

Baking Saved My Life with Christina Marquez

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 Christina Marquez. But a quick reminder, we are just a month away from the Home-based Food Entrepreneur Conference.

[00:00:17] This is the only national conference for our industry, so you're not going to want to miss it. It's a virtual four day conference that goes from April 10th through April 13th.

[00:00:28] So four full days of keynotes, workshops, breakout sessions, and perhaps most importantly, the community that you'll get to interact with along the way. Now, most multi-day virtual conferences like this cost well over \$100, but this conference will only cost you \$35. And yes, that price includes everything, and even if you can't attend during the day, you'll still get access to all the recordings that you can watch on your own time. So if you haven't registered yet, you can sign up right now by going to [cottage food conference.com](http://cottagefoodconference.com).

[00:01:06] All right, so I have Christina Marquez on the show today. Christina lives in Antioch, Illinois, and sells cakes and other baked goods with her cottage food business, Twisted Sifter's Baked Goods. Christina has been running her cottage bakery for over a decade now, and as you'll see, it's been quite the journey. From fulfilling a five tier wedding cake order while wearing her newborn twin daughters, to putting her business on hold after she had a heart attack, to completing an order of 500 hot cocoa bombs the day before a surgery, building her business has not always been easy, but it's been worth it.

[00:01:50] You would be hard pressed to find someone who cares more about their cottage bakery than Christina does, and perhaps that passion is why her business has been so successful. With that, let's jump right into this episode.

[00:02:05] Welcome to the show, Christina. Nice to have you here.

[00:02:09] **Christina Marquez:** Thank you, David. I'm glad to be here.

[00:02:12] **David Crabill:** Well, Christina, can you take me back, when did this whole journey get started for you?

[00:02:17] **Christina Marquez:** Oh gosh. Back in 2011, 2012, my son had the opportunity to go to Washington, DC for his eighth grade trip. I inquired to the school if they were going to do any sort of fundraising. When I was in eighth grade, that was how I paid for my part of my trip. And I was told that there were no fundraising opportunities.

[00:02:36] Parents were just expected to pay for the entire trip. Having three small children, I didn't have the funds to be able to just pay for it outright. So I decided to do a little fundraiser and ask people to make a donation in exchange for a loaf of pumpkin bread. I can't remember exactly how many loaves I sold, but it was quite a few.

[00:02:55] And pretty soon people were reaching out to me, asking me to make pumpkin bread for different events and muffins and whatnot and it kind of spiraled from there.

[00:03:06] **David Crabill:** So this was back in 2010, 2011. How old were your kids at that time?

[00:03:11] **Christina Marquez:** Let's see, eighth grade, sixth grade, and kindergarten or first grade. My older kids are now 19, 23 and 25. We've since added two more to the crew. I have six year old twins.

[00:03:26] The girls are adopted. They're our only girls. My older three are boys and they're the Twisted sisters, which is actually where I spun my name off of.

[00:03:35] **David Crabill:** Yeah, so I did see that you had the twins from when they were babies, and I just wanted to ask you like while we're on the topic about your first wedding cake, we might as well start there.

[00:03:48] **Christina Marquez:** The first wedding cake after the girls were born?

[00:03:50] **David Crabill:** Yeah.

[00:03:51] **Christina Marquez:** They were six or seven weeks old. I made the majority of the cake while they were in a, a Moby wrap. All of the moms out there will know what that is. It's essentially like a big, long

piece of cloth that you wrap around yourself and then you put the babies in it.

[00:04:07] Normally, people carry one baby in it. I had both of the girls in there and made a five tier wedding cake.

[00:04:14] **David Crabill:** It was just crazy. So this is like within the first two months of them being born and what year was that?

[00:04:21] **Christina Marquez:** That was in 2016.

[00:04:24] **David Crabill:** Yeah. Okay. So you'd been running your business for quite some time at that point, but still it does seem a little bit crazy to me. But let's go back to the beginning because you were starting to guess get your name out there and people were catching on to what you were doing and word of mouth spread. Was that mostly how it got started?

[00:04:44] **Christina Marquez:** That's exactly how it got started. I wanted to make an Angry Bird's cake for my son, for his birthday. And all of my ladies at work, I worked at a hospital at the time, they kept telling me, you can do this. You've got this! And I was really nervous and worried I was going to ruin his birthday. And the cake turned out awesome. And then pretty soon I was getting orders for Angry Birds cakes because nobody really made those back then. That was when the Angry Birds game was at the height of its popularity, I guess so I tried to keep it mostly like friends and family, but it kind of exploded a little bit.

[00:05:19] People would see a picture, you know, that was when Facebook was really popular and so people would see a picture of this cake that I made and I would just have people that kept reaching out, asking if I could make their kids cake.

[00:05:30] **David Crabill:** Now at the time, did you know that it was not actually technically legal to do that in Illinois?

[00:05:38] **Christina Marquez:** Honestly, I had never known anybody who was a cottage baker. I didn't even know what the term cottage food was. I had no idea. I figured if somebody's asking me for it, what's the harm? Once I learned about Illinois' laws, I found out how restrictive they were. And as a baker, that was very frustrating. because, I probably could have grown my business a lot more, but I chose not to. I chose to

kind of keep things mostly to people I knew for a long time just because we had such restrictive laws and I tried very hard to follow them.

[00:06:13] **David Crabill:** Well, I did see that you, I don't know if at that point, but at some point you've worked in the restaurant industry, right? So you have some food service experience.

[00:06:22] **Christina Marquez:** So actually, I still work at my restaurant job. Very part-time at this point but I've been there since, my, gosh, 1996. I've left and come back. You know, I've had babies. At one point we moved to Florida for three years but I always go back. It's like home. Definitely have tons of experience in the food service industry. My husband's a chef, so between the two of us, we've got many, many years of experience, dealing with the sanitation guidelines and whatnot.

[00:06:51] **David Crabill:** Wow. So is that part of like where this all comes from? Like you just have a love for food or baking or like, I mean, do you think that that's what really prompted the growth of this as not just a hobby but a business?

[00:07:04] **Christina Marquez:** I think in order to be truly successful, it's something you have to love it. For me, this is something I love. Part of my baking journey was I lost a pregnancy. I was five months pregnant and lost a baby and so baking became my, it was my grief therapy. At that point, a lot of stuff didn't make sense in life and in the kitchen, things made sense. Baking saved my life, like it really did.

[00:07:29] So it was, it was hard but I believe everything happens for a reason. It sounds, sounds really cliché sometimes, but I don't think I would be where I am today. I'll be honest, I never thought, oh, I can decorate a cake. Like I liked baking, but not, not on this scale.

[00:07:49] **David Crabill:** That's interesting. So you never had anything in you that was like, oh, someday I'd like to be a baker.

[00:07:57] **Christina Marquez:** No, started out life wanting to be a teacher. And then, I don't know, after I had the boys, I was like, you know, I'd really like to go to nursing school. And then the baking thing just kind of happened and I was still thinking about going to nursing school.

[00:08:10] And we had a car accident when we lived in Florida, which left me with a bunch of herniated discs in my back. So my doctor was like, forget nursing school. There's no way you'll make it through clinicals. And so here I am, you know, this offers me the flexibility that I need. And I'm, I'm where I'm supposed to be.

[00:08:28] I absolutely love what I do. Baking is this, is this is my passion. This is truly my passion. When I don't do it, I think about it. What am I going to make next? This past summer I had a heart attack. Obviously, there was quite a bit of recovery time and I was miserable. All I wanted was to be back in my kitchen.

[00:08:46] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I did see that on your social media account and you can tell from your social media account, like how passionate you are and how much you love what you're doing. So, can you share a little bit about how you handled that with your customers, like when you had the heart attack and the choice to share it or not share it, and then you know how things picked back up afterwards?

[00:09:10] **Christina Marquez:** It didn't even occur to me not to share it honestly. My symptoms were very atypical. I mostly experienced shortness of breath. It wasn't a textbook heart attack where you grab your chest and you fall to the ground. It started and I waited three days to go to the hospital because all I had was shortness of breath. I decided to share it because I wanted to educate somebody, anybody, even if it was one person who woke up one morning short of breath and thought, you know what? That girl on Facebook, that baker lady, she had these symptoms. I thought, you know what, if it can help one person, I'm going to share it.

[00:09:46] And I've had a lot of people reach out and say, thank you so much for, you know, for doing that. I, I realize it's not a, typical business approach. Um, it didn't occur to me that it would have any effect on my business. I just wanted to share that with my people.

[00:09:59] I, I cared very much about my customers. A lot of my customers have become like family. You know, there's people who I've made their bridal shower cake, their wedding cake. Then I get to make baby shower cakes and birthday cakes for their kids. You know, I care very deeply about my customers. I did have to obviously cancel some orders and everybody was super understanding. I actually had people reach out and, oh, if you and your family need anything, you know, if we

can bring you dinner or whatever you need, just let us know. And that's amazing. Like, that's like an extended family to me. And they're customers and I think some people would say, oh, you have to keep a line.

[00:10:33] And I think I've done a good job of having a line, but also, you know, making people feel like family and making them feel like they're cared about.

[00:10:41] **David Crabill:** Well, I can see from your Facebook page, you've definitely done a good job of infusing your personality into it, and maybe that's just who you are as a person, but it certainly allows me to trust you just from reading some of your posts. And, I also noticed, like in the beginning, I, I walked back to the beginning of your Facebook page and you kind of came out with, you know, quite consistent posts, but then I noticed that there was a number of years there where you didn't really post that much on Facebook, and it was just like you just posted albums from time to time.

[00:11:18] And then it was somewhere in 2019 that you sort of picked things back up and started to be more intentional. Can you share a little bit about what that transition was and maybe how social media has impacted your business?

[00:11:31] **Christina Marquez:** Well, I had little kids. Having twin toddlers, takes a lot out of a girl. I think I got really bad at taking pictures of stuff. Just, okay, the cake's done, put it in a box. You know, like not being as intentional with pictures and stuff. I've tried very hard. That was one of my goals over the last few years was be more intentional with your pictures. Take pictures. You can always say, oh, I made that cake, but if you don't have a picture of it, how can you show somebody? It's a lot to balance, you know, I, I literally do everything from start to finish as far as messaging with the customer, you know, finding out what they have in mind. The shopping, the planning, the, you know, every making, decorating, boxing pictures, whatever it, that's me. I do have to say my husband is very good and he'll wash my dishes

[00:12:21] But otherwise, it's me. It's a lot, it's a lot to take on. I've had people, you know, say, why don't you get like a virtual assistant, or you know, somebody to at least answer your messages. Well, part of my business is the interaction with my customers, you know. It's finding out what they really want. Like, yeah, I could have a computerized order

form, but that takes away the personal touch. And I think that's why I have such a good relationship with my customers is because I take the time to get to know what they want. And just really try to translate that into cake,

[00:12:52] **David Crabill:** I can imagine that your customers feel a strong sense of connection, as you mentioned, that they, they feel like an extension of family. Do you feel like doing it that way where it's like it's all on you? Has that led you to feel overwhelmed at times or just like, you know, you can't handle all the requests or all the things that need to get done?

[00:13:16] **Christina Marquez:** Summer is definitely a really difficult time just because there's so many graduations and birthdays and parties and whatnot. Summer definitely tends to get overwhelming. I also do a farmer's market here in our town, and I tend to go way overboard with all the stuff that I make because I love the interaction with, with the customers and everything, and I just want to make like everything that everybody asks me for. So it does get overwhelming sometimes. I've gotten much better at time management and, okay, Monday, I'm going to do this Tuesday, you know, just blocking out blocks in my schedule for different things. I don't know that I'll ever delegate anything to anyone. I used to dream of having my own shop, and obviously I would have to be better at delegating. I've also gotten good at saying no. Having limits. If I learned anything from the heart attack, you know, it's that you have to know your limitations. And there are times that you have to say no. I have a hard time with that word, but I'm getting better.

[00:14:18] **David Crabill:** Going back to the social media thing. This is interesting because you, you know, kind of kept it going for a number of years, but you weren't really putting a lot of effort in social media and then you really started focusing on it.

[00:14:32] You started posting more consistently, you started writing things in your posts more consistently. Did you notice an ROI, like a return on your investment there? Like were you actually getting more engagement, more interaction, more orders coming in when you started to up the Facebook?

[00:14:50] **Christina Marquez:** Maybe a little bit. I think my biggest marketing thing, and not even a marketing thing. Just what has helped my business grow so much is just word of mouth. I can't even tell you

like all of the Facebook groups I belong to like the moms groups and stuff, people go on there, hey, I'm looking for a cake.

[00:15:08] Does anybody know a baker? A lot of people, a lot of my customers tag my business in the post. And I think that's helped tremendously way more than any advertising I could ever do for myself. Mom's trust other moms and, you know, I've, I've worked really hard to have a good relationship with my customers and, you know, listen to them and try to give them what the vision is they have. I've made some really interesting cakes. You know, if somebody tells me, oh, my, my daughter wants a ballerina and a dog and a kitten on her cake, okay, that's what I'm going to make her with green frosting.

[00:15:42] You know, that's what I'm going to make because that little kid is going to remember that, you know. My fifth birthday cake, it had green frosting and a cat. I think moms love people who make their kids feel special.

[00:15:53] **David Crabill:** It sounds like you had a lot of returning customers. And then, You said that you got a lot of word of mouth from people, you know, recommending you, so that would indicate to me that, you know, maybe you had of a very organic growth of your business over time. Like, would you say that that's accurate?

[00:16:11] **Christina Marquez:** Definitely, the word of mouth has been huge. In 2020, at the height of covid that first Halloween, of 2020, I saw these, somebody tagged me in a, in something for hot cocoa on TikTok and I was like, what's a TikTok?

[00:16:28] I don't even know what that is. It was a video of hot cocoa bombs I was like, oh, those are cute. I bet the girls would like those. Life was kind of hard at that point so I ordered some molds off Amazon and put some really ugly hot cocoa bombs together. They were my first ones. And then I reached out to people on my Facebook page, on my personal page and just said, I ordered these, cocoa bomb molds. You know, if anybody wants them for their kids, let me know. And I don't know what happened. Somebody, one of my friends, bless her heart, Cindy. You know who you are. She put it out to a Lake County, like an online forum newspaper type thing for our county. And all of a sudden I had all these people messaging me on Facebook asking about hot cocoa bombs. The next thing I knew it was December. I didn't have time to even make

cakes or anything else from October to December because it was just cocoa bombs.

[00:17:26] And I did all porch pickups because at that point we were all no contact. Yeah, and I think that's where things kind of spun out of control.

[00:17:36] I've had people come up to me at the farmer's market, this past summer and the summer before and say, I've been to your house. I picked up cocoa bombs from you, and I was just trying to make kids happy. You know, it was, it was such a bad time. My God, we were all homeschooling our kids and I don't know about the other moms out there, but e-learning, I had both of the girls were in early childhood with, you know, therapists and IEPs and whatnot, and I was doing it all at home and it was not a good time.

[00:18:06] So I was just trying to, I don't know, brighten up a really bad time in our lives. And so many people tagged me in their posts of them doing their cocoa bombs, and their kids would laugh and they were happy. And that made me happy.

[00:18:19] **David Crabill:** Well, so you were in the thick of the, the hot cocoa bomb craze. Now, when it's all said and done, did you calculate how many hot cocoa bombs you ended up making?

[00:18:30] **Christina Marquez:** It was in the thousands. Too many. I'm not even sure at this point. It was, it was a lot. I'm happy to say this year, well, 2022, I only made about a hundred. So, I'm okay with that.

[00:18:43] **David Crabill:** Yeah, well, that trend has definitely died down, that's for sure. I did see a post where you said one order was 500 cocoa bombs.

[00:18:55] **Christina Marquez:** That was chaos. It was a corporate, some sort of corporate order. That was a really crazy, crazy, crazy day. When we were packaging everything and running out of room and I was literally in like this serious time crunch. You know, it was the week before Christmas. I had surgery December 18th, so I had gastric sleeve surgery. I'm diabetic and my doctor and I decided that I needed to have this surgery to help me lose weight and help with my insulin resistance. So, the week before Christmas.

[00:19:25] And I'm, trying to like, you know, have some sort of semblance of Christmas for my kids knowing that I'm going to be recovering from surgery and had so many orders that I was trying to get out the door. I don't have that energy anymore. That was absolutely crazy. And my husband is always shaking his head at me.

[00:19:44] I don't know how you do all this. I don't know how you do this. I might have bitten off more than I could chew, but I still got it done.

[00:19:51] **David Crabill:** That's very crazy now. How did that impact your business? Like moving forward? You got all these hot cocoa bomb orders, did that like just boost your business permanently because you have a lot more people that are aware of you now?

[00:20:04] **Christina Marquez:** I think a lot of people, liked my Facebook page or followed it. And that's really, I mean, I don't have a website. I use, Castiron if I'm going to do like pre-sales or whatever. But otherwise everything's through Facebook. So I think having those extra followers and putting stuff out there, you know, when I'm going to be at the farmer's market or a craft fair. I think that those people have come back. I know they've come back because I recognize the names. That's one thing, if you've ordered from me, probably I remember. I might not remember what you ordered, but I'll remember the name.

[00:20:39] **David Crabill:** Well, so you, you, we talked about the hot cocoa bombs and we haven't really talked about what you actually make, you know, or what you've made over the years. Can you just give us a little lay of the land in terms of, your products and, and what you produce?

[00:20:56] **Christina Marquez:** Mostly custom cakes, cookies, uh, sugar cookies, cupcakes. When I do the farmer's markets, I do breads. I make a lemon blueberry bread that. Sellout every time. Usually within like the first hour. pumpkin bread, the original pumpkin bread. Still the same recipe. banana bread, macarons. What else? Oh, and then I started this past summer I started quarter pound cookies. So they're ginormous cookies.

[00:21:22] **David Crabill:** So that's interesting. Would you say that what you have made has changed over time based on whatever, like have you noticed changes in trends or changes in popularity of certain items?

[00:21:36] **Christina Marquez:** Sugar cookies have definitely gotten much more popular or I'm just getting more known for them. I'm not sure. This past year, I purchased an Eddie printer to help sugar cookies because there's some weekends when I have three or 400 sugar cookies, and that's a lot. So if I can delegate some of the work that really cuts down on, on the labor.

[00:21:57] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I would definitely say that I've seen sugar cookies pick up a lot as a trend. Also, cookies as well. You said you started making quarter pound cookies. Have those taken off?

[00:22:11] **Christina Marquez:** Those are a huge seller. I do chocolate chips, snicker doodle, triple chocolate, an ultimate peanut butter, a lemon cookie. I always sell out of the chocolate chip. People love chocolate chip cookies, but the other flavors are, are, really big sellers too.

[00:22:26] **David Crabill:** You've made, regular cookies like smaller cookies for a long time, right? And you just added these big cookies. So are you noticing that they sell a lot better than small cookies or like they more profitable than the normal cookies?

[00:22:42] **Christina Marquez:** I'd say the profit margin is about the same. But people seem to like them and a lot of people buy several at a time. You know, they're my goodness, it's like, the cookie's as big as your palm. I measure them, I measure everyone out. And I'm, I was surprised at how, popular they were.

[00:22:57] I thought maybe like, you know, regular sized cookies would sell, faster, but the big ones are definitely big sellers and go big or go home, I guess. Huh?

[00:23:05] **David Crabill:** Let's talk a little bit about pricing. Can you just share what your prices used to be? Maybe what your prices are today for some of your items?

[00:23:15] **Christina Marquez:** Well, when I first started doing sugar cookies, I think I was at, gosh, like a dollar 50 a cookie, maybe \$2 a cookie. Now I'm up to the base price of like \$45 a dozen. You know, I may end up having to raise them again if eggs and butter don't come down soon. **That's probably one of the hardest things is I think people**

expect because you don't have the overhead of a shop, you know that your prices are going to be like, super low, like, let's say Walmart.

[00:23:43] Well, I don't mass produce stuff. Everything is custom. It's really hard to try to keep your prices where you feel like they're, you know, going to be affordable for people. I think that's definitely something that probably all, any food producer in general, even, you know, restaurants and I think we're all feeling that right now with food costs going up the way they have. I can tell you there's orders that I've taken a little less profit on. Just because let's say they ordered three months ago, well, prices have gone up significantly in the last three months, but I'm not going to come back and be like, hey, by the way, your order is this much more because prices have gone up. But I'm trying really hard not to pass all of it onto the customer.

[00:24:22] **David Crabill:** Certainly the prices went up quite a bit during the pandemic, but you're the first guest that I've had that's really been able to talk about the egg situation.

[00:24:33] **Christina Marquez:** My gosh, the egg situation makes me want to cry every time I go to the store. I just want to cry. I buy like 10 dozen eggs at a time. Oh my goodness. The last time I went to Walmart, I bought the five dozen case of eggs and I accidentally rang it up twice. I only had one, but I rang it up twice and I called the lady over to take off the second one and she said, oh, you only have one.

[00:24:57] I'm like, I can't afford two. My goodness, people have been tagging me in posts for egg substitutes, somebody said like flax seed and vinegar or something to substitute egg and a recipe. I'm like, oh, I think I like eggs.

[00:25:13] It's not just the eggs, it's the butter. The flour has gone up. For sugar cookies, you use meringue powder. Meringue powder has gone up. I don't know if you've had to buy any boxes lately, but, cake boxes. The boards that go under the cakes, just everything has, oh my gosh. I was comparing, I had bought cake boxes like a year ago and they were \$60. Now they're like \$103. stuff like that, that really, it's very hard to try to balance it all out, you know, because at what point does this become prohibitive? Does this, you know, it just no longer makes sense to be in business, you know, to paying these prices and there's only so much you can pass on to the customer before the customer's like, wait a minute.

[00:25:57] **David Crabill:** You know, this is what all bakers are dealing with right now. Right. And as you've raised your prices, are customers pretty understanding, or have you gotten pushback?

[00:26:09] **Christina Marquez:** I've had a few that sometimes they ghost you, you know, you give them a quote and they stop responding. Or I did have one lady who said, that's really expensive. I do offer an explanation. Unfortunately with the cost the way they are, I've tried, you know, not to pass all of it onto the customer, but I can't keep prices the way they used to.

[00:26:29] **David Crabill:** I did see a post where you were selling a loaf of your lemon, blueberry quick bread for \$12.

[00:26:38] which I, I thought that that's pretty good price. I mean, like, that's, maybe a higher price than I was expecting. Not saying it's an unfair price, but it seems like you're charging the right amount. Would you say that's correct?

[00:26:50] **Christina Marquez:** I kind of, obviously, you know, I look at my bottom line. But when pricing, I also think about what would I pay for this. I'm a smart shopper, maybe not so much a bargain hunter or, you know, but I know what I would pay for products. So I try to price accordingly. Obviously, I can't work for free but I'm also not going to try to gouge the customer, you know, just so I can make an extra buck or two. That's not me. I try to keep it fair for everybody. And obviously sometimes there's going to be people who are like \$12 for a loaf of bread. Well, that's the price that I feel is fair. And I think when we're pricing things as, cottage food, as anybody who's in charge of pricing, not every customer is going to be for you. There will be people that no matter what you charge, they're going to think you're too expensive. And that's something you have to be comfortable with, you know, as somebody running a business is you're not for everybody, not everybody's going to like your stuff.

[00:27:41] Not everybody's going to like your prices, you know? This business can be, it can be tough, not everything's a big seller. Sometimes you think something's going to be a big seller and, oh my gosh, this is going to be the most popular thing ever. And, and it's not.

[00:27:54] There's been holidays when I've, you know, launched like special cookies or. cupcakes or I do a lot of like the d i y kits, you know,

like the decorate your own, cookies for Christmas, Halloween, Easter, whatever holiday. and some of those have been a total flop. It's happened, you know, whether it was a lack of marketing or, you know, sometimes I think financial stuff gets in the way for people.

[00:28:17] You know, there's, there's just this month there's no extra money for, you know, for extras. I know how that goes. I've got kids, I think, we've all experienced that on some level like that like sense of failure, that, you know, you thought something was going to go really great. I don't market a lot of Halloween stuff. For me, halloween has always kind of been a, a little bit of a flop. A few years ago I bought 50 or a hundred, plastic test tubes because I was, I did these DIY kits and I was going to put the sprinkles in the test tubes. They were going to be really cool. and I think I sold like three.

[00:28:49] You know, sometimes you, you think that something's going to go over really well and it doesn't, and that's kind of the nature of the beast.

[00:28:57] **David Crabill:** Well, I, I did see a few years ago that you were at least thinking of doing keto cupcakes. Did you ever do that?

[00:29:07] **Christina Marquez:** Oh gosh, that was a failure.. So I tried keto cupcakes, which were disgusting. although my keto friends said they were really good. I am definitely not a keto girl, although being diabetic, I should be, I didn't think they were that great. I have a really hard time, you know, making things that I think don't taste good. it was honestly, in my opinion, it was just kind of a flop. the texture wasn't there. I tried a few different recipes and I just, I invested all kinds of money in all these sweeteners and special ingredients that you need. I couldn't find passion that I have for baking. It just, It wasn't there because to me, it didn't taste good.

[00:29:46] I am my own worst critic. I think that's a lot of us, and I didn't feel comfortable even trying to market that because I didn't feel like it was a product that I normally put as far as quality.

[00:29:57] **David Crabill:** Well, you said that you, you know, have mostly focused on cakes over the years, and I can certainly see that from your social feed. Now, what are some cakes or, or one cake that's like really stood out to you over the years?

[00:30:14] **Christina Marquez:** A year or two ago, I have a friend that has been my friend for my gosh, well over 20 years. And our sons grew up together and her son got married and I got to make his wedding cake. And that was one of my most memorable cakes, just because I watched him grow up. Got to make his wedding cake. I also made my cousin's wedding cake back in 2012. That was my first wedding cake I ever made. I traveled, from Florida to South Carolina. for a while. I was using the hashtag have pans, will travel, and made her wedding cake and like 150 cupcakes. It was one of the first tiered cakes I had made. I look back at that cake now and I'm like, oh my gosh, that cake is a disaster. But she loved it and still talks about it.

[00:30:59] I made my daughter's, um, they had a smash cake photo session, and I made like a little individual cake for each of them.

[00:31:07] And then , I made a ginormous cake, which was, I want to say it was an eight inch round, but it was like at least a foot and a half tall. I just had this idea in my head that, oh my gosh, they should have this ginormous cake to smash for their photo session. you should have seen the photographer's face when we walked in with it. It also would not fit in a box, so drove to the photographer's house, which was like 30 minutes away from us. my husband drove and I had the cake on my lap the whole time. It was a really scary ride, but, that was probably one of my favorite cakes because it was, it was so fun and so far outside of anything I had ever made, and the girls loved it and they were an absolute mess afterwards.

[00:31:46] **David Crabill:** Can you recall any cake, mishaps, any cake, flops or failures or falls?

[00:31:55] **Christina Marquez:** Honestly, not, that I can think of. I've never even really had somebody come back and be like, Hey, I know you tried, but that cake was horrible. I've never really had somebody even come back and say like, it missed the mark, or it wasn't what I wanted. you know, I try really hard to know what they're looking for and, you know, when you're making a cake, you level it. so I always, take a piece off of what I leveled and make sure that it tastes okay and, try to make sure that you're putting out something that you're proud of.

[00:32:23] **David Crabill:** It just sounds like you have a very deep connection with your customers as well. And I can imagine that's probably one of the biggest reasons for your success as well.

[00:32:34] **Christina Marquez:** I try, I try very hard to put what they're telling me into, you know, make it a reality. as far as like a cake goes or cookies, I try to always be kind to my customers and, just listen to them. Sometimes I get to know all kinds of stuff that do I need to know to take their order? No, but. it costs nothing to be kind.

[00:32:55] **David Crabill:** Clearly you got a lot of word of mouth, and that helped grow. But you've been doing markets and events for a long time as well. Now, can you remember back to your first markets or maybe even your very first market, what that went like?

[00:33:12] **Christina Marquez:** My first market was actually in Florida, was a farmer's market. my tent was placed over a fire ant hill. so it was great. I all kinds of, I didn't even know what fire ants were. and I ended up with all kinds of bites all over my legs. So lesson learned, don't go in the grass, even if they tell you to. it was really an awesome experience though, I'm a people person. I love talking to people. I love getting to know people. so it was like the best of both worlds. You know, I was able to do what I loved baking, and I was able to talk to people. I'm still like that. I absolutely love the farmer's market that I do. maybe going to add a second one to my schedule this summer. and, you know, I'll sign up for craft fairs here and there, just because I, I, love the interaction more than anything. It's not all about making money, it's also about making connections.

[00:34:03] **David Crabill:** Now, what are some of the things that you find sell the best at markets?

[00:34:07] **Christina Marquez:** Lemon, blueberry bread, number one seller. And then the quarter pound cookies, Those are what people come back for.

[00:34:15] **David Crabill:** Do you get a lot of people who can sample your bread at the market and, you know, get a lot of new customers that way too?

[00:34:22] **Christina Marquez:** Yep. I've had a lot of people who pick up a business card, you know, they come and get a cookie or a bread and take my business card and then reach out. oh, I had your, I had your cookie at the market. I had your bread at the market. I see you make. it's a great way to meet people.

[00:34:36] And I think because, you know, this is primarily my business is primarily through Facebook. Like, it gives them a chance to put a name with a face and, know who they're talking to. And I, I think that's huge. Those connections.

[00:34:49] **David Crabill:** Well, you clearly love what you do so much that it sounds like you would do it for free, and I've seen that you actually have done it for free sometimes. So, can you share a bit about, I saw you did like your first icing, smiles cake.

[00:35:04] **Christina Marquez:** Oh my gosh, that was so long ago. . I feel very strongly that food conveys love. I always tell people, if I love you, I'll, cook for you or I'll bake for you. sometimes you hear of somebody who needs their day to be brightened and, I don't know. That just that really speaks to my heart. this past summer I did, a cake for, we have a a charity here called Fill a Heart 4 Kids, and it's, um, for foster kids. And they had posted that there was a young lady who was going to be celebrating her birthday in foster care. so I offered to make a cake I didn't meet her. I didn't, I met lady in charge, and she insisted on taking my picture and, posted it on their Facebook and. you know, I just did it because I've got kids. I , I can't imagine, you know, I, I can't imagine being a kid in foster care on your birthday. So I just wanted to brighten up her day. I also, through sugar cookie marketing, a bunch of us bakers got together and made cookies for the families in Uvalde, Texas. Um, sorry, I had, um, Mikey Rodriguez. She was the child that I made cookies for and that was really heartbreaking.

[00:36:21] I, I used my Eddie printer and printed h er picture on the cookies did one of like the, the Marine Institute that she wanted to go to school at and printed one with the shoes. tried to pick images that would represent her the best way. And I cried, oh my God., I cried, over that order. , oh, that wasn't even an order, but I, I cried over those cookies and, I was an emotional mess. Like, that was, that was really hard, I, I hope that I can't even say like, I hope they made those cookies, made them feel better. Like I don't know what it's like to lose a child in that situation, but I don't think anything would make me feel better. But I hope that it conveyed some love, you know, that the rest of the nation was sending them.

[00:37:05] **David Crabill:** A common thread through this whole conversation is that, you know, maybe you say yes too much, or maybe you have a hard time saying no. but at the end of the day, you just, like,

you care so much about serving other people. And that's a big part of, what's made you so successful.

[00:37:24] **Christina Marquez:** I believe that we should all try to leave the world a little better than before we came and you know, the, the cake donations and stuff, like why wouldn't I, I don't know. I mean, I'm not going to say, oh, I have this, this talent that, I was given, but I mean, I must have some sort of talent because people seem to like my stuff.

[00:37:44] You know, like, why wouldn't I want to share that with somebody, especially like a kid in foster care or that poor little girl's parents.

[00:37:52] **David Crabill:** Now why is it important for you to, run your business from home or, have you thought about maybe moving out into a storefront?

[00:38:06] **Christina Marquez:** I've weighed the pros and cons. Um, a few years ago I was definitely very, very much wanted to have a storefront. my, ultimate goal was to have a storefront and have my own little bakery. I think things have kind. Maybe recentered a little bit in the last few years. You know, COVID was pretty rough, financially on a lot of people. my own family included. So, you know, I started kind of thinking, well, how could I just, you know, keep doing what I'm doing and, get better at the planning aspect, you know, just, time management and, just keep doing what I'm doing from home versus a storefront. I know that if I had a storefront I would be away from home all day, part of the evening, because I care so much, I would have a really hard time just turning it over to somebody, you know, whether it be a manager or other staff, I, I think I would have a hard time leaving for the day and letting go So I think, I think for now this is, this is what works best for my family. it is a little better now. The girls are in school. They're in first grade. so, today I spent the day working on orders. it, it works out. I still have the flexibility, with having had a heart attack, I still have a lot of doctor's appointments and stuff, so have the flexibility to be able to do that stuff where I wouldn't have that with a storefront so, for now, I think I'm, I think I'm okay.

[00:39:29] **David Crabill:** Well, you might not be ready to turn part of your business over to somebody else, but I did see that you've at least collaborated with other bakers in your area. And of course this ties into

your, you make a lot of connections and relationships. So how has it been in terms of just interacting with other bakers in your area?.

[00:39:50] **Christina Marquez:** I've got a couple of baker friends that I talk to more than others. Some bakers, you know, they look at other bakers as competition. We don't have to be competition.

[00:40:01] There's plenty of customers out there for everybody. I look at them more like coworkers, you know, like we're not competitors, we're coworkers. Like, if I can help you in some way or clear up something, I'll do it. I have no problem helping other people. I'm not going to step on somebody else to build my success. There's enough for all of us.

[00:40:20] I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who's a baker, and she's about to do the, like the cottage food registration for our county and stuff.

[00:40:28] And, I told her, if you need help with that, I'll, I'll help you. I actually started a Facebook group for bakers in our county, so I told her I'm going to put it in the group that if anybody needs help with that, I'm more than happy to help.

[00:40:41] I've already done the whole process. it's not that hard. It's a little intimidating, like when you're trying to fill out all the, the labels for your ingredients and stuff like that. But it's not, you know, it's not something to be scared of. So I have no problem helping somebody else.

[00:40:55] **David Crabill:** Well, it's been pretty recently that Illinois improved their law to the point. A baker can, you know, sell directly from their home and not have to sell it to Farmer's Market. So can you just share a little bit about what that was like when that law came through, when your county started, you know, doing applications and what the process was like? there was,

[00:41:19] **Christina Marquez:** I think, a good amount of confusion at first, because I'm not sure who was in charge of, like, rolling out the applications and, paperwork. It was a lot of, um, we don't have it at this time. Give us some time. We're working on it and I think a lot of us as bakers, were just like, come on, get it done.

[00:41:36] We, this was so exciting. I mean, Illinois was, was extremely restrictive you know, so to have the, laws changed and feel like we were validated and legit, that was a big thing I mean, we live in Illinois, it's winter how many months out of the year? There are no farmer's markets.

[00:41:55] Like that was extremely restrictive and really not fair it was great to be able to feel like, okay, they're recognizing that, We are real businesses. We, we do contribute something.

[00:42:07] **David Crabill:** I'm just curious, your, your business goes back even before the whole Chloe Sterling Home Kitchen operation Law came into play, and I just was wondering if you ever tried to, you know, become a home kitchen operation Illinois, or if you did try, did your county just not allow.

[00:42:30] **Christina Marquez:** Before we moved to Florida, in 2012, I didn't really know anything as far as cottage. Like I said, I didn't even, wasn't even familiar with the term. when we moved to Florida, I had seen a farmer's market advertisement. and I called them to get more information and the lady was like, well, you have to have your cottage food permit, for Florida. you know, there's labeling requirements. so that was really when I realized like, wow, okay, there's, there's stuff you have to do. at that point I didn't investigate into Illinois's laws because we didn't live in Illinois anymore. and then in 2015 we moved back to Illinois and I reached out, I think I did some research, and reached out to the health department to just find out like, Hey, what exactly are the laws? And. I was basically told, you know, that it was just at farmer's markets. and I did express, how unfair that really was considering our, our climate. It's not like we have farmer's markets year round. and I was told off the record, you do your thing, be careful. and the only time you and I will ever talk is if somebody gets sick or somebody reports you, maybe not the best advice, but um, at the time, you know, that was.

[00:43:46] **David Crabill:** Oh, I, I had somebody else on the podcast that was running their business in Illinois back then, and their health department said the same.

[00:43:53] **Christina Marquez:** Yeah, I proceeded with caution. That's kind of why I was more, low key, didn't put myself out there as much because I didn't want to get in trouble. And, I mean, really, unless you're putting like, custard with eggs or, you know, something temperature

controlled in a cake, like a cake's not going to really make people sick. but I just, I just proceeded with caution. I'm very grateful that things have changed. and as far as the cupcake law, I believe it was dependent on the village. Like the town that you lived in had to have the cupcake.

[00:44:24] **David Crabill:** Correct? Yeah. That your county would've had to have their own ordinance. And most counties didn't.

[00:44:30] **Christina Marquez:** Yeah, I think it wasn't on the table and wasn't trying to make any waves at that point. I was working full-time and had a full time job. I was making cakes but it was still fairly small.

[00:44:42] **David Crabill:** Well, now that you do have your cottage food permit, do you feel like liberated? I mean, at this point you've been running your business for a long time, right? So did it actually change anything about how you proceed with your business now?

[00:44:58] **Christina Marquez:** I, I don't cringe when people tag me in cake posts., I used to kind of cringe a little bit , just because, you know, I, like I said, I, I tried to just kind of keep it quiet and, you know, not get my name out there so much. it's kind of like feeling legitimate. You. Like, you go from feeling like you're, oh, well I don't want everybody to know about this. And now I've got a t-shirt with Twisted Sifter's on it. Like just I feel like I get to be proud of, of what I've done. And that's, that's an awesome feeling.

[00:45:32] **David Crabill:** Well, what's coming up for you next? I know you might not be doing a storefront in the near future, but, what, what do you have your eyes set?

[00:45:41] **Christina Marquez:** Oh goodness, you never know where I'll turn up David I would like to do some more classes. I don't enjoy large groups, but I enjoy small groups of people. You'll never see me getting up in front of a people in an auditorium, but I do enjoy like doing decorating classes and I'm going to try to do some more of those. I've had quite a few people asking me about like kids decorating classes. Just need to find a, find an appropriate venue, and work that kind of stuff out. My first love was I wanted to be a teacher so that would kind of be the best of both worlds. Get to be around kids and technically teaching, but teaching something fun.

[00:46:19] **David Crabill:** And are you wanting to like grow the sales or are you good where you are right now?

[00:46:27] **Christina Marquez:** This past year probably would've been a really great year for me, had my, my health problems not interfered. so I'm hoping that 2023 is my most profitable year yet crossing my fingers. I would like to grow a little bit. I'm, I'm not sure what that'll look like, given the, space and time and only time will tell.

[00:46:48] **David Crabill:** And I can tell that the business means a lot to you. Why do you love it so much?

[00:46:55] **Christina Marquez:** it is truly my passion. I wake up thinking about cake. I go to sleep, thinking about cake. every order means the world to me. every time somebody chooses, to order their, cake or cookies with me, like that is like the biggest compliment. I know that there's lots of choices out there. it's like an affirmation that you're doing something right.

[00:47:16] **David Crabill:** Well, Christina, thank you so much for coming on and sharing your story and sharing all that advice with us today. So, thank you for that. Now, if somebody would like to learn more about your business, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:47:35] **Christina Marquez:** I've got a Castiron store and I've also got a Facebook page, Twisted Sifter's Baked Goods or you can reach me at twisted sifters baked goods@gmail.com.

[00:47:45] **David Crabill:** Perfect. Well, I'll put links to those in the show notes. But thank you so much again for coming on and sharing with us today.

[00:47:53] **Christina Marquez:** Thank you so much, David.

[00:47:55] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager Podcast. For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/84.

[00:48:07] And if you're enjoying this podcast, please take a quick moment right now and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. It doesn't have to be a long review, but it's truly the best way to support this show and will help others find it as well.

[00:48:19] And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

[00:48:32] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.