

# Turning A Kitchen Mistake Into A Thriving Business with Nicole Pomije

**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 Nicole Pomije. Nicole sells cookies, shaped like cupcakes with her business. The Cookie Cups, which is in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Again, these are not cupcakes. They're cookies that look like cupcakes. So a pretty unique concept for sure.

Nicole started her business from home in 2015. And since then, her business has significantly grown in both size and scope. She has now expanded to two brick and mortar storefronts. And as you will see, she has gone well beyond cookies.

So let's jump right in. Welcome to the show, Nicole. Nice to have you here.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:00:48] Thank you so much.

**David Crabill:** [00:00:50] Nicole. Can you take us back to the story about how you got this off the ground and started.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:00:57] Absolutely. So about six years ago now, I was literally baking in my home kitchen and, didn't have the right pan for chocolate chip cookies. And I did have this mini muffin tin. so. I made these chocolate chip cookies, cookie cups at the time. And, kind of just started making these cookie cups out of my house and serving them at, family gatherings and sort of just like started as a friends and family little thing. And then I decided to create a little business out of it. And I found out about the cottage food. Program in the state of Minnesota, and that you could literally run a business baking out of your house, which does amazing.

So, I signed up for the Minnetonka farmer's market and kind of just hit the ground, running, selling these cookie cups, doing some product development and, also like testing flavors and things that local people liked. And, at. Some point, I just realized that this could be bigger than just selling cookie cups at a farmer's markets.

So, you know, of course the next thing I did was sign up for a few more farmer's markets. And then I went on to places like the Renaissance festival and the uptown art fair, which are significantly bigger festivals in the Minneapolis area.

**David Crabill:** [00:02:20] So, when did you actually move into. To like a commercial space.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:02:24] Yeah. So, kind of along this development road, my husband and I moved to a small town in around Lake Minnetonka. and we would drive by this empty space literally every day. And I. I guess this had to be like 2017 and it was this old like rundown building. And it was just so cute and small, and I just felt like maybe we could turn it into something amazing and sort of revitalize the space.

and that was our first location in Navarre, uh, which is right outside of Wayzata? So That was in 2017. Well, it was toward the end of 2017. It was about a nine month remodel there. I mean, we literally had to gut the whole place. and we opened in April of 2018,

**David Crabill:** [00:03:15] So it was only like two maybe three years, after you started your business, so that's pretty quick.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:03:21] Yeah. So it was, you know, it was a little bit of a leap of faith. but I learned a lot and we did really well that first year in Navarre. And, I feel like really just kind of brightened up what was sort of a rundown, little building. and then as time went on, I'm always kind of driving around, like looking at empty retail spaces and just, you know, daydreaming.

And I came across this little location in Chanhassen, not too long after, we were doing so well in the first location. I just, you know, I figured if the space Was a great opportunity with a, with a new area of people. Why not expand? So in October, 2019, we ended up opening the doors to our second location in Chanhassen, which has been well, was really successful in the beginning.

And then of course, We've had a COVID year here, but, we were booking birthday parties and cooking classes and just, everything was amazing. I mean, we, this location is just, it's very different from the other location, not looks wise, but just the, the customer base is different, you know, and every area is going to be a little bit different based on who lives there.

but we had found a lot of success in kids, birthday parties and corporate like team building, cooking classes, and just any kind of cooking classes in this location

**David Crabill:** [00:04:52] Yeah, no, I noticed you've, you've expanded into so many different things. Catering classes, parties, and events and everything.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:05:00] we have. Yeah. It's, it's really come a long way from my days in my pink farmer's market tent.

**David Crabill:** [00:05:06] Yeah, and I do want to get into the commercial side of things, but I wanted to ask you about the beginning because you, you mentioned your story and it's a kind of a cool, fun, unique story about how you. Started this almost by accident. You, you mistakenly used, uh, these cupcake pans to make your cookies cause you didn't have the right pan. and I've heard that story before, cause it's on your website and you've been on a, a new spot in a TV show and I've heard it just in reading your stuff. I've, I've seen you share that story multiple times. And at this point, I'd imagine you've probably shared that story with newcomers thousands of times over the years.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:05:45] Yeah. You know, sometimes I just like can't believe it myself. That this has come so far in the past, like five years. It's just so crazy to think about. And even this year, we've just come so far just changing our whole direction. So it's been, really interesting, but you know, positive overall, I would say.

**David Crabill:** [00:06:04] Well, that story reminded me of like the whole toll house, Ruth Wakefield story about how she mistakenly created chocolate chip cookies, which isn't actually a true story, but it's something that a lot of people know about. And I was thinking about the power of story. And I guess the question is, do you feel like you would have been as successful as quickly if you didn't have that story to share to newcomers or put another way, how important has that origin story been for your business?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:06:38] I mean, I think that my story just makes me, relatable to other. People, um, you know, just on a really basic level, it just shows that I'm, that I'm human and that I literally like spend the day baking in my kitchen sometimes at home. And, um, I'm not this robot working for a corporation. just on a different sort of playing field.

I think it just humanizes the brand and, it really makes people feel this connection to us. And, you know, if we didn't have that story, I, I would probably have another one. And who knows it may be better or worse? I, I don't know. I just know that this is what happened to me.

**David Crabill:** [00:07:20] I can definitely see that. And I, part of the reason I asked that is kind of twofold. I think some people new entrepreneurs come and they might not share their story enough, or they might not infuse their personality into their brand or their family into their brand. As I've seen, you've done so well, or the other side of it is they might go, man, I wish I had a story like that. And if I had a story like that, Then I would be successful. they're kind of two sides of the same coin. Do you have any thoughts about one or both of those sides?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:07:50] I mean it, it's not like you can make up a story for the start of your business. I mean, you can tweak it in a way that might sound a little more exciting, but your story is it's who you are. and I would say to anyone that is starting a business, you know, like rock your story. I mean, use it to your power and that's, what's going to make you successful is like your ability to be honest and, really tell your story in a way that's appealing to, the people you reach or people you didn't even know you were trying to reach.

**David Crabill:** [00:08:23] I noticed that I think in one of the pictures of your shop, you even have like a picture of your family up

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:08:30] I do.

**David Crabill:** [00:08:32] Was that uncomfortable for you to put a picture of your family? Or are you just a very outgoing person?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:08:38] no, I'm pretty outgoing. Um, You know, I mean, I don't, I try not to use my family, in everything that I do, but, my, you know, my husband has been there by my side throughout this whole journey. So he's very much a part of this, He's been there since the beginning. And, my daughter was literally born during the first store renovation.

So I was pregnant the entire renovation and I mean, she's was literally born into this. So she was very much a part of it as well.

**David Crabill:** [00:09:08] So, how do you make the time when you're pregnant? You have a young one. I have a, I have a 17 month old and another coming along the way very soon. And I've heard from a lot of new, new entrepreneurs. Like they have young families. How do you have the time for not just a cottage food business, but now a commercial business with multiple locations. How do you do it?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:09:33] So I'm really good at multitasking. and I'm very process oriented, which, you know, It's just about making time and sort of strategizing the process, you know, and. I think that where there's a will, there's a way. And if you want to accomplish something like building a bakery, like you can do it.

It just has to be really thought out and organized. and a lot of the, what I did with the first location, you know, the reason it took nine months is because I really didn't have experience building, a space like that. And I was also learning as I went, so like forget pregnancy. Like I also had no clue what I was doing, when it came to that side of this, I mean, I, I knew how to bake, but, you know, construction is a whole different thing.

With the second location, I knew exactly what to do. So it was just, like snapping my fingers. And we went from point A to point Z and we opened the doors. It was so much easier. And you know, you just, you have to take in everything that you learn and like learn from your mistakes and just build on it.

And, for me, I'm still learning as I go, especially with this year, um, with all the changes that we've had to endure, but. you know, you take everything in stride and you just, it doesn't matter what happened yesterday or today. you still have to just think about what's going to happen tomorrow every single day.

And that's how you build a business.

**David Crabill:** [00:11:04] For sure. now I do want to talk about these cookie cupcakes because it's a pretty unique concept. And, um, can you just describe a little bit about what they are, what size they are? and what kind of flavors you offer?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:11:21] We actually have a catering menu of like 35 different flavors now, but we make, we make between eight and nine of them on a day-to-day basis, which are chocolate chip or fudge brownie. We have a white chocolate caramel, we have an Apple pie, a strawberry, we have a banana chocolate chunk. We have cookies and cream and we have vanilla bean and lemon drop now on the menu as well.

however, during the holiday time we have, a menu of thanksgiving flavors, and then we'll have a menu of, more like holiday centric flavors. Like our gingerbread will be back. And then we'll, we even have a few new year's Eve flavors planned for this year. but yeah, I mean, anytime it, you know, if someone wants to place a catering order or just order something special, they can order from any of our flavors on our catering menu.

**David Crabill:** [00:12:09] Yeah, I did see that catering menu and it includes even a lot of savory options like Mac and cheese and a cupcake and stew and a cupcake. And. All sorts of things I've never seen in a cupcake before or cupcake form before.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:12:24] Yeah, exactly. So we have created this whole line of appetizer minis. we don't only make the minis, but the appetizer minis have been super popular. Like people order, a box of like mini taco cops and pizza cups and Mac and cheese cups for their super bowl party or for, For, you know, anniversaries, birthdays, anything like that.

You know, obviously we're in a different kind of year now, and there's not as many parties going on, but, those have been really popular and successful for like just all sorts of events.

**David Crabill:** [00:12:56] Yeah. So that's where you've gotten to this amazing array of options. But where did you actually start with your business? How many different options did you have?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:13:06] You know, in the beginning, when I was just doing farmer's markets, I had like, I dunno, I had like three flavors and then I would test flavors like at a farmer's market. I would bring like my chocolate chip, my fudge brownie, and maybe like the strawberry or the Apple pie. And then I would. Have like a test flavor, like the white chocolate Caramel or, you know, maybe like a pumpkin cheesecake if it was during the holidays. so it was just so small compared to what we have now. It's just so crazy.

**David Crabill:** [00:13:37] And I was wondering if. I mean, it's still a cookie it's just in the shape of a cupcake. It's in a little cupcake liner. Like, is it that just a marketing strategy or is there actually a benefit or difference in having the cookie in a cupcake form?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:13:55] Yeah it's actually not a marketing strategy. When you bake, so when we make our cookie cups, in the cupcake tin. They, they obviously bake a little bit different than if you're making them on a flat sheet. So when you make cookies at home, you're throwing them on a flat sheet pan typically. And, like when they're fresh out of the oven, they're gooey.

They're amazing. but once they sit on the counter for a little bit, they really like harden really fast. So with our cookie cups, they tend to just keep this chewy texture. So they stay a little bit softer generally. And they're just, I mean, they're cuter. What can I say?

**David Crabill:** [00:14:34] Now it is a very unique idea, a unique concept. I have seen a lot of cottage food businesses. I have never seen this cookie in a cupcake concept, and I was just wondering, if anybody's ever tried to steal this idea, or if you've noticed anyone trying to steal this idea, or if that's something that you were worried about over time.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:14:58] You know, in the beginning, when I was doing farmer's markets, I, I was, you're always a little bit. Not concerned, but you always want to protect your brand. So there would be a lot of people like that worked for TCBY or that worked for like, some of the bigger food chains, like in the corporate headquarters in places like that.

And they would ask me where I got my packaging and, you know, just different questions about my brand. And then I would never share that information because that's like our special sauce. So, now at this point I'm not like too afraid of people trying to steal our design because, or our brand, because, we're just a little bit more branded and we're more

established now, but yeah, definitely in the beginning, I was a little bit, more protective of everything.

**David Crabill:** [00:15:47] And do you think he needed to be.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:15:50] I don't know. I mean, I've never directly seen anyone trying to copy what I'm doing. but you never know. I mean, you never know who's going to pop up and like, try to copy you. I mean, it's just the, it's the name of the game it's with any business.

**David Crabill:** [00:16:05] I, I did want to ask also about the size of your cookies, cause they're really small. And I don't know if you've experimented with sizes. They also have, I think, a pretty low price point because they're so small. And can you talk about the pricing and the size and how you've experimented with that over time?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:16:24] Have you ever had a mini cupcake?

**David Crabill:** [00:16:26] I have, I had one yesterday.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:16:29] Yep, exactly. There you go. So they're the same size as mini cupcakes. they're a little more dense. So you get a little, you get a little more full off of them. I would say because, you know, just cupcake batter tends to be a little bit lighter, like a cake batter.

but we do sell them in packs of six. So, you know, people come into the stores and they kind of pick and choose what they want off of our bakery counter and build their little custom six pack. there's a reason that they're sold in packs of six, because one just isn't enough.

**David Crabill:** [00:16:59] And did you ever try to do like a normal size cupcake

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:17:04] So we don't make normal size cookie cups. Um, we can, it's just not cost-effective, it's more cost-effective for us to sell them the way we're selling them.

**David Crabill:** [00:17:15] and what, what is the pricing of cookie cups?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:17:19] They come in packs of six for \$5.99. Um, and. When you hit 2 dozen, they go down a little bit. They come down to about 86 cents a cup. so our party packs, we call them our \$21.95 for two dozen.

**David Crabill:** [00:17:36] Now there's also the, other side of it being unique. It's unique and novel, and maybe people want to copy it, but on the other side of it, yeah. It's that it's an unknown item. Right? So people aren't even looking for something like this. And has that been a challenge for you to address, especially as you were getting started?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:17:56] You know, I think in a way, I mean, we've built a pretty big local following here in Minnesota. I think most people have heard of us. They may not have been to our stores, but they've definitely heard of us at some point by now. we've done a really great job of, kind of working the media circuit and getting the word out about the brand over the past five years.

the next challenge for us is building more of a national following, which we're working on now. And, You know, it's just, it is really interesting because we've gone back to like branding, because when you're reaching a new audience, you have to keep in mind that they literally have never heard of us.

They don't know what we do. They don't know who we are. you know, they didn't see me at a farmer's market five years ago, so, you know, I wouldn't call it a challenge necessarily, but we're definitely going back to the drawing board a little bit and just sort of. Trying to simplify the brand for people that have never heard of us.

**David Crabill:** [00:18:55] One of the unique things about Minnesota is that it's got a pretty low sales limit. For their cottage food law. It's I think, I think it's \$18,000 if I recall correctly. And I was wondering if that was ever something that was a consideration when you started your business, if you ever hit it, or if you ignored it, or if that had anything to do with moving into a commercial kitchen.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:19:21] So I never, I don't think I ever hit 18,000 as a cottage food producer. I might've come close to more like the \$15,000 Mark. but it depends what you're, it depends on where you're selling to, because I kind of. was hitting both directions here. Like I was a cottage food producer when I was selling at the farmer's markets, but I would use, a commercial kitchen for places like the Renaissance festival type of things. So, it was kind of divided. I was doing two different things at the same time because I didn't really, I didn't want to like be limited to what I can do.

**David Crabill:** [00:20:01] You kind of progressed into the commercial space more gradually

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:20:05] Yeah. I worked in a couple different commercial kitchens, for certain events and certain catering things. And, for the smaller events like farmer's market, I, had my cottage food license and went that route.

**David Crabill:** [00:20:20] How do you think it would have been if you had been doing the cottage food thing and then tried to jump into a storefront without any other commercial kitchen experience.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:20:32] I mean, I didn't really have a ton of commercial, kitchen experience. I mean, it, especially not with building one, but, you know, I mean, I was a little bit familiar with some of the, Commercial equipment and things like that. But I think I was still a little bit naive when I was first starting out and building the location. I, like I said, I just, it was new to me. And, I learned along the way.

**David Crabill:** [00:21:00] Do you think you jumped into the storefront too early?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:21:04] No, definitely not. I think it was the perfect time. Um, the perfect, opportunity arose and, it was just, you know, I wouldn't, it wasn't easy by any means, but, I think I needed that sort of learning experience to get to where I am today.

**David Crabill:** [00:21:23] How did you know that you were ready to take that next step?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:21:27] Oh, I, I still don't know if I'm ready to take any of these steps. I'm just doing things that, you know, that I think matter and will make people happy. We're we happen to be in like a really happy business. you know, what's better than sending your friend, like fresh baked cookies or, or like a baking kit at home.

I mean, Everything that we do is like pink and purple. So we're literally in the business of making people happy. And, I mean, how can you not be ready for something like that? I mean, give or take all the challenges.

**David Crabill:** [00:21:57] Yeah, well, it can be a challenge. And in particular, you you've, you see so much creativity on your website. You've done so many different things with cookie cup bouquets, and now you have all these savory cups and you've got coffee and catering and, and now these new kits to deal with the pandemic. And I was just wondering if if that's because of your creativity and that's something that you wanted to do and an intentional way of growing your business, or if you think, you know, if it would have been, if there's something about just focusing on one core item, like just doing the cookie cups, instead of having all these different options, do you get kind of get what I'm asking there?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:22:41] I sure do. So, the answer to that is that this is new. We only have two locations. We are very much still at the beginning of this brand and what the lifespan of this will look like. and this is the time to test things, to see what works and what doesn't work. So like, that's what we're doing.

and all these ideas that we come up with, you know, are they going to stand the test of time? I have no idea. but what I do know is we'll know the answer to that. in the next couple of years when we're in more of a, more of an established, position

**David Crabill:** [00:23:19] how many employees do you currently have

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:23:23] I have seven right now.

**David Crabill:** [00:23:26] and is that seven because is that a reduced number because of the whole pandemic or is that as much as you've ever

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:23:34] Yeah, I have a revolving number because, we employ like high school students and college students too. So, I mean, we've, you know, at the end of the summer, we typically have some employees leave and we hire new ones and it's just sort of, That's just the way, I mean, we do have some that are full-time, but, a lot of our employees are younger and, just kind of learning and getting experience as well.

So, you know, we, we adapt to what we need. we only have two locations, not 20, so we're pretty comfortable where we are. and we won't be hiring most likely till after the holidays.

**David Crabill:** [00:24:08] Did you have any prior management experience? Like what were you doing before this to prepare you to run a business like this?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:24:16] Um, I own a marketing firm that I've run into, uh, started from the ground up eight years ago.



**David Crabill:** [00:24:22] Okay. Now that makes a lot of sense. Cause I've noticed you do really good job with your marketing and relationships in particular, you've, you've gotten on TV, you know, some pretty significant marketing avenues. Is that a proactive thing? Like what do you recommend for people who are trying to put themselves out there and get noticed?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:24:43] It is it's, um, it's very proactive. It's, very strategized. But, for people that are looking to do something like that on their own with that experience, you absolutely can. I mean, I would. Start with the basics and set up some social media pages and build a local following, you know, tell, you know, if you're selling cookies at a farmer's market or pies or whatever you're selling, give them a flyer that says to follow you on the Facebook page and, you know, be proactive about telling them where you're going to be selling this weekend and what you're going to be selling, tell them you can order for Thanksgiving and things like that. So I think just kind of, Making sure that people can find you is really important.

**David Crabill:** [00:25:26] How much of your time would you say is dedicated to marketing or. Expanding your reach for the business versus running the day to day operations.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:25:39] Um, you know, it's tough because every day is different. so it's really tough to say some days, like I'm all in, I'm a hundred percent doing, You know, cookie cups, stuff like ordering and managing our marketing team, managing our bakery staff. Like just, it totally depends on other days. Um, other days, none other days I'm fully staffed and I don't even have to be in the bakery.

**David Crabill:** [00:26:04] I initially wanted to start a cookie business and eventually didn't because, a variety of reasons, but one of the challenging things about a cookie business is shelf life. Because if you're not using stabilizers or preservatives, then usually cookies. Don't have a lot of shelf life. How have you dealt with that? Particularly when you're doing the markets and maybe didn't have as known expectations of consistency of orders.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:26:33] Yeah, it's a tough thing. But, as you're doing the market circuit, you kind of get a feel after a few weeks of, you know, I would say an average, say an average unit sale. so I generally knew like about what I wanted to make for every market. and I made everything super fresh the same day. unless it was something like the Renaissance festival that was a little bit more challenging.

We needed a lot more inventory because it had to last through the whole weekend, not just, you know, one afternoon, in which case, I mean, we do, you know, our cookie cups are good for. I would say two or three, depending on the flavor of some kind of hold better than others, but I would bake either two days before or the day before, and if I had to rebake, if I sold everything on Saturday, I would just come home and stay up late and bake. And that's it. That's how you do it.

**David Crabill:** [00:27:34] Well, you certainly come a very long way. You went from cottage business to doing, you know, a little bit of commercial stuff to doing a storefront, then another storefront, and then the pandemic hit. And I know, um, a lot of cottage food bakers

in particular have done pretty well during this pandemic. some have seen their bakeries explode, but they don't have overhead, they don't have a commercial kitchen rent to pay. They don't have employees to take care of. And I know it's been hard on you. So can you just share a little bit about what it's been like to deal with this year?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:28:10] Um, it's been, it's been crazy. It's just, I think the craziest was back in March when nobody really knew what was going on and, you know, for all we knew we were all going to get this virus and get really sick, but, We didn't really know what it was, what the extent of it was. And we just kind of quickly shut the stores down and, just got to work re-strategize three strategizing and, um, canceling all of our cooking classes.

It was just, it was, you know, just shy of a, well, it wasn't really shy. It was basically a total nightmare. It was like, it was like a bad dream. but we quickly got to work and. In early April, we started, sort of developing this new product line, the shippable at home baking kits. And, we, I think we did a really good job of just putting this together in a really professional way.

And we just launched them in September and they've been selling, I mean, we're. You know, we sell them on our website. We sell them on Etsy. We sell them on our Amazon store. I mean, we're just trying to sell as many as we can, and just see where this takes us, you know, see what the next step will be.

**David Crabill:** [00:29:26] Yeah. And I saw those and they are really marketed very well. They look super impressive. And you have two kits, you got the, the cookie. You know, unicorn baking kit and you've got the pizza kit, which isn't even related to cupcakes. how did you go about deciding on those two products to focus on?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:29:48] For our customers who really know our brand, they know that. The pizza cake is on brand. because that is one of our biggest sellers with kids, birthday parties in our store is our pizza make parties. So, that's where that came from and we want it to be able to bring, something home with people that they could still do at home and kind of get our experience of being in the store, but not being here. And of course our unicorn cookie cup baking kit, that's, you know, an extension of our direct line of cookie cups. It's a special recipe that you can't get in the store and you can only make them with a kit.

**David Crabill:** [00:30:26] Yeah the cookie cups made perfect sense to me, it was the pizza kit that I didn't quite see the connection, but I, I can understand how you do these classes and events over time and parties. and I did want to ask you about the Amazon side of things. Cause you've now launched on to Amazon and Amazon has, is kind of a beast. So what have you learned about actually putting a food product onto Amazon?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:30:50] Well I haven't learned much yet. It's too new to tell, um, however they are selling and we're just hoping to sell thousands of them over the next year.

**David Crabill:** [00:30:59] And in terms of pricing, I mean, I could go out and get a pizza at a pizzeria for like \$20 and. if I recall correctly, I can go onto Amazon and get a pizza kit that has, not only all the ingredients for a pizza, but an apron, a baking sheet, a rolling pin. There's just all these things like a spatula and it's \$50.

And then you have it currently discounted to \$35 and I'm just thinking. How does this line up in terms of pricing? It seems like kind of an amazing price for, like a low price in my mind for all of the stuff that's in this kit.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:31:40] You know, I agree. Um, I, you know, I think it's really important to be competitive. And, I mean, while we want to offer a unique package, we also have to keep in mind that, You know, I think that we're kind of at the top of the market right now for kids baking kits. And, there's a lot, there, there are cheaper options. They're not as good as what we're providing, but, we just want to be competitive with what else, the other stuff that's out there.

**David Crabill:** [00:32:06] I guess I was wondering if you've had to go out and, you know, source and, and put these kits together through a China manufacturer or something like that, to be competitive.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:32:17] No, we actually, um, we co-pack everything in house, in our bakery, we're using our Chanhassen location right now to do that. So that's what our employees, spend, I would say 50% of their time doing right now.

**David Crabill:** [00:32:30] Yeah. I mean, it's remarkable to see how much you have adapted and grown and done over the past five years. And I was just thinking about how it all started with this really basic idea of a cookie. Did you ever envision, uh, when you made that mistake years ago or created this little cupcake cookie that it would turn into something like this.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:32:56] I don't, you know, I didn't know what it was going to turn into. I didn't know if we were going to have like 55 bakeries or, I really never envisioned like the cooking class side of it being as popular as it was. I sort of envisioned us just having this like goofy bakery, where everyone would want to come and like try our cookie cups. But that's really taken on a life of its own. And, I'm really proud of what we've accomplished in that respect

**David Crabill:** [00:33:24] When you started the business, did you have this vision for it becoming a storefront?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:33:30] I absolutely did. Yes.

**David Crabill:** [00:33:33] What was it like when that vision was realized, like the first day that your storefront opened?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:33:39] Oh my gosh. So the first day was like, The best. It was the best craziest day ever. we had a line out the door the entire day. I mean, for a second, I was a little nervous. I think we opened at like seven or 8:00 AM because we used to do breakfast in our locations, pre COVID. we literally had like this, this moment of like silence.

Right when we opened at like eight or seven, whatever it was. And then all of a sudden, like the first person came in and then the second person came in and it just, literally, we had

people walking in the door the entire day and it was something I'll just never forget because I worked so hard to build, that space.

And it was just, it was so overwhelming, like, Just waiting and waiting to be able to open the doors and then having just such a success off the bat was, just really this like this aha experience, you know, an a moment, my mom she actually helped me, run the store that first day.

**David Crabill:** [00:34:45] That's very cool. and as you got your business going, I know you've expanded into all these different areas. And I was just wondering, do you have, but before the pandemic hit, what was the percentage of your business say, you know, from direct product sales in store to the revenue from classes to doing birthday parties and events, like how did that all shake out in terms of what percentage of business those different aspects were taking and catering would be another one.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:35:18] I would say 50% of our business, pre COVID was walk-in traffic. And the other 50% was divided between cooking classes, birthday parties and, catering.

**David Crabill:** [00:35:30] At what point did you, I mean, you were focused on the cookies, right? When did you say, you know what? It would be a really great idea. If we just started putting regular dinner, food into cupcakes, how did that, how did that transition or that idea come about?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:35:47] so that was something that I came up with, before we opened our location, because I wasn't just going to open a bakery with like a cookie. So you have to have options. when we first opened our first location, we had a really small menu. We started with our Mac and cheese, our meat and potato cups.

We had cornbread and we had, Maybe one, one or two other options, for our savory. So the idea was someone could come in and get like a Mac and cheese cup and a cookie cop in a glass of milk and, you know, kind of hang out, kind of like, you know, a little bit of a Starbucks type of place, but more kid friendly.

**David Crabill:** [00:36:25] And as you started getting noticed, I mean, as I mentioned earlier, you got on TV shows. I actually, the one I saw, I thought it was a national TV show, but it looks like it was a local one very well, highly produced. what was it like to go on TV for the first time? Or is that something you already had experience with?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:36:44] Well, I'm not sure which video or TV

**David Crabill:** [00:36:47] was looking at the Jason show.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:36:49] that was not my first time on TV. I've been on TV several times before for my other brands. so I would just say it was, I mean, it was exciting going on for this brand, but I had also done several local TV shows before that for the cookie cups, making, literally making cookie cups on air.

So, You know, Jason show was great. he's just, he's the best, cause he's like so funny. and it's just more of a, like a talk show type of thing than like a news show. That's the only difference I would say. But, I've been on TV for years for several different things.

**David Crabill:** [00:37:24] Well, I'm not surprised because you were very comfortable on the Jason show and it looked like you had quite a bit of experience. What would you recommend for somebody who wants to get onto a news spot or something? Are there any strategies you have for making those connections or getting on TV to promote your brand?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:37:45] I would say, reach out to your local audience. So, you know, aside from TV, when we first opened our, our first location, we established some really great relationships with like some, some little local newspapers around town. Who that's literally their job is to talk about local businesses and local things happening.

So we were able to, get some really good news articles written about us in that way. And that kind of drove, some other, writers and media outlets toward us as well. And how anyone can, I mean, anyone can do that. If your opening, a storefront, if you're at a farmer's market doing catering, I mean, I would say reach out to your local news people, and give them the information, like tell them what you're doing and see if there's something that you can do with them.

**David Crabill:** [00:38:34] Yep. Good advice. And, if you could think back on the past five years, are there any stories that jump out to you, memorable moments as you've built this business?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:38:48] Um, anything specific you're looking for? There are so many moments.

**David Crabill:** [00:38:53] I, I just, sometimes somebody has like a favorite story or, or a customer that they really impacted or a moment that will always they'll always remember.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:39:04] You know, I will tell you one thing. Years ago, I did this little spirit of the lakes festival in mound, Minnesota, and I met a lot of local people, and sold them cookie cups and. You know, just really got a lot of face time with some of our customers who are still customers today, like four or five years later.

Um, I think it was last holiday season. We got a call for about 20 dozen cookie cups, for an Amazon, Shipping warehouse for the drop for the drivers of the Amazon trucks. And the lady remembered talking to me at that festival five years before. So like, you never know who your next customer is going to be.

It's really interesting to see who remembers you from like the earlier days and I mean, these are. You know, I mean, people do remember, they remember like that you spent time talking to them and they remember the whole experience. So I would say that was a really positive, memorable experience of mine.

**David Crabill:** [00:40:11] Yeah, that's very cool. So you've been obviously taken this, so far, far, and you've had a struggling year and you're still persisting. And I know you've had a

significant decrease in sales. what drives you to keep this business going? And why do you love running your business so much?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:40:33] You know, I think that, um, with every business you're going to have your challenges, especially running your own business. It's a whole different, you know, every day is a new challenge, in any kind of business that you start. so. COVID or no, COVID, you know, business ownership is a really, it's a really strange and difficult thing sometimes. It also can be really rewarding, but. I don't think that if you have a challenge, you know, whether in, with what's going on now or, in any challenge that you have in the life of the business, I don't think that's a reason to close down your business and give up. I think it's a reason to reevaluate what you're doing and restrategize and, you know, just wake up the next day with a new attitude and, Just keep on keeping on.

**David Crabill:** [00:41:27] Yep. Well, I can see why you're successful. Uh, anyway, thanks so much for jumping on today, Nicole. And how can people find you and reach out?

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:41:37] so they can actually, they can find us, on our website at [www.thecookiecups.com](http://www.thecookiecups.com). They can also email us at [thecookiecupsstore@gmail.com](mailto:thecookiecupsstore@gmail.com). Or they can come to one of our locations. If they're local here, in Chanhassen or Wayzata or they can find us on Amazon.

**David Crabill:** [00:41:57] Perfect. Well, thanks so much for sharing. And I think people learned a lot from you today. Thanks so much.

**Nicole Pomije:** [00:42:03] Thank you so much for having me.

**David Crabill:** [00:42:06] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. Nicole's business has grown and changed a lot over the years, but if there's one thing that ties it all together, it's that she's never afraid to try new things and put herself out there. And I think that adaptability has been key to her success.

If you are thinking about starting a cottage food business, head on over to [forrager.com](http://forrager.com) to check out your state's cottage food law.

For more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/22](http://forrager.com/podcast/22). Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.