

Written by Jane Rushmore

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Friendly bakeshop sells sizeable, sought-after sweets



Charli's Cupcake Factory

912 Boston Post Road, West Haven, 203-909-6001, charliscupcakefactory.com. Hours: Sun., noon-4

"The early bird gets the cupcake," says the man next to me. It's a Saturday afternoon, my third visit to Charli's Cupcake Factory, and the place is hopping. The man and his wife have driven out of their way from Old Saybrook on the way to a party in Groton to buy Charli's cupcakes.

They've snatched up the last lemon chiffon and another couple picked the last strawberry, made with real strawberries, as part of a dozen for their daughter's 20th birthday party. It's a small operation, cupcakes made fresh daily, no reserves on hand, so once a flavor is gone, it's gone.

Owner Jennifer Maultsby-Calhoun knows everyone by face, if not by name, and stops everyone to ask about family, business and of course, cupcakes.

The first time I visited, on a Friday at 6 p.m., I raced to get there after work. The store sits in a plaza on Route 1 marked by a large brown and pink banner. Their neighbor? A dentist's office, ironically. When I arrived, a simple, hand-written note hung on the door: Closed.

Maultsby-Calhoun says they closed early to start the weekend baking from scratch — a batch of 1,000 cupcakes had gone wrong, the batter missing the eggs, and they were tossed in an attempt at damage control. It was an easy decision but a painful act: Part of Maultsby-Calhoun's mission is to "be intolerant of waste," a philosophy she says comes from her previous lifetime as an environmental litigation manager. She worked with the federal Environmental Protection Agency and state Department of Environmental Protection. "You learn a lot about waste and become very aware of it. We only produce one trash can of waste a day," she says.

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Charli's offers organic cupcakes, too, but only by special order. Regular cupcakes sell for \$3.25 each; \$3.50 for candy flavors; and \$13 for a package of four. The sizes are huge — my five friends couldn't finish the four cupcakes I brought home.

Maultsby-Calhoun's personal favorite and the best-seller, the cupcake that started it all, is the sweet potato. One Thanksgiving she was inspired to convert a sweet potato pie into a cupcake for her only daughter (and the shop's namesake), Charli, who loves cakes but disdains pies. It was such a hit with friends and family that Maultsby-Calhoun launched Charli's Cupcake Factory in October 2009.

In some cases, cupcakes get better with age, as with the sweet potato. "I've talked to some women who have been baking for years. They used to make the buttercream frosted cakes, cover them with wrap, and leave them in a dark closet shelf for two days, to let the frosting crust over before serving them," she says. It's like letting the cake marinate.

In that spirit I waited two days to sample my sweet potato cupcake. It tasted like a cinnamon explosion. Then, slowly, something spicier and deeper unfolded like a bass note in a slightly melancholic tune, perhaps nutmeg or cloves. It was the lightest and fluffiest of the cupcakes, moist just around the edges, frosting slightly crusty as promised.

Another Southern delicacy is the red velvet, with real cream cheese frosting. It's the second best-seller at Charli's. Often the red food dye absorbs all the moisture in red velvet cupcakes, leaving them dry, but not this one.

Maultsby-Calhoun named her truck after this flavor; Charli's Red Velvet Express truck parks around New Haven and caters private events — you can follow it on Facebook and Twitter (@CharlisCupcake) for daily details.

Upcoming for fall will be cupcakes with fillings like hazelnut, cherry and a dozen or so more, along with new cakes like pumpkin and more fruit flavors. Each time I visited there were nearly two dozen flavors on display, their tops like flying saucers wrapped in swaths of pastel.

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Of the chocolate variety there's Chelsea's Hot Mess, with marshmallow and crumbles of vanilla wafer and chocolate chip, like a cupcake s'more. Or try a peanut butter with frosting so creamy it's like a mousse on top of a chocolate cake. The Milky Way frosting practically seeps with caramel, and tastes so much like the milk chocolate, caramel, and nougat of the candy bar that you are left scratching your head wondering, "How does she do that?!"

The pistachio icing floats like a sea-foam green '80s prom dress, all poofs and swirls. The nuttiness of the light green cupcake takes a moment to fully reveal itself, and it's a wonderful moment.

For vanilla cake lovers, the Kori's Bada-Bing house specialty comes topped with vanilla frosting, Oreo crumble, and a giant "G" swirled in chocolate syrup. Or try the mint, with half a York Peppermint Pattie as the centerpiece, mint flavor saturating the chocolate frosting.

The Butterfinger cupcake has a subtle flavor. Crushed candy bits on top make it look like the surface of another planet, rugged and mysterious, the cupcake is so dense it could be pound cake. "I want to declare myself the Paula Dean of Connecticut, because you can never have too much butter," Maultsby-Calhoun says.

"When I first started I wanted my cupcakes to look like my grandmother's," Maultsby-Calhoun explains, simple and homemade. "Now I'm moving more toward the decorative. People feed themselves with their eyes first. The more aesthetically pleasing, the more you want it. But, I know from growing up the ugliest one is the one I want, because it's falling apart from too much butter — and everybody wants that!"