

The Cookie Cutter Queen with Tina Karnath

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager podcast where I talk with cottage food businesses about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today I'm talking with Tina Karnath.

Tina lives in Saginaw, Michigan and sells custom decorated cookies with her uniquely named cottage food business, the [Chunky Chicken Cookie Company](#).

She also runs cookie decorating classes for adults and kids from time to time. Tina started her business in 2017 but clearly she has been decorating cookies much longer than that. Her cookie displays are truly works of art and judging by [one of her Facebook videos](#), she probably owns more cookie cutters than anyone I know.

And with that, welcome to the show, Tina, nice to have you here.

Tina Karnath: [00:00:45] Thank you for having me.

David Crabill: [00:00:48] So Tina, can you just take us back and tell us how you got this business started and what you sell and why you're doing it?

Tina Karnath: [00:00:57] Officially I started, I had my first sale in September of 2017. I've been baking. I honestly can't tell you the first time I remember baking cookies. It was just a part of my life from the time when I was probably five years old. I spent a lot of time in both of my grandma's kitchens and that's what I remember about both of my grandmas was my one grandma made lebkuchen and my other grandma made honey cookies. And there was usually always some available as soon as you are in the door. And it's just, I don't want to say a lifestyle for me, but cookies is always been a part of my life.

Obviously if you see our family pictures, it's not salads, but, it's just been a part of my life and I've always made cookies and I, I happened to do some that summer. That were custom decorated sugar while they weren't custom, but they're decorated sugar cookies and somebody made a comment, Hey, I'd buy some from you.

And I'm like, really? And then somebody else says, well, I would too. So next thing you know, here I am looking for more cookie cutters. I set up a Facebook page and here we are almost three years later. That's it. I just kind of fell into it. Honestly.

David Crabill: [00:02:10] Yeah. And judging based on your [Facebook pictures](#) and [Instagram pictures](#), I mean, you are an amazing decorator with the decorated cookies. And so it's easy to see why your business took off and you hit, you said that you are looking for more cookie cutters, but I saw hundreds of cookie cutters in a video that you took quite a while ago.

How could you be possibly needing any more of those?

Tina Karnath: [00:02:35] Well, Etsy is my friend, but also not my friend. There are a lot of really good people who have the 3d machines, and they can do custom shapes for

everything. So every holiday they'll always come out with a new theme or a new, you know, a new thing shape. It's like, Oh, I don't have that one yet. And I don't have that one yet.

So I, I think just, if you count my Christmas alone and I separate Christmas from snowmen. So if it has, no, I don't count that as Christmas. You just got like Christmas cutters. I'm pretty sure I'm about 500

Just for Christmas. Yeah.

David Crabill: [00:03:18] I can only believe that because I saw the video and I just don't even know how you keep them organized.

Tina Karnath: [00:03:24] They are, but I have one, two, three, four. I have five bins. Currently, I'm looking at getting actually two more, and they're sorted. They're big wide drawers, and they're by holiday or theme, like Christmas has two drawers. Halloween, spring, Easter. I have a drawer for letters. I have a drawer for animals.

I have a drawer just for shapes, like the squares or the special plaques, transportation. Yeah, it's chaotically organized, as my husband likes to say.

David Crabill: [00:03:52] Well, it works for you. And, and I would actually encourage anyone, I'll post a link to your [Facebook page](#) and [Instagram account](#) in the show notes, but check out Tina's pictures. Cause I think for anybody trying to get into custom decorated cookies, you just have a ton of ideas. There just in your pictures alone because there are some shapes I've never seen before for a cookie and a, it's pretty impressive. Uh, before we get into all of this stuff about how you run your business, I have to ask you about the name of your business, the chunky chicken cookie company. How'd you come up with that name? What's that all about?

Tina Karnath: [00:04:26] I knew going into it just from my, my background, I have a, you know, I have an English degree, nothing to do with baking and I've done a little bit of marketing with the nonprofits I work with. So I knew it needed to be something catchy in order for people to pay attention to it. You know, everybody, or not everybody, but a lot of the bakeries around here, they all have like sweet in the name or sugar in the name, but that kind of, they all kind of blur together.

So, I was just literally sitting at the kitchen table thinking, you know, brainstorming ideas. You know, what, what's related to the house, where I bake the cookies from, and what can I use? And, I looked out the back window and I also raised chickens and one of them just happened to go waddling across the backyard.

And I'm like, that's it. I have chickens and they're chunky, and it all kind of, all the alliteration fell together and I'm like, when I tested it out with some people and they're like, yeah, that's kind of catchy. It's, it's not, it's kind of cookie related, chunky chickens. But yeah. So that's my logo on my Facebook is the actual chicken that it, it was inspired by Mary Poopins is the chicken

David Crabill: [00:05:41] I saw on your website, I saw some of these names. Just tell the listeners what some of the names of your chickens are, because they're pretty funny.

Tina Karnath: [00:05:49] Well, Mary Poopins was the first batch I've got. I've had, we have a batch of chicks right now that are eight weeks old. And this newest batch, we, since we were home with the coronavirus, we were home. We had a lot more time to come up with names to fit their personalities. So this, this batch, I have an Amelia Egghart cause she was the first one to try and fly out of the coop.

I have, Princess Lay-ah, hopefully she will be a good egg layer. And then the rest of my chicks and my chickens, they're all favorite characters from movies. There's Scarlet O'Hara, there's Maria Von Trapp from the sound of music. Belle from beauty and the beast. Sandy from grease can't even think of what the rest of my names are, but they're all, some of our favorite characters from movies and cartoons.

David Crabill: [00:06:37] I know. I know there were some good other good puns in there, but I can't remember them off the top of my head either. But, Yeah, you, you listed some of them on your about page, on your website, and then there were some in your, one of your Facebook posts as well, I believe. But anyway, there's definitely a lot of personality there with the name, with yourself, with your chickens, and it certainly memorable.

But I will say that your cookies themselves are memorable. And even if you didn't have such a creative name, you probably would have done pretty well with your business just because of how professional your cookies look.

Tina Karnath: [00:07:06] I hope so.

David Crabill: [00:07:08] Yeah. All right, so let's get into. How you do, how you run your cookie business. You said you started, you've been making cookies all your life, and it's one thing to be making cookies.

Like, I've been making chocolate chip cookies all my life, but it's another thing to be making very professionally, custom decorated cookies. How did you progress up to that point?

Tina Karnath: [00:07:29] there was a lot of research cause when the first person said, Oh well you should sell them. It's like. Well, it's not just as easy as slapping them in a Ziploc bag and putting a price tag on them. I can do that. And people do do that. However, you know, I knew I wanted to follow the rules, see what the rules were.

Cause I know just with having friends with kids with allergies, I knew labeling was important. So luckily Michigan has a lot of good resources through the Michigan state university extension program. So they have an online class that you can take. They have representatives that you can call that will help you walk through the process of what you need to do, what steps you should take.

So I, I did a lot of online videos, did some reading, I joined some Facebook groups for cookie decorators, cookie business owners, and instead of, you know, just throwing out questions

out there, you know, I didn't want to be the newbie out there asking that. So I just kind of lurked around for a few, few months just trying to figure it out.

And while I was practicing on working on cookies before I sold more at home. So it was, it's a big learning curve in a way that has nothing to do with cookies. You had to do the whole business side of, what you had to do to do it legally and safely for customers.

David Crabill: [00:08:51] Sure. Are there any of those resources that you would recommend to somebody who's starting out with custom decorated cookies.

Tina Karnath: [00:08:59] Uh, there's quite a few of them. There is cookie decorator for beginners. There is a group called [Lila Loa](#), who is a famous decorator. There is [Cookie Business Owners](#). If you just do a search for, if you start with cookies or cookie decorating, a lot will pop up. And there are some that are specific to your region.

There's a Michigan bakers and a [Michigan cookie group](#) that I'm in, but those are specific to people in Michigan. That help with rules and, we work with each other and work with the state when like through this corona thing, you know what we could do what we couldn't do.

So I would, I would suggest people search for state specific cookie groups as well.

David Crabill: [00:09:49] Yeah, that's, that's good advice. And you're the first podcast guest I've had that is totally focused on custom decorated cookies. Even within custom decorated cookies, there's probably a variety of different techniques that you could use, right? So is there a specific technique that you focus on and can you explain what your style of cookie is, if that makes any sense?

Tina Karnath: [00:10:15] I try and mix it up with the styles. Just because there are so many, it's nice to. Mix it up a little bit, but there's, you know, you can do the wet on wet technique. You can just do regular outlining and flooding of cookies and then adding basic designs. You can do a lot of details with stencils, airbrush machines if you want to do airbrushing of the colors on your cookies. You can, there's all kinds of sprinkles and gadgets that you can, I don't want to say gadgets, but decoration type things that you can add onto your cookies. It really depends on what your customer wants. Like you could get really, really detailed, but it's time consuming and that raises the price, where I found a middle level of decorating where you still get some details and it's still fancy and custom to what the customer wants, but it's not as time consuming, therefore it's not as expensive for them to buy. So I think it's just a matter of trial and error too. As you get into it, figuring out what kind of decorating you want to do, if that makes any sense.

There are, you know, there's obviously different levels and you can do all kinds of online training, but if you don't have a market that's willing to pay \$45 a dozen, it's not worth your time to do those classes unless you have the market to support it either. So you have to find the balance.

David Crabill: [00:11:42] Well, let's talk a little bit about pricing. What do you currently price your cookies? I know it's not a fixed cost because of course we're talking about a custom item here, but a generally speaking, what do you price your cookies at?

Tina Karnath: [00:11:55] Generally there they start at \$2 a cookie, and that's for the average to large size. I've heard that I'm a little bit under priced for the size and the decoration, but I, I kind of view it as sometimes they get a little bit more for their money because I'm practicing and working on my skills and I don't mind it if it's on me that I'm looking to do something. And then the price goes up per cookie if it's a giant cookie or if it's individually wrapped, which, with bows, which a lot of people are doing now for drive by showers and drive by parties. So yeah, it starts at \$2 a cookie and it can go up.

Sometimes the giant cookies I've done are five and \$10 a piece, so lots of variables in there.

David Crabill: [00:12:42] Yeah. I would say that you probably are underpriced at this point. I don't think you need to worry too much about, uh, under pricing so that you can keep learning. Um, I, I know you're always learning, but I would say, uh, that sounds pretty low to me for somebody with your skill set. But then again, I don't know the Michigan, the area of Michigan you're in and what the market's like out there.

Have you tried to price your cookies higher and then found that it just didn't resonate with them or is just you just keep bumping up the price over time? How did you settle on the current pricing?

Tina Karnath: [00:13:15] I gradually, I've bumped up and especially when prices go up, butter went up a little bit. Vanilla's really high right now. So I've bumped up a little bit, but I try and always, look for sales on packaging because packaging is one of the bigger expenses and actually producing cookies. Cause you have to, you know, you have your ingredients for cookies, but you also have to figure out how to get it, presentable looking.

So I always try and look for sales as much as possible. Keep the costs down.

David Crabill: [00:13:46] And are you just getting these supplies from grocery stores or online? Where are you getting them?

Tina Karnath: [00:13:51] Pretty much everything right now is online only because the stores haven't been opened. Around me, but I try and look for, ways that the packaging, a lot of people buy a custom dozen for a gift, especially right now when a lot of the stores weren't open. So I try and fit, fit it. So actually it looks like a gift.

I have colored boxes and I use tool to put it in a ribbon. And sometimes I'll put a card on there if they've asked for a card. But I always try and coordinate it. So it's, so if they pick it up from my house, they can. Turn around and deliver it right to that person and it's, it looks like it's gift ready unless they, you know, I know they're not handing it off as a gift or they ask me not to.

I usually always wrap them up so that they look like a gift.

David Crabill: [00:14:35] Do you remember what you were charging for your cookies when you started the business?

Tina Karnath: [00:14:40] I think it was \$10 a dozen when I started only

David Crabill: [00:14:45] Oh my gosh.

Tina Karnath: [00:14:46] cause I'm like, Oh, who's gonna pay for this? And then it was, and then once I got more orders, I realized, yeah, this is, once you're into it, it's a lot more time consuming. And then there's a lot more overhead expenses. You know, there's a lot of baking time.

There was a lot of electricity use. I had to buy more pans, I had to buy more. You know, just things that you don't think about necessarily the, the liners for the baking sheets and the time to clean up and the time to shop to get all the supplies. Cause it wasn't, where I could just add it into my regular grocery shopping.

I was making specific trips to do large purchases of flour and the butter and the trays. So I had to figure in a lot of that. And I think that's. I pretty much settled right at I think 25 a dozen after that and I've pretty much stayed there unless somebody requests an elaborate design or elaborate packaging.

David Crabill: [00:15:39] Well, it's easy to look back. And realize that \$10 a dozen is quite low. But it happens a lot. It often happens with people who are new because they go to the grocery store and they price compare, and those mass produced factory produced cookies are, you know, not very expensive. So you can start to, almost sabotage yourself just by looking at the competition.

And obviously that doesn't do, it doesn't even come close to covering your costs, your time, et cetera. And, and truly the, what you're delivering are pieces of artwork more or less. So yeah, it definitely deserves that higher price.

Tina Karnath: [00:16:14] I do hear that sometimes. Oh, it's too pretty to eat and I feel flattered by that, but on the other hand, maybe it's because I've done so many cookies. I'm like, it's just a cookie. Eat it. But maybe it's because I do it so much, I just take it for granted. But it's a fancy cookie. Whereas other people, Oh, I don't want to take a bite. It's like, Oh just eat it.

David Crabill: [00:16:35] Well, what do you do in terms of order quantity right now? What? How, how long does it take you to make a batch of cookies or fulfill an order? How much can you currently handle right now?

Tina Karnath: [00:16:49] On average, if you would've asked me before all of the coronavirus shut down, my max was between 20 and 25 dozen a week. Cause I also have another part time job outside of the house.

David Crabill: [00:17:01] This is 25 dozen custom decorated cookies.

Tina Karnath: [00:17:04] Yes.

David Crabill: [00:17:05] Wow.

Tina Karnath: [00:17:07] If, if they're all like doing graduation season when they're all basically the same shapes, it's a lot easier because it's all the same shape. But when it's, if it

was 10 different custom orders, that's when I have to limit it to, you know, 18 or 20 because it's, there's a lot more colors involved.

There's just a lot more moving parts. Whereas when it's all graduation, it's a lot easier. I can just do trays of the same, the same shape. It might be different colors so I can do a little bit higher and graduation and Christmas, cause Christmas are basic shapes as well. There's not a lot of custom colors requested, so I can do, my highest was, I did 46 dozen one week in November and that that was a lot.

I had to take days off of work that week, but. It was okay. I figured it was a learning curve too. It's like, okay, how much can I do and still get a few hours of sleep every night and still produce a quality product?

David Crabill: [00:18:02] Wow. Yeah, that's over 500 cookies right there,

Tina Karnath: [00:18:05] Uh, yeah.

David Crabill: [00:18:08] That's pretty crazy. So can you walk me through what it's like to start an order where you're talking with the customer, maybe they have an idea or you coming in with an idea of what you might be able to make. How does that process work in trying to find something that both works for you and works for them and line the price up and all that.

Tina Karnath: [00:18:33] Uh, usually they'll email me. I do all, right now I do most of my orders through Facebook messenger through my Facebook page. People will, some people have an idea of exactly what they want. They, they'll tell me, I, it's a baby shower. I want this shape, this shape, this shape, this colors. And then we might go back and forth a little bit if there's a name or a date that they want put on it.

And then there's other people who will say, I need something for a 50th birthday party. These are their favorite things, and surprise me so. And those people, they pretty much, as long as it's 50th birthday party, they're usually, I don't, I have, knock on wood, I haven't had anybody say, Oh well, like that was a bummer.

But most people usually, maybe it's because of my sense of humor that the cookies I come up with always seem to fit what they were requesting. So knock on wood that, that continues.

David Crabill: [00:19:26] Yeah. You definitely have a quite a creative quality about you. Certainly a lot of personality in your cookies. And I was going to ask you this, cause I don't, it doesn't matter how successful somebody gets, they always deal with it. I just think it's one of those things when you become successful, you're going to deal with people who are dissatisfied or leave a negative review.

But I just have a hard time imagining that anybody has been dissatisfied with any of your orders. And so it sounds like you, you literally haven't had one.

Tina Karnath: [00:19:56] Knock on wood. Not yet. I maybe there hasn't, nobody's said anything. I don't know. I hope everybody likes their cookies. Cause kind of, unless there's

something specific they want and you really miss the Mark I cookies or kind of cookies, I guess I don't, I don't know. I.

David Crabill: [00:20:13] No, I would say it's actually just that you have such high quality cookies that it would be pretty hard for somebody to. Be dissatisfied with the outcome. I mean, I've seen some custom decorate cookies that were good, but, uh, you know, the product that you're making, it's just about as good as any I've seen.

So, yeah. And that's a very good price as well. So that's another reason why I couldn't see them being disappointed. So that kind of gives me a sense for how you get an order going. And you said you are working a job as well. I mean, this just seems like it would be, almost a full time thing.

Tina Karnath: [00:20:55] It's certain seasons. It's very busy. Christmas is obviously number one. However, what was surprising when I went back and I, because I track my sales every month since I've started, and actually surprising my number two busiest time is Easter. So that was surprising for me. And then graduation is a very close third.

So I know going into it, those seasons for my work schedule, I plan, you know, light. Work schedule cause I work part time so I can, I'm flexible with my hours so I can kind of maneuver it so I can have more time off away from that job to handle the influx of cookie orders. But you also have to be prepared.

I have to make sure I have enough supplies on hand and baking ingredients on hand so that I'm not running to the store, taking up more time so that when I come home, if I do have to bake a lot in a week, I can come home from my job. If I'm working and I can get right to it. I don't have to, Oh, I got to go to the store first.

I got to go to here first and get trays. Everything is out and ready to go and I can start baking at say four o'clock instead of waiting until seven o'clock at night. Cause those three hours make a big difference. Big difference when you can go to bed at 11 o'clock at night versus two o'clock at night.

David Crabill: [00:22:09] Well, you were talking about having enough supplies on hand, but that's one of the difficult things with custom decorated cookies with how many different types of designs you do, how many techniques you're using. I can just imagine you must be inundated with supplies, I mean, it's not just the cookie cutters, but it's all those things that you mentioned at the beginning of the episode.

So is it like, is your whole house taken over with cookies or is it, is your house become. have you been limited in how much you can do from your home? Because I just imagine that your cookie stuff's everywhere.

Tina Karnath: [00:22:42] Yeah, some, it's some of both. When I first started, I had to set up an eight foot table in the living room so I could spread out so that the cookies can dry. And after that first Christmas, we knew we had to fix some things. So my husband, we had an office in the front of our house that I wasn't using for my job anymore.

So we converted that room into, we call it the cookie room, and he puts some, there's countertop in there, and there's shelving in there. So all of the sprinkles are in there. All of my ribbons for packaging, my tool, all of the cookie cutters, my extra mixers, all of the boxes and the trays and my baking racks, everything goes in there.

So it's. So that was a little bit better. But now, now as I've expanded again, I'm, I'm actually sitting at, I have two eight foot tables in the living room now. We've moved our furniture so that the tables are against one wall. So I have a cookie room now and part of the kitchen and part of the living room.

So we've actually very casually looked at renting space, but that's, that's a whole nother animal in Michigan. Not sure what the next step will be for us. And I say us because this is a family thing because they aren't working on the cookies and decorating. But I have, like right now, I have all my ingredients out ready to make icing tonight.

So my kitchen counter is covered and there's, you know, the tables are on the side of the living room. They're not in the middle of the living room, but they're still here. And I try and work my schedule around family events, but sometimes. It's like, okay, we gotta wait to do this cause I just got to get this tray, I got to finish baking this tray and then we can do this.

So, so they're involved indirectly.

David Crabill: [00:24:26] Right. So when you started, did you just do only referral customers or did you market yourself and are you just all referrals now? Like how do you grow your business.

Tina Karnath: [00:24:41] I'm strictly on Facebook and it's, it started with friends and then friends of friends and friends of friends of friends. I, I know a lot of my customers, or at least I. A lot of them, I know who they've come to me from like, Oh, well, I work with so and so, or I, I saw so-and-so posted, so I kind of know where they they're from and it's a small enough region.

I don't know all of my customers exactly where they come from. Cause I have done a few vendor events and I have run contests on my Facebook page where people can tag other people. So I have gained customers that way that I, I'm not sure exactly how I know them or met them. But, I haven't done, I've done a couple of Facebook booth, but as far as other advertising, I have not advertised on the radio or anywhere else.

It's all been through either Facebook or Instagram. Or word of mouth from friends,

Especially when they go to a party and see a cookie, I get a lot of that. Oh, I had your cookie at the hospital. They had a party and I had this at school, so I do get a lot of that.

David Crabill: [00:25:47] Right. I want to move into your process for making cookies on a daily or weekly basis and what that looks like just in case someone's interested in becoming a bit more efficient because I imagine you've become a lot more efficient with the way you make cookies.

What is that process like from the dough, the batter to baking, decorating? What's your workflow?

Tina Karnath: [00:26:12] I try, I try and group orders as much as possible. Right now with my other job, I'm being, I'm working from home from my other job too, so I have a lot more flexibility. But before I would try and line my orders up. So most of them go out on the weekends, which that's what it used to be. Cause everybody had events on the weekends.

So I would typically gather them up as late as possible cause I can figure it out. I estimate I need an hour a dozen to decorate. So I backtrack from there. When they're going out, they need 12 hours to dry. I need this much time to bake. I need this much time. So that way that, and when I say bake is as late as possible, that means as late as possible so that I know that they're still fresh.

Cause I know other places they'll bake a week or two weeks ahead of time. But I, I, I don't do that cause I don't want to keep product out without getting into the customer's hands that long. But So I will typically. Bake on Tuesdays or Wednesdays, and then depending on how many I do, if I have one or two dozen, I might start icing them that night and then finish up the details the next night and then put them on the tray.

Or the, the Friday mornings, I would get them already on the trays and most people pick up on Friday afternoons from me. Friday afternoons or Saturday mornings, depending on what their event is because, because I found that I, if I don't schedule them, then I'm baking some on Monday, some on Tuesday, some on Wednesday.

Then I'm icing some after I baked some and it was, it was just too chaotic for me and it was too chaotic for our family life. I had to limit what days people could pick up as much as possible. Cause I know events happen on other days, but for ordering, I needed to. Try and keep it as much as possible on the same day, this day's baking, this day's icing, this day's packaging, if that makes sense.

I don't know if that makes sense to somebody who isn't a Baker, but I'm also a pro procrastinator. I know. I know. I know when my last free hour is, and then I have to, but I've gotten a lot better. I don't, I don't take it down to the wire like that anymore. As long as you know, as long as you're prepared ahead of time, I usually have a few hours to spare, which doesn't sound like much, but after three years it's like, Ooh, I can go to bed tonight.

David Crabill: [00:28:33] See, this is why you need to be charging more than \$2 a cookie, Tina, because you just said that you take, you allow an hour for decorating a dozen, and that's just That's just the decorating part. That's not the packaging. That's not the baking. So you know, if you're, if you're getting \$25 for that, that's just, yeah, I think he could easily bump that up to \$3 a cookie,

Tina Karnath: [00:28:57] I probably could. I might gradually, I don't. It's one of those, I have a hard time myself cause I was a single parent for a long time and I want to make the product available to everyone and you know, attainable by everyone. I don't want it to be some exclusive product that only is available to some people.

I want to do maybe a little bit easier of a design that doesn't take as much time that everybody could afford, or at least in a smaller amount so that you know their kids, kids can still have a special cookie for their birthday party or for their class treat or.

You know, cause I always try and think back of, you know, 15 years ago when I was a single mom, I couldn't have afforded \$3 a cookie for my kids to take for a birthday treat. So I want to make sure that I always keep in mind what I could do myself because I can't expect other people to do what I can't do myself or what I couldn't do at that time.

David Crabill: [00:29:51] Yeah, I totally understand. And I've heard similar things from other cottage food businesses. One thing I always think of though is just that you want to make sure that you're not getting burnt out, right? Cause I think part of the reason why it's sustainable is maybe because you have a part time job, your husband's working.

But, uh, if you can price in such a way that you can then do it full time, then you could potentially be making more cookies for more people and having more people enjoy those. And so you just want to make sure that you don't get burnt out so much that you're like, ah, I'm done with the cookies and then nobody gets them, right?

Tina Karnath: [00:30:24] Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's a fine line for figuring that out.

David Crabill: [00:30:29] I know. In terms of having those types of people get cookies, one thing I know you do is you offer very affordable classes for cookie decorating. I know probably not recently, but, can you talk a little bit about your classes and how that works.

Tina Karnath: [00:30:45] I've only done a couple for adults and, holidays. I offer a kit where I have. It's 18 cookies and three or four different colors of icing and then sprinkles. And I usually just sell the kit because some people like to just sit around with their kids or grandkids and just decorate it on, on their own and that's fine. So what I've done with my adult classes, I just take that kit and we, we sit down and you know, I put up a table in the living room when we just sit down and we pull out a set of those cookies and I just showed them how to decorate six of them, and then they took the other dozen home that they could decorate. I did that for a couple of holidays last year, and then in the spring I did a partnership with one of the education facilities in town, and I had 25 kids. We set up a series of four different classes that we picked a theme and I went in and we, we did the whole theme each week with those classes and those kids had a lot of fun. I think kids are a little bit, easier to teach just because they're purely in it for the end result. They, they, they aren't as picky about what their cookie looks like necessarily. But they, for me, it was, it was fun seeing them actually try. I was surprised by some of the students who actually tried harder that they really wanted their cookie to look like this or they really wanted to, they, they tried very hard.

Cause I, I have boys or at my two oldest are boys and they're. I don't want to say a stereotypical, just glob some frosting on there and eat it. So I wasn't sure what to expect with the boys in my class, but they actually, they were very impressive. They actually were very, very good listeners and very good learners.

So I was impressed by that. So I think I get more joy myself out of teaching the kids cause I see they get more joy out of the cookie eating the cookie, especially at the end.

David Crabill: [00:32:43] In terms of getting the cookies to look a certain way. I wanted to ask about what you do to make your cookies look so professional. Is that just a lot of practice and hand drawing or are you using stencils? What, what are the common techniques that you use to get your cookies to turn out so perfect.

Tina Karnath: [00:33:02] lot of, lot of trial and error. First, the first ones, there just weren't pictures of. Cause they were so awful looking. But it's a matter of a lot of looking at what other people are doing. On my Instagram account, mostly I follow other cookiers so I can see, you know, see what they're doing. Cause they do a lot of tutorials online and they're great at teaching, you know, Oh, shake the cookie and you'll get all the bubbles out or use a toothpick and you can smooth it out.

There's just a lot of little tips like that, that you just can't pick them all up to start. You have to, you just get in. I'm still learning things every day, you know, three years into this. I do have stencils that I make with my cricket when I have big orders that have a lot of lettering.

And I do that so that they're all uniform and then they all look the same. Or if people have, I do some logo work for companies too, in that way, I know that it will replicate and look exactly like what their logo, their logo is. So I do do some stencil work and with a stencil for cookies, you just cut it out of the plastic material and then you take, it's a thicker icing so it doesn't smear underneath of the stencil and you just run a hard, like a knife, flat surface over it and spread it out and you have to get an even consistency. But, it makes it a little bit faster if you have a lot of large orders rather than just hand piping that shape each time makes it a little bit faster.

I use that technique when I, I do a paint your own cookie where it's an outline. It's just the outline. It's not colored in, and then I put the different colors of the concentrated gel on the bottom and kids can then they can take, I sent a paintbrush with them and then they can paint their own style of cookie.

It gives them the shape on there. Those are popular. That's, those are also done with a stencil, so that they're all the same.

David Crabill: [00:34:55] Interesting to hear some of the more basic techniques that you use with your students. Do you have any tips for someone who is maybe starting a custom decorated cookie business or getting their feet off the ground or looking for to, to become more profitable with it.

Tina Karnath: [00:35:14] I guess it depends. If you ha if, if you have a lot more time, you probably could cause you have a lot more time to spend learning techniques and doing. You know, doing practice runs, get online and there's a lot of YouTube videos. Follow some of the, big name people cookies. [Lila Loa](#) that I had said earlier.

[Sweet Sugarbelle](#), she has a lot of stuff online. Pinterest is full of cookie ideas. If you Google icing tips, icing techniques. and, and then so it's just a lot of where you can watch so much of

it, but you're still gonna have to do it yourself to figure out, you know, icing consistencies cause it's not all the same icing you need thinner icing when you're doing the whole basic bottom of the cookie, and then you have different thicknesses for the different detail work that you do all of the different colors that you need to mix up. It's a lot of, Hands-on to get the feel for it. Like sometimes my husband will make icing for me and I can just tell by sitting watching him.

I can just tell him when to turn the mixer off. I know when it's mixed up without even looking at it, just because I've made so many hundreds of batches. But in the beginning I didn't, I didn't have any idea how long I needed to mix it. So it's just something that you learn, learn by practice and repetition.

David Crabill: [00:36:38] And one of the things that can be challenging with cookies is their shelf life cause they get stale pretty quick. How do you combat that?

Tina Karnath: [00:36:47] actually I don't think I've really had that problem cause I make them for a specific time for people to pick them up. I've only, I've just recently started doing popup shops outside on my front porch since, you know, with the shut down stuff, I could still stay open cause I was, food is essential but with limited contact.

So I just put some tables out outside in my front yard and I have enough space and I have a big driveway. I actually sold out for mother's day and I think, I think I did 24 dozen individually wrapped cookies and those sold out in four hours, I think. Once in awhile I'll have leftovers, but I don't, if it's more than three or four days, I just throw it away.

I don't sell anything or else my kids eat it so.

David Crabill: [00:37:37] I noticed that you have been doing some extra special things for the whole coronavirus situation. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Tina Karnath: [00:37:47] well that, that falls in line too with my sense of humor and the, you know, the state of the world. I have a senior in high school this year, and that's just kind of been our attitude is, you know, and I put it on my cookies, you know. F-you COVID cause you just really screwed up a lot of our plans this spring and going into summer.

So I feel like we just have honest feelings and I'm like, why not put it on a cookie? Cause I know other people are feeling that same way too. And it, seemed to hit, cause I sold 34 dozen of my different COVID cookie sets that I think people at that time, you know, I, I try and relay life to life to my cookies.

I have some more sets coming up with social distancing champions. And I do. I like to do a lot of puns. I have some father's day puns that are, I think going to be pretty cute this year. So I, I try and put what people are thinking into a cookie form because it's always more fun and makes it, makes it less hurtful maybe if it's a cookie, you know, like, Oh yeah, well that didn't go as planned, but you know, you put it on a cookie and it's like, my son's like, well, yeah. All right. I guess I missed my senior prom, but I guess whatever it is, what it is so.

David Crabill: [00:38:59] Well, and you can eat the cookie too. You can take out the vengeance on the cookie, right?

Tina Karnath: [00:39:04] there's, there's been a few posts where I've, I've done a cookie and I taking a picture of it with a bite out of it.

Cause it's like, yeah, that's how I feel about that. So that's kind of our attitude. I'll just take a bite out of it.

David Crabill: [00:39:16] I also noticed that you're, you've done some graduation cookies and I was particularly intrigued by this concept of the decision cookie. Can you talk about that?

Tina Karnath: [00:39:28] I have two children that have graduated now and. My first one had a normal graduation where they had a special, we had a breakfast and all of the kids wore a tee shirt for if they were going into a military branch or if they were going into college, or if they had picked a trade or a career school, you know, just, they tried to wear something that matched that.

And so this year my son didn't get that day, so I tried to again, put it into a cookie, what they were missing. So I offered cookies that were the logo of their school or the logo of, the major they were going to choose. I don't think I did any military this year, but I have done, Marines and air force and army in the past.

But, um, so I do the logo of the college and I did them on a giant, I think it was a six inch cookie. And their parents came and picked them up and handed them out. So that was fun. No, it doesn't replace, obviously all the things that they're missing of their senior year, but it was at least something on what for our school district, that was our decision day breakfast that we missed. But yeah. And I actually had people, friends who have kids from out of the area that actually requested them, came and got cookies from out of the area. Cause being a cottage Baker, I can't ship cookies with, without having the commercial license.

But you know, some people are willing to drive and come get them anyway. So that was fun.

David Crabill: [00:40:49] There are some States that do allow shipping. Do you know what, how practically that would work? I mean, custom decorated cookies are so fragile, typically.

Tina Karnath: [00:40:59] They're very fragile.

David Crabill: [00:41:00] would you feel confident shipping them and how would you do it?

Tina Karnath: [00:41:03] not really, I would probably only ship to people that I know and that people wouldn't be terribly upset if a couple arrived broken. I've as tests I've shipped. A couple to my nephew who lives in Illinois cause he's, for his birthdays and stuff when he was five and six, a couple of years ago I've, I've shipped and, and usually two or three out of a dozen are broken.

But since I'm just shipping them to him for fun, it's not a customer's order, you know? That's okay. But I, you know, if people are ordering like some, a lot of people sell online and I, I'd be

really nervous about shipping a dozen cookies. I'm not sure. It would take a lot of bubble wrap and a lot of expense, I think with shipping to get it there. I don't know if customers would be willing to pay that in shipping. Maybe some are, but me personally, I don't know.

David Crabill: [00:41:57] Well, I know that there are people, if you, you know, you make it up in the shipping cost, but I know there are people willing to pay at least \$5 for one of your cookies in some parts of the United States.

Tina Karnath: [00:42:08] I've heard that in other regions, I'm sure other regions are, but we're a lot of the farming community, and I'm just not sure

David Crabill: [00:42:17] I definitely understand for your market, you're a bit more rural for sure. You're not going to be able to price that highly, but I'm from California and I know that people pay high price for certain things, so

Tina Karnath: [00:42:30] and a lot of people, even people that I know who do cookies, they don't like to do logo work like that. Cause it's exact, if you don't get the logo right, you know, it's obvious. You can tell. So it's a little bit harder to make sure that you have it right.

David Crabill: [00:42:48] Well, you're obviously super busy with your cookie stuff. You also have a part time job. And I just was wondering, where do you see this business going into the future? Or where would you like it to go?

Tina Karnath: [00:43:01] That's kind of a tricky question cause we're actually exploring. We just looked this weekend at, you know, down the road there's a new Building going up. That's retail space for rent. So a lot of things to consider, especially in uncertain times right now. You know, do we want to venture out? Do I want to venture out?

Do I, you know, if I do full time, then I don't have the other income to rely on. You know, I'd like to say that I'm bigger or going to be bigger, but Michigan is also capped, with cottage bakers, the limit in Michigan is \$25,000. So once you hit that limit, you have to get a commercial license or you have to stop selling for the rest of the year.

So, yeah. So once, you know, if I commit to going bigger, I have to commit to going a lot bigger to pay for other expenses and to pay for overhead costs. So it's a lot to sit down and and figure out money wise, especially with having two kids in college, there's a lot of, a lot of stuff that's not cookie related necessarily that we'd have to figure out in order to go bigger, I guess.

David Crabill: [00:44:06] Yeah. Well, you certainly have the passion for it and in terms of the cookies, the quality. I think you could definitely do it just would be a matter of the finances. Like you talked about maybe making sure you have enough money to cover a couple of years just in case. And then you kind of have that to support your forward momentum when you jump into a storefront, but

Tina Karnath: [00:44:26] yeah. And in the midst of a pandemic, and then our region had a 500 year flood. It's like, Ooh, glad I hadn't ventured out three months ago trying to do that because we'll see. We'll see. Hopefully it's in the future.

David Crabill: [00:44:39] It takes some time, but, I definitely could see you in a storefront someday. You're probably getting pretty close to that point.

Tina Karnath: [00:44:47] Yeah. I would like to say I'm close to that, but yeah, I, I just have this hesitant bone in my body that's, yeah, not sure.

David Crabill: [00:44:57] Well. To wrap up this, I just want to ask, why do you love running your cottage food business.

Tina Karnath: [00:45:05] It's flexible. And I did freelance work from home before and then, I went back out into the workforce and then I just missed being in charge. Like with the cottage bakery, I can control how many orders I can take. I can control what I make. I can control the quality of what I make and I can fit it around what works best for me and my family.

So, as long as I don't have to count on it right now as a full time income, the flexibility is what worked for me and the fact that I didn't have anybody else to answer to. It was what I wanted and what I could do. I didn't have a boss telling me or limiting me or, any creative controls.

It was kind of whatever I felt like doing is what I was going to do today.

David Crabill: [00:45:53] And you haven't gotten tired of making cookies yet.

Tina Karnath: [00:45:56] Not yet. There's been a couple of days, but I've muscled through and, and then realize, you know, once you see the, how happy the people are with their cookies, or when you get emails back, you know, that it was a gift and Oh, they just loved it.

Or Oh, you know, gave them tears and you know, that that's what makes it all worthwhile. Making people happy. We need more things to make people happy in this world these days. So if I can be a part of it with a cookie, that makes me happy.

David Crabill: [00:46:22] Of course. Well Tina, thanks so much for coming on. Where can people find you and get in touch?

Tina Karnath: [00:46:28] I am on [Facebook at chunky chicken cookie company](#), and I'm also [on Instagram with chunky chicken cookie company](#), both of them. And you can send messages through both of those sites to me.

David Crabill: [00:46:41] Yeah. Send a direct message on Messenger or Instagram. Perfect. Well, thank you very much for coming on the show. It's just so fascinating to hear your story. And, thanks so much for jumping on here and telling us a little bit about your business.

Tina Karnath: [00:46:57] Hmm. Thanks for having me on.

David Crabill: [00:47:01] That wraps up the 10th episode of the Forrager podcast. I'm really impressed with the creativity and quality of all of Tina's cookies, and like I said, I strongly encourage you to check her out on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) to see many of her designs.

If you are interested in selling your own homemade custom decorated cookies, head on over to forrager.com to [check out your state's cottage food law](#).

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/10. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.