pastry chef and restaurateur, told me that when she opened her Flour Bakery she used home-sized, two-ounce muffin tins for her muffins and cupcakes. Customers balked at paying premium prices for what they regarded as miniatures. Chang bought the four-ounce tins that virtually every bakery uses, and customers “stopped complaining”—but she didn't stop feeling guilty that she was giving customers “enough to feed a family of four.” “We're competing against what people see on TV,” she said with a sigh. People should look at their own muffin tins to remember what a single serving looks like. ■

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