

# A Little Bit of Joy with Tracy Mancuso

**David Crabill:** Welcome to the Forrager podcast, where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs, about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today I'm talking with Tracy Mancuso. Tracy lives near Medford, Oregon, and sells custom cakes with her bakery Sugar Rush. Now, Oregon has two different laws for people who want to sell their homemade food.

And Tracy has actually used both of them to grow her cake business over the past decade. For many years, she used her business partners, domestic kitchen, which was licensed and inspected by the ag department. And then when her business partner left the business in 2019, Tracy started using Oregon's more basic cottage food law from her own kitchen. Tracy made her first custom cake for her daughter's second birthday back in 2010. And as she says, it's been a wild and crazy ride since then when she merged forces with her business partner back in 2013, their business quickly exploded with tons of wedding cake orders, and they had a hard time keeping up.

And to this day Tracy's business continues to grow far beyond what she ever dreamed of all the more impressive Tracy has managed to grow this business while raising two young kids, one of whom has special needs. I was definitely inspired by her story, and I'm sure you will be as well.

And with that, let's jump right into this episode. Welcome to the show, Tracy. Nice to have.

[00:01:25] **Tracy Mancuso:** Hi, nice to be here.

[00:01:26] **David Crabill:** Tracy, can you take us back to the beginning of this journey? How did this all get started?

[00:01:32] **Tracy Mancuso:** This actually started with my daughter's second birthday. So it was this time of year It was 2010, and I had been watching a lot of cake boss and I wanted to make something fantastic for her birthday. And I picked out a design online and just started going. We had a local cake store in the area, and I got a lot of advice from them and some ingredients and made a three tier cake.

My first cake I've ever made and it came out pretty good for a beginner cake and everybody at the party loved it so much that they started asking me if I could do their kid's parties. So I've just did a little bit for friends and family. And then another friend asked if I could start doing cake pops.

And I started mainly doing those for the next couple years. Just dabbling in cake pops a little bit of cakes and not really too serious because I had another job and I had little kids and it just spurred on from there.

[00:02:34] **David Crabill:** So uh, I can relate to that because my son actually turned two this year and I did my first cake

[00:02:42] **Tracy Mancuso:** Oh,

[00:02:42] **David Crabill:** him. And it turned out pretty well, but I don't know if I'll be making a business out of it. Let's put it that way. So,

[00:02:49] **Tracy Mancuso:** right.

Yeah. We were surprised at the amount of a mess that it took. And I think her cake, we were up my husband and I were up until the midnight two or three in the morning working on it.

[00:03:00] **David Crabill:** yeah, it. sounds familiar.

[00:03:02] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yes.

[00:03:04] **David Crabill:** so you have two kids, right. And was this your oldest?

[00:03:08] **Tracy Mancuso:** This was my, this was my youngest.

[00:03:11] **David Crabill:** Okay. And so how, how old is your other one

[00:03:14] **Tracy Mancuso:** he would have been four.

[00:03:16] **David Crabill:** So you're kind of kicking off this side business hobby. You didn't know it at the time, but it was when your kids were very young.

[00:03:24] **Tracy Mancuso:** yes.

[00:03:25] **David Crabill:** So when did the business really start to take off?

[00:03:28] **Tracy Mancuso:** in 2012. I actually started working with another person and we started the sugar rush business together before then. We both had our separate businesses. She worked at the cake store and we got together and said, you know, we really want to both start doing wedding cakes, but we don't want to do it alone.

So we said, well, let's, let's join our forces and do this full-time and we both quit our day jobs and went for that from there.

[00:03:58] **David Crabill:** Why did you decide to join forces with her? I mean, did you just feel like you'd be more successful together or were you best friends or something? I mean, what caused you to merge together?

[00:04:10] **Tracy Mancuso:** It was something where we knew we could take with our skills, that we could take what we had forward, but we needed the support of each other to go forward. you know, we're both on uncharted territory And my reasoning for doing a business from home was because I couldn't afford daycare anymore.

I was working part-time at the county and sending the kids to daycare and then they would have afterschool care. And I thought, you know, I could skip all of that if I was home with them.

it was kind of funny. Cause in 2012 in may I ended up getting fired. I had a temporary position. I got fired from it and I called my husband. I'm like, well, I'm baking full-time, it's a sign.

He's like, oh, I don't know. I'm like, oh yes, this is happening. I'm not doing daycare anymore. We're done. And it, it worked. I mean, when I know. I know. So it seemed to work out really well that way.

[00:05:07] **David Crabill:** I did see somewhere where you posted that one of your children. As autism and I mean, that's more difficult and it just kind of amazing to me that you're able to build up a business with these two kids not only being young, but one with special needs.

[00:05:23] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yeah. And his was part of the reason because school was so overwhelming for him, but sending him from school to daycare

was nearly impossible. So we started having, when he started kindergarten and then into first grade, we started having a lot of behavioral issues with him and his, a lot of meltdowns and stuff.

So it really was for me the only choice to be home with them. But if I wanted to stay busy and not just be a stay-at-home mom. Which would make me bored. I need to stay busy um, that I would continue this from home and then be his support system. And it's continued like that. He's in high school now and he continues to have a lot of emotional needs.

I'm constantly just this morning, I'm interacting with his teachers and trying to figure out his schoolwork and how to motivate him. So it's been a constant battle, but he knows that when he's done with school, he can come home and relax and he's home with mom. And they know that I work weird hours.

So sometimes when they come home, I'll be working and they're fine with that. But I think just having that security to know that he can come home and he doesn't have to worry about f ending for himself or having another person watch him, it's really helped with his development and his success.

[00:06:49] **David Crabill:** Well, it is commendable and quite impressive that you've been able to even be able to focus on a business and not only that, but do so well with it. I mean, I've seen, it's grown to, you know, you have thousands of Facebook followers now and um, is the business partner still involved with the business?

[00:07:07] **Tracy Mancuso:** Nope. She had some life changes and it became mine in 2019. And so I've been running it on my own since January, 2019. And I actually having all the experience from the past. It has not been a struggle to go on it alone. It's actually been really nice. I rebranded a little bit and I'm able to focus on.

More of my vision for where I want my business to go. So it's, it's been a good uh, transition.

[00:07:38] **David Crabill:** So I know that you started your business under the name, delicious delights in 2010. And then when you merged with your business partner, you went under the name sugar rush in 2013. And I was just wondering, where did the name sugar rush come from?

[00:07:56] **Tracy Mancuso:** I remember we were headed out, uh, my husband and I were headed out of town for Thanksgiving. And uh, we're like, what are we going to name this business?

And that's when Wreck-It Ralph came out and I didn't know anything about the movie and there was an ad for it on my friend's TV and sugar rush came across the screen. I'm like, that's it, that's the name? Sugar rush. Cause we deal with sugar and we um, we're rushing a lot. But we were setting up for our big debut in 2012 and it all came together at Our first wedding show in 2013. So that was January and we got a booth on the upstairs level. So it was kind of where the cheap booths were, were just starting out. But we did a, an entire themed display with cakes and cake pops and cookies, and it was candy and it was beautiful.

It was teal and black and white. And so it was very striking and we had such a huge response. We had no idea. People were going downstairs and telling more people to go upstairs and check out that cake place. We had a huge response right away and the, the learning curve was steep because we were popular.

Um, I think we got like 40 weddings that season, which to people who hadn't done weddings before it was a shock. So we had to figure a lot of things out really quickly. And uh, it was fun. It was really. Inspiring to be able to get that amount of attention. For sure. We tweaked our business the years after learning, you know, you learn as you go.

But it was a big hit.

[00:09:34] **David Crabill:** Wow. So I can imagine There were some pretty serious growing pains there when you're growing that quickly.

[00:09:39] **Tracy Mancuso:** yes, there were a lot

[00:09:41] **David Crabill:** Are there any specific stories you can remember from that year that stand out to you or things that you learned?

[00:09:49] **Tracy Mancuso:** I'm trying, that was a long time ago. The only thing I remember is that we had a discounted deposit. If you booked for us, booked us for a wedding at the show and one lady booked. And then a couple of weeks

later she wanted, it was non-refundable and a couple of weeks later, she wanted to cancel with us.

And um, we said we have to stick to our word here. We said, you can't cancel. So we're going to take your money. And that was our first disagreement with a customer. And anytime you fight with somebody it's uncomfortable, but you know, we've started to learn that you have to, you have to stick to your rules.

There's a balance between that and then being reasonable and nice with people. But that was one of the things we had to learn in that first year is that you can't make everybody happy.

[00:10:41] **David Crabill:** Did it feel like you were firmly planting your foot into the business realm? Like you're, you're now a business owner, not just a hobby baker?

[00:10:50] **Tracy Mancuso:** Definitely. Yes, we had to get serious. you know, there's a pressure that you've got orders. You have to fill them. You can't cancel if one of you sick, the other one has to make up for that. And you gotta be on time when you deliver early, you have to that whole concept of customer service really played an important part and continued to play an important part because we were trying, you know, for the first three or four years, we're trying to grow our business and we're trying to figure out what, grows it.

we tried doing ads with local papers and publications. We tried paying for advertisement that didn't work. you know, we finally learned over time that what worked the best was having a good reputation. And when the friend at a party, everybody likes the cake, then they recommend it to everybody else.

And then they come to you and word of mouth was our most, you know, as our most valuable tool

[00:11:49] **David Crabill:** And were you working at this time, doing anything else or is this your full-time thing,

[00:11:54] **Tracy Mancuso:** full-time that, and the kids,

[00:11:56] **David Crabill:** but that's a lot.

[00:11:58] **Tracy Mancuso:** it was a lot. It still is a lot.

[00:12:01] **David Crabill:** Now imagine you were doing this from home and were you aware of cottage food laws at the time or what, what were you learning in that realm?

[00:12:10] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yes, we were, we actually had a certified kitchen. Her kitchen was certified. And. yeah, we worked at her house. so now, now that it's my business once it became just me. I started working under the cottage food act.

[00:12:24] **David Crabill:** So in 2012, when you're kicking your new business off with your business partner, you set up this booth or, or this, I dunno if it was a wedding show, cake show, something like that, but how did you even know to get into that or to try that.

[00:12:42] **Tracy Mancuso:** I think we knew that wedding shows happened in January Oh, I think I know why. Cause she, my old business partner used to work for a cake shop and the owner of that cake shop would do this wedding show. So she had had a little bit of experience with the show before.

[00:13:00] **David Crabill:** Okay. So it was really helpful to have this business partner with the experience of working at a cake shop. And I mean, I think people have different opinions about this. You know, you obviously built up your business with someone else. Is that something you recommend or, um, I know you say you like working on your own now, but do you feel like it would be helpful for most people to business partner when they're starting their business.

[00:13:26] **Tracy Mancuso:** it really helped me. She had a lot of decorating experience. Um, She'd been decorating since she was in high school. I think. So she had about 10 years experience already. If not a business partner, I would recommend. Somebody as a mentor, I have someone right now who owns a cake shop in Jacksonville, which is close to us.

And she, I bounce ideas off of her a lot for techniques and stuff. I do a lot of internet research, but just with that confidence, it really helps to have somebody that understands different techniques. That's worked with these things before, so maybe it's not necessary to have a business partner, but somebody that you can bounce ideas off of.

[00:14:13] **David Crabill:** Well, let's just say, hypothetically, that you didn't find this business partner and you went on your own. I know you started your business on your own. And you just kept going that way. Where do you think your business would be today?

[00:14:26] **Tracy Mancuso:** I think I would've been able to pick up a lot off of YouTube videos which is how I learn a lot of my techniques anyway. So I do believe that it still would have grown when we were working together. My strength was the baking and the recipes and her strength was the decorating.

So I actually didn't have a lot of experience when I took over on my own. But I picked up on it really fast. So I think I would have been able to pick up on it. It just, it's helpful to have someone say, oh, I've done this before. And this, this works. If you do this, or this is why we don't do this, that kind of thing really does.

[00:15:04] **David Crabill:** I did see from your website that you take a lot of pride in your recipes and it looks like your customers uh, you know, give you high praise for the cake itself. And I was just wondering, you know, what, what did you do to learn how to make your cakes? Not only look good, but taste great as well.

[00:15:23] **Tracy Mancuso:** A lot of experimenting the first two years from 2010 to 2012, I researched recipes like crazy. And then finally hit on one that worked. Perfect. And I can modify, it's just a base for the white cake and then I can modify from there and I've just branched out. Now I get a lot of recipes. I follow a group on Facebook.

That's US-based and they're all very easy to communicate with and they have a lot of different ideas. So I, I can pull flavor ideas, decoration ideas from them too. But that first two years, I nailed down my filling recipes and my cake recipe and have stuck with it right from the start.

[00:16:11] **David Crabill:** Which Facebook group was that,

[00:16:13] **Tracy Mancuso:** I think it's called. We are home business bakers. Just a private group.

I've been on a few before and these guys were just, it's the best group I've run into. So I can ask a question and within minutes they've answered it cause

they're up all hours of the night too. But yeah, it's been, that's been very encouraging.

[00:16:33] **David Crabill:** Well, I'll definitely link to them in the show notes. And what kind of flavors do you offer for your cakes and your frostings?

[00:16:40] **Tracy Mancuso:** I will do just about anything, my most popular ones for birthday parties. I would say our French vanilla or white almond. Most people like either strawberry cream or strawberry, and then the raspberry fillings to die for. Then people like chocolate, but if you go onto like the gourmet flavors, peanut butter cake is really good.

I make a bourbon cake. I just made that a couple of weeks ago. Oh my champagne or pink champagne. A mint cake, mint chocolate. oh, and the Snickerdoodles really good too.

[00:17:12] **David Crabill:** And I know that you, you know, do weddings, but you also just mentioned you do birthday cakes. Is it split 50 50? Are you just like locked into wedding cakes during the wedding season? Um, What do you typically focus on?

[00:17:27] **Tracy Mancuso:** It depends on when you book me. If you book me six months in advance for a June birthday cake, I will do that for you. Wedding season it's weird. There's certain dates. I know I'm going to be about with it. Like the last week in June, I'm always booked. I'm already booked that week.

Then in September it starts getting really heavy around labor day and the first two weekends of September, and then the first two weekends of October get really busy with weddings. And then other than that, it's just kind of hit and miss But the beginning of June is graduations. And that is an interesting time because people don't book until maybe a week or two before.

And so we, we hit a log jam with all the orders coming in.

[00:18:14] **David Crabill:** And do you do anything with um, you have any policies in your contract to try to alleviate some of the problems that come up with that? I mean, what have you learned over time and what have you added to your contract?

[00:18:26] **Tracy Mancuso:** Not really. I, honestly, if people ask when they should order by, I'll let them know, you know, this is how it's going right now, but by this time it's gonna probably be around. you know, a little busier. So I recommend booking a month out. But in general, if I could fit you in, I'll fit you in. I often overbook to my standards to fit people in because I have a desire to help everybody. I hate saying no,

[00:18:55] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like you over-commit sometimes?

[00:18:58] **Tracy Mancuso:** Oh, definitely. I'll look at my husband and say, you will have no idea what I've done this week. And he'll say, how many did you take? Oh, 20.

[00:19:07] **David Crabill:** Wow. So what I mean, what gives, is it getting less sleep or something's got to give.

[00:19:14] **Tracy Mancuso:** Getting less sleep. It's just going, going, going. I think. August, I was pulling 16 hour days. it was a lot.

[00:19:25] **David Crabill:** Yeah. And last August, if you were pulling 16 hour days, I'm sure you're a lot more capable of a baker you were 10 years ago. So you're probably pumping out even more.

[00:19:35] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yes. It's yes, definitely. Yeah. I'm surprised at how quickly I can get, you know, the amount of what I can get done. Sometimes I think, whoa, that, you know, actually got ahead of schedule. So it's definitely experience pays off,

[00:19:51] **David Crabill:** Have you thought about bumping up your pricing to kind of curb the demand?

[00:19:55] **Tracy Mancuso:** you know, I try to keep it reasonable for our area. I consider it on the higher end, but people know that it's worth getting what they get. What's been, my struggle has been food prices have gone up so high and fondant prices, material prices. Everything's gone up so high in the last two years, but really this year, but I struggle with how do you raise it?

when you know, your customers are already being pinched by the same thing you're being pinched by. So that, that is hard. I do tend to go up five or so

dollars a year. Because for my birthday cakes, I do just a base price. So I tend to bump that up a little bit because of inflation. But right now I'm, I don't know.

It's been hard.

[00:20:42] **David Crabill:** What's your pricing, right?

[00:20:44] **Tracy Mancuso:** For an eight inch cake, a simple one, it would be 85. And my smallest two tier, just the basic would start at 145. And then it just goes up from there fondant's been adding quite a bit because of how expensive fondant is right now. My minimum is 65, but if it's a simple one, sometimes I quote under, and then if people order multiples you know, a big order, I'll cut off a little bit just to make it work for them or throw in figures or extra things.

But yeah, it's a hard thing to judge because for me I'm like, well, it's not that hard, 10 more minutes to do this, but then I think, well, I put a lot of fondant into that and there is work so I should charge for it, but then it makes it really expensive. So it can be hard for me to judge what.

is fair to me and to the customer. When I think a lot of times I'm undercharging,

[00:21:39] **David Crabill:** How has your pricing changed over the last 10 years?

[00:21:42] **Tracy Mancuso:** Like I said, the price for, well, everything I do per serving for wedding cakes. And I think it used to be \$4, a serving for buttercream. I'm up to 475 and then fondant I think it was four50 for the past, so many, five years or so. And I've got it up to almost \$5 or serving now just because it's so much, it costs so much more to get it.

[00:22:07] **David Crabill:** So you don't feel like you fell into that category of people who started pricing way too

[00:22:15] **Tracy Mancuso:** I don't think so. We struggle with that because when we started, there were a couple other cake people that started along with us and one of them they're all out of business now, but one of them refused to ever raise her prices and she got a lot of business, but we would always, well I've learned over the years, not to compare myself, but in the

early years, we're looking around seeing who we're competing with and we could never figure out how she survived.

And then there was a cake shop and her prices were similar. It was just very low. And we rose ours to what we believe, you know, would get us a profit, but also pay for our materials. And. I think our customers know that it's worth what they're getting. Not only are they getting a quality product that tastes amazing, but they're getting good customer service.

So if we're, I think people will pay more, if you're easy to work with and they're getting a positive experience versus cheap, and maybe not as good of experience,

[00:23:18] **David Crabill:** Do you think that this is another instance where having a business partner helped you out? You know? Cause she kinda knew what the market was charging?

[00:23:27] **Tracy Mancuso:** That was something we were always bouncing around. we would try to figure out, you know, where is that sweet spot? That was more of a challenge. For both of us to figure out where I am now. I feel like my prices are really they're in a good place. Which is why I don't want to raise them too much, too high on my customers, but I will have customers order a big cake and then add on cupcakes and cake pops.

And I keep thinking I could never afford that, but to them it's worth it. I mean, if you're going to throw in \$300 to a venue and have a party, why not just have it you know, like at home and get really good treats. And I think a lot of my regulars, they know the value of that.

[00:24:15] **David Crabill:** what are your policies on delivery or pickup? do you deliver what you charge? Do you only deliver, do you let people pick up.

[00:24:24] **Tracy Mancuso:** I do both most are celebration orders that aren't weddings get picked up. And then for weddings, I offer delivery. It starts at \$50 in town. And then it goes up depending on where you're located. And a few times a year, I head to the coast and that's usually an overnight trip for me because it's a ways out for the cake.

And if they don't have refrigeration, I like to bring it the day before, let it set up in the fridge, then deliver it to their venue. The next day. So I had one in

September where she did not have refrigeration. So I came the day ahead and we stayed at an Airbnb and then took it over the next day.

And it worked out really well. the in-town ones, some of them are venues are over an hour out. So those can be, those can be a challenge. Or if you order something that's over a three tier cake, I don't deliver it stacked. So I have to bring it to them. And they're pretty good about that.

I mean, a lot of people will even have me bring cupcakes out just cause they don't have to worry about transporting it. And I totally get that stressful. But for pickups uh, people come to, we set up a pickup time and they come and get them mostly events on Saturday. So they'd come get them Friday or Saturday morning.

That's been a struggle because people don't show up on time I've been trying to brainstorm how to get them to commit, to picking up on time and not five hours late.

[00:25:49] **David Crabill:** You just charge a dollar per minute that they're late.

[00:25:52] **Tracy Mancuso:** Oh I so feel like it.

[00:25:55] **David Crabill:** So have you had any um, delivery disasters? Have you had any memorable stories or, or pick up problems?

[00:26:05] **Tracy Mancuso:** I can't say that unless I knock on wood. Oh my goodness. No. I've not had any delivery issues. I've had issues where people picked up and they didn't take care of their cake and they lost it. But not when I deliver my husband knows, cause he comes with me now. He is not allowed to drive. He just lets me do it because he knows I will stress if he drives wrong.

In general, I try to arrive no later than half an hour before I try to figure out if they need refrigeration. I am so super careful because it's so important that you know, nothing happens on my end. I have had them people have had their cakes collapsed because the heat having it out too long, I'm not liable for that.

I warn them and tell them, you know, what my policies are, but once I drop it off, they know that it's their responsibility. But as far as delivery disasters, no, that doesn't happen.

[00:27:05] **David Crabill:** I know you said that you had higher end pricing, but you also, I see have complimentary cake tastings. Why do you do.

[00:27:15] **Tracy Mancuso:** just to me, if I'm working on cake that week and they want to sample it, I am more than happy to make a couple of little samples for them. They're not full cakes, they're just little bite-sized cups. That seems to work the best because I know if I eat a whole mini cake, I'm going to be stuffed. So yeah, I just do three samples of what I'm working on that week.

And I am more than happy to just let you try it. You don't have to book. It's commitment free.

[00:27:43] **David Crabill:** So what's the process like for a client? Let's say a wedding a couple who wants to have a wedding cake? What's the process like when they're working with you? Especially if they want something designed take me through that process.

[00:27:57] **Tracy Mancuso:** Normally they will contact me through email. I don't have a consult space anymore. I lost that during 2020. So we are doing everything virtually, which seems to be working really well. I have them send me their ideas of design and how many they're wanting to serve. And I quote them a rough quote right there, so they know what they're dealing with.

And then we talk about their venue and where, you know, how much delivery is going to be. Then I offer for them to set up a time to come pick up samples. And if they have any questions at that point, they can ask me. Uh, it's informal, but because of the COVID restrictions it's been necessary. And I usually, if they're interested in booking, I send them with a contract and then they just send me a screenshot of that back. Once

they filled it out and I require a hundred dollar non-refundable deposit to book their date. And then that goes towards the cost of their cake. And once everything is set, I send them, I can invoice them just for the deposit or then I can invoice them for everything after they paid the deposit.

However they want to handle it. They're welcome to pay through credit card. They can mail in a check, they can drop off cash. They can make payments. I'm pretty chill with all of that. And that seems to work really well. I try to be open with communication and then. When their emails come in, I tell them, you know, I've got a lot going on.

If you don't hear back from me within a couple of days, or it's urgent, just send that again. I will get back to you. I will make you a priority. And it has for 99% of my clients in the last two years, that's worked very well.

[00:29:35] **David Crabill:** So I know there's a lot of different ways to do cakes and people have their own styles. What would you say is your. style um, that you stick to?

[00:29:46] **Tracy Mancuso:** I like the textured butter cream. I call it a Wehe cake. Um, Years ago, the first girl that ordered that texture, buttercream cake. Her last name was . So my business partner and I nicknamed it, the Wehe style It's just the lines on it. It's really pretty. It looks pretty on tiered cake with flowers.

That's my go-to. if somebody says, do what you want, but now the drips are coming in. They're really popular. So if it's for a birthday or, you know, just maybe like a 21st or something elegant and people want ideas, I'll send them some drip cake ideas. Those two are my favorite go to's are like the semi-naked too. Those are really pretty.

[00:30:28] **David Crabill:** Is there any kind of cake that a customer will come to with and you'll turn them away?

[00:30:34] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yep. I don't do car cakes. Um, Somebody just asked me to do a shoe cake. I don't do shoe cakes. we used to, when I had my business partner, we used to do some pretty extravagant carved cakes, but recently. I feel like it takes so much, it's just stressful to do them. Then I'm constantly wondering if I'm going to get the shape, right.

Or if it's going to collapse and I've just some of those I've written off. I just don't do them. Even if my kid asks for it, I'm not going to do it. But my, my contact um, who lives in Jacksonville, who has a cake store, I will recommend her for a lot of those. Cause she's just fantastic with carved cakes.

[00:31:18] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, it certainly makes sense that you'll stick to what you're good at and what you enjoy doing. And you could probably be a lot more profitable that way.

[00:31:27] **Tracy Mancuso:** Yeah. I've learned over the years. If I'm not confident with a design and I know it, then it's okay to say I don't do that.

Everybody has what they're good at. I've seen some amazing people who can do 3d cakes. And my kids keep saying, you can do it.

And I said, I can do it, but I am not going to like the end result. So I'm going to do what brings me fulfillment and the other people can do what they do because they are amazing at it.

[00:31:58] **David Crabill:** Well, I have seen many pictures of your cakes and um, although you don't do the sculpture cakes, your cakes are very impressive, nonetheless. You certainly are very good at what you do. Um, Do you have any cakes that stand out to you over the years? Any favorite cakes?

[00:32:15] **Tracy Mancuso:** Oh, I have so many favorites.

[00:32:18] **David Crabill:** Well, I can see you've done a lot of cake

[00:32:20] **Tracy Mancuso:** there's so many, and it's funny because I'll do them. And then I just forget and I'll look through my gallery and think, holy cow, I did that. But the ones I like the most are either like a themed cake that's really crisp and you know, it's just, I executed it, how I had envisioned it, but I really like the simple boho style.

I did one with little cutie oranges on it. It was a semi-naked with just little streaks of orange and it was so pretty, it photographed perfectly. Those ones make me so happy, but as far as like anyone in particular, it's hard unless I went through my gallery and then I'd probably say, oh, that one's my favorite. Oh, that one's my favorite.

[00:33:01] **David Crabill:** So, are there any stories that jump out to you over the past decade? You know, maybe not the cake itself, but just the story behind it,

[00:33:09] **Tracy Mancuso:** Uh, There's a couple um, Last summer I had They were two blue cakes and the grandma picked up the one cake for the, for her daughter. And so I set it there and it had the name on it and sent her on her way. And then the other customer said, I'll be there in just a few minutes.

And I realized that the customer who was coming, I had just sent that cake with the lady. figured it all out. But the mom came back. She never questioned the name or the fact that what she had ordered was a six inch cake.

And the one I gave her was a two tier cake. And I said, did you not? Did you not read the name? And she's like, oh, I did. I thought it was an inside joke. And I said, But the theme is different. She's like, yeah, I couldn't understand why he was into sports because it was basketball. So it was such a can. It was so confusing.

Everybody was confused. It got figured out. I gave it to the right person. I told her what happened. She thought it was hilarious. And sent the lady on with the small cake for her three-year-old and it all worked out in the end, but those kind of confusing things. you know, they happen.

And when they do happen, you just have to think through it, figure it out. And then around that same time I had two 21st birthdays the cakes were really similar, but one had. Very intricate cake pops with it. And so the first lady that picked up, I gave her the cake pops, but they weren't hers. And so she took them a dozen cake pops.

She took them and left and then the other girls came to pick up and I was like, oh my gosh, I sent the cake pops with the wrong person. So I called her and she was almost home. And I said, those weren't your cake pops. Why did you take them? And she said, I thought they were complementary. And she had eaten one of them.

And I'm like, oh my gosh, well, I always make extra. I'm like, well, that's why I make extra. So she brought them back and they, again, you know, the right amount was there. It all worked out. But those are times when I just shake my head. And what just happened?

But when the husbands pick up, I have to like triple check what's going out. Cause they have no idea what they're picking up. Just like the grandma who picked up the wrong cake that they don't know. And a lot of people you know, my response with cake is this is how you handle it.

It's not a big deal. And people are so nervous cause they don't know. They've never worked with cake before. They've never handled it. My cakes are really heavy, so there'll be like, oh my gosh, it's so heavy. And I have to remember that they're inexperienced.

[00:35:49] **David Crabill:** Um, I was just thinking about the different cakes. You know, you said you do textured buttercream. It's your favorite right now? You

also like naked cakes. Those, I feel like those are really trending now. Like what have you seen over the past? In terms of cake trends.

[00:36:05] **Tracy Mancuso:** Frozen. We went through about three years of frozen. Everybody wanted frozen cake. That was fun, but it got a little old. And now it's unicorn cakes. Those have died down a little bit and I actually really like the unicorn cakes. I've got one this week. I think they're pretty cute. But for a while there I was doing one weekly, at least one, maybe three people all wanted unicorn cake and the texture buttercream for weddings has been a staple.

It's from the beginning. To still now a lot of people just want texture buttercream with flowers and it's beautiful. It's timeless. So I totally get it. And then the semi-naked started coming in. It used to be the naked cake, which doesn't have any frostings, just the, you do the little ring of frosting and set the cake on it.

And I don't like that one as much. It doesn't have any frosting on it. But I really like the semi-naked with flowers and succulents, and it's simple and it's

[00:37:09] **David Crabill:** Speaking of trends. I've also noticed That you offer gluten-free sugar-free Your recipe to be gluten free.

[00:37:19] **Tracy Mancuso:** That one is I do have to let everybody know, but you know, I work in a kitchen that does have gluten, but I'll explain my process to you. And they're usually pretty cool with it, or same thing with tree nut allergies. Those are really hard. But with gluten-free, I make sure that's the first thing I work on.

Everything is clean everything's sanitized, and then I pay a lot of attention to. You know where it's going, how it's handled, it's properly labeled you know, when it's put away not touching anything else, the frosting that I use for gluten-free cake, can't be mixed with a different frosting,

you know, if I've worked on a gluten cake and I had some frosting left her, I can't use that same frosting. The piping bag has to be sanitized. Everything has to be like completely separated. And it's the same with nut allergies. I'm actually, I have some terrible allergies, some food allergies. And so when I'm working with any kind of cake that has nuts and up until recently, certain fruits, I have to be super careful even touching them.

So I tell people, you know, I understand you have a peanut allergy or your son has peanut allergy. I do too. So I know how to handle it and not get sick because I can't handle it.

[00:38:32] **David Crabill:** So I did want to ask, you know, I know you've gotten so successful with your business and it's grown a lot. You have thousands of followers on Facebook. I noticed that you don't have as many on Instagram. And I didn't know if you did more of a focus on Facebook or how have you um, tackle the social media?

[00:38:54] **Tracy Mancuso:** Facebook was what we started when sugar. I started I was delicious designs and she was mama cakes. We blended our clients on there and sent them to sugar rush. I started Instagram in 2019, my own. And that has grown just in the last couple of years and what I did with Instagram, I only follow local businesses. So I thought, let's see how this works. If I, you know, I see a roofing company and it's in Southern Oregon, I'll follow it and then they'll follow me back, but then other people on their page follow me. So it's been really successful just having the audience, a local audience.

And I've gotten a lot of orders through Instagram. Sometimes. I think it's probably that 40% of my orders are coming in through Instagram. So I think that's been a wise focus to just, look at local businesses and follow them and yeah. Does that make sense?

[00:39:59] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it definitely makes sense. Um, Are there any other ways that you try to grow your business? I mean, you're doing social media, but do you work with cake boutiques that are local or any other ways that you try to actively market yourself?

[00:40:14] **Tracy Mancuso:** I've done like photo. They do those glam photo-shoots or they'll set up a pretend wedding and a bunch of vendors will get together and do a shoot. I've done those before. In the last couple of years, not as many, 2020 was a weird year for that because people couldn't really get together. So those slowed down, but I did just get invited.

To do a, giveaway at the wedding show for a complete, a one bride to win a bridal shower. And so I was going to do the cake for that. Those I found help in the, like the people who work in the industry, it helps build the reputation, which in turn helps them recommend high-end clients for weddings.

So there's building a client base with your customers. And there's building a reputation with the other wedding vendors. Both are equally as important because there's some good really high-end venues that I want to do, you know, be recommended first for wedding cakes and in a couple of venues that's happened.

[00:41:18] **David Crabill:** You said that you were invited to the most recent one. I mean, if you're starting out, how do you find opportunities like this to participate in photo shoots?

[00:41:26] **Tracy Mancuso:** my theory with the Instagram thing seems to be working. If somebody was just starting out, they had a decent portfolio. I would recommend getting, just finding any groups that have your wedding vendors, where they communicate with each other, or get ahold of photographers on Instagram, get people to like your um, your content.

And then people like to see like the vendors, like to see simple cupcakes or just really interesting shots of your work. And then as they try, and this has happened with me, I've had so many vendors say I've had your cake at weddings. That's amazing. There's times when I've just brought treats to different people like drop off cards to different venues and, you know, bring some cupcakes with me or bring cupcakes to the vet's office or to my doctor's office, just to kind of get the word out there.

And there's always somebody that's involved in. You know, my cousin does photography or this or that. And it just slowly builds your reputation builds. And I'm finding that people who work in the wedding industry, they want somebody who's, you know, they want to work with somebody who is easy to work with who brands themselves well, who has a good product.

And it just kind of grows from there. The more connections that I've made my reputation in the community, the vendor community has been positive. It's grown.

And I'm amazed at, you know, some of the offers I get, I mean, like this I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm going to do a podcast. I'm like a. Just kind of a quiet nobody, and these things have found me. And it's an honor. I, I don't want to push any of this with a, I did this attitude. It's just, to me, it's just a quiet honor to be able to do the journey of life, doing something I love

[00:43:28] **David Crabill:** I was looking on your social media and I noticed that you don't post much about yourself personally. And I don't see pictures of yourself or personal stories. And um, you know, I was wondering if that was intentional, would you say that you tend to fall on the introverted end of the spectrum?

[00:43:47] **Tracy Mancuso:** extreme introvert. Yeah.

[00:43:50] **David Crabill:** Usually I recommend to entrepreneurs to put yourself out there. I'm an introvert. And you know, it's something I've had to learn is, you know, got to put myself out there because people would much rather follow a person than follow a brand. And I know you haven't done that. You haven't put yourself out there on social media.

Do you feel like that has held your business back?

[00:44:12] **Tracy Mancuso:** I don't know the, the rate at which it's grown. I can barely hold onto it right now. So it's grown for the right amount for me. If it were to go explode anymore, I couldn't handle it. I'd need to get an intern. and it's all about those personal relationships. I have a girl she orders from me all the time and she lost, she had a stillborn she always orders a birthday cake for her little stillborn.

And um, I just talked to her last night. She was telling me that, you know, she's been having a really hard year and I just reached out to her. You know, if you need anything, let me know. I'm sorry. And are you okay? And it's that kind of personal touch? I think my regulars, They feel that they know that when they talk to me, I am really honestly there to make things joyful for them. So bringing those personal, just having those personal friendships or relationships with my clients helped them confidently tell their friends she's worth the money you should go with her.

[00:45:19] **David Crabill:** So where are you planning on taking this? Or where do you plan on going with this business into the future?

[00:45:26] **Tracy Mancuso:** That's a really good question.

Um, I am working off of older appliances in a small dark kitchen, and it is time for an upgrade. So the plan has been for the last year to refinance and pull out the money to add onto our home. And the plan is to get all new appliances

really separate my workspace from my home space. right now, home life clashes a lot with business life.

And it's just, it's stressful. Especially the more I grow and I have the potential to grow a lot further, but I have to keep it, you know, I have to keep it under a certain amount because of the cottage food act. But when I am able to certify my kitchen, the possibilities are endless.

my orders normally stop mid-October for the, until January. And they pickup end of January. I'm booking right now. I'm booked for December. That's never happened before and I'm booking into January right now.

So the amount of growth and the demand, I've never had a demand like this before. It's crazy. If anything, I always say work smarter, not harder. So if it would be possible to up my weddings, which hopefully when. wedding sizes get bigger. That can happen um, to focus primarily on weddings in the summers when during wedding season, and then go back to the birthday.

That would be the focus. But as it is right now, I'm just riding this rollercoaster, my kids, uh, my son's a ninth grader. My daughter's a seventh grader, so we have a few more years where I would want to be home with them. So that would definitely be part of the focus. My other pull is to work in the schools.

So if something were to happen with the cake business, just tanking or just losing the desire to do it, I would definitely pursue work in education. But as it is right now, I always come back. If even if I've had a hard week and I'm tired and I just need a break, do I still love it? I still love, I love it with a passion.

I love the. I love the designing. I love creating, I love baking. I still have a passion for it, so I don't see it ending anytime soon.

[00:47:47] **David Crabill:** Why do you feel like you love it so much?

[00:47:49] **Tracy Mancuso:** I create I'm a creator. always since I was a little kid, making things with paper and, going out and designing and creating. And this really gets that creative bug going. But I also really love being able to bring to people a little bit of joy. That's really important to me.

a lot of times, if a client is upset, they think that I'm just wanting money or whatever. It's absolutely not my motivation. My motivation has always been just to bring a little bit of joy and right now we all need that.

[00:48:25] **David Crabill:** Well, Tracy, thanks so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today. If people want to reach out to you or, um, learn a little more about you, where can they find.

[00:48:36] **Tracy Mancuso:** my website is [sugarushbakery.me](http://sugarushbakery.me) and then I'm on Facebook and I'm on Instagram. all of that is on my website. And then my um, I'm always reachable through email or any of the other direct messaging on the other platforms.

[00:48:55] **David Crabill:** Great. I will put a link to the website and the social media into the show notes. But again, I loved hearing your story and Thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today.

[00:49:08] **Tracy Mancuso:** Thank you so much.

[00:49:11] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. My next episode is actually episode 50 and I'm doing something special for it. So keep your eyes peeled for that one.

Now for more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/49](http://forrager.com/podcast/49).

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Thanks for listening. And I'll see you in episode 50.