

Denise Golia with Dee's Little Sweets

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 Denise Golia. But real quick, I wanted to check, have you created a website for your business yet? If you have, do you pay for it?

[00:00:20] A lot of entrepreneurs still think they need to spend money to get a good website and that is simply not true anymore. I am a really big fan of Square Online. That's what I use for my fudge businesses website and I created a free tutorial that will walk you through how to set up a totally free website in less than one hour.

[00:00:39] And in case you think free also means cheap, it's actually quite the opposite. I think Square Online is hands down the very best website tool for most cottage food businesses. So, if you want to learn more, you can watch my free tutorial by going to forrager.com/website.. Alright, so I have Denise Golia on the show today.

[00:01:00] She lives in North Providence, Rhode Island and sells gluten free and vegan cupcakes with her cottage food business, Dee's Little Sweets. When Denise started her business back in 2020, Rhode Island still didn't have a cottage food law that she could use, so she baked from a shared commercial kitchen instead.

[00:01:19] But when Rhode Island passed a decent cottage food law a couple years later, she immediately switched over to it, and that's allowed her business to be far more successful. In this episode, she shares how a physical injury led her to start her own food business, what it's been like to transition from commercial to cottage food, and the unique challenges and opportunities she's faced from niching way down.

[00:01:46] And with that, let's jump right into this episode. Welcome to the show, Denise. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:55] **Denise Golia:** Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:58] **David Crabill:** Well, Denise, can you take me back to the beginning of this journey? How did it all get started?

[00:02:04] **Denise Golia:** Well, um, I started with gluten free baked goods because we found out that my grandson, when he was around six, six and a half, was celiac.

[00:02:13] So I started teaching myself to bake gluten free and he would actually bake with me every other weekend. We'd do cookies, so he'd have snacks for school and snacks for home. Then I started digging a little deeper, went into cupcakes. My family loved them, and they said I should stop selling them. So that's how it all got started.

[00:02:32] **David Crabill:** And what year was this when you started to make gluten free items?

[00:02:38] **Denise Golia:** The cookie started a long time ago because he's 20 now. I've been doing this for a while, but not as a business. The business started about four years ago.

[00:02:47] **David Crabill:** What were you doing before running this business?

[00:02:51] **Denise Golia:** I was a hairstylist for about 25 years.

[00:02:53] **David Crabill:** Uh, was that your own business, uh, or were you working at a boutique or something?

[00:03:01] **Denise Golia:** I worked in a salon. I didn't own my own business. And I had two spine surgeries, so I've actually become permanently disabled. But I'm bored. I can't just do nothing, so doing this business has been great.

[00:03:17] **David Crabill:** And when you say you're disabled, clearly you're still able to do baking and run this business.

[00:03:22] But can you just share a little bit about the extent of your injury?

[00:03:28] **Denise Golia:** The injury is on my cervical spine. So from my, my neck is fused with titanium plates and screws. So, I have limited range of motion in my neck and on my right side, and there's also a rotator cuff tear that's not operable because it's small.

[00:03:43] I live with chronic pain, and I need to be able to do things at my own pace, so starting my own business and baking, you know, in a way that is comfortable for me, helps out a lot. When Rhode Island made cottage food legal, that was even better.

[00:04:01] **David Crabill:** Was this an actual injury or was this just a disease or something that happened to you?

[00:04:07] You

[00:04:09] **Denise Golia:** Now, I'm not exactly sure what to call it. I think over time, the discs that they removed, they had herniated. So I think it was just wear and tear.

[00:04:20] **David Crabill:** So if it weren't for this injury, do you feel like you just would have kept working at the salon?

[00:04:26] **Denise Golia:** Yeah, um, the position I had when I had to leave was, um, an educator's position, and I traveled all over the country, so I probably would not be doing this, no.

[00:04:37] **David Crabill:** So you weren't actually doing hairstyling by the time you were kind of forced to quit?

[00:04:44] **Denise Golia:** Right. I occasionally worked in the salons if they needed help, but most of the time I was off teaching classes, holding seminars, things like that for the company.

[00:04:55] **David Crabill:** So how long was it between when you stopped working at the salon to when you started pursuing this as a business?

[00:05:04] **Denise Golia:** I don't know, it was about four years.

[00:05:07] **David Crabill:** Can you take me through those four years? I mean, was that a difficult time for you? Are you someone that likes to work? Were you happy to kind of be retired or semi retired?

[00:05:19] **Denise Golia:** You know, I thought I was going to be, believe it or not. And after I had my second surgery in 2016, I started to feel a little better.

[00:05:26] I wasn't at a point where I could do things all day long. I was at a point where I became extremely bored. I need to work. I have to be productive doing something. And I've always loved to bake. I've been baking since I could reach a countertop. I just never pursued it as a business until Nathan ended up becoming Celiac.

[00:05:46] So it was after my second surgery that the boredom set in and the business started.

[00:05:52] **David Crabill:** So given your injury, working at a bakery wouldn't work for you, I assume. Like you have to do things at a slower pace. Yes, exactly. Is there anything that you feel like you took out of your cosmetology career that you brought into the business?

[00:06:12] **Denise Golia:** I'm relentlessly dedicated. I've been that way since I can remember in any job I've ever had. I'm a perfectionist, very dedicated, I don't stop. If I hit a stumbling block, it's like a vendetta. I'll go after it until I achieve it.

[00:06:28] **David Crabill:** So you said that you've been doing this business for four years, so did you start it in 2020 then?

[00:06:34] Yes. Was it before or after the pandemic started? Oh, before. Okay. So right at the beginning of 2020.

[00:06:44] **Denise Golia:** Yeah.

[00:06:45] **David Crabill:** So when you started your business, what were your plans? Where did you expect your business to go?

[00:06:53] **Denise Golia:** Well, honestly, I was hoping to just have a website up, take orders and work things that way. And then I discovered Farmer's Markets and that opened up a whole new world.

[00:07:03] And that's what I've been doing ever since, along with taking orders.

[00:07:08] **David Crabill:** Did you start the Farmer's Markets before the pandemic set in?

[00:07:13] **Denise Golia:** Yes.

[00:07:15] **David Crabill:** And then I'd imagine they shut down for a little period of time.

[00:07:20] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes, they did. That gave me time to test recipes and create new things. So I made good use of that time.

[00:07:29] **David Crabill:** Now were you gluten free from the beginning of your business?

[00:07:34] **Denise Golia:** Yes.

[00:07:35] **David Crabill:** And it's because your grandson is celiac, so you'd practiced, you know, making gluten free recipes all this time. Do you also eat gluten free?

[00:07:46] **Denise Golia:** No, I, I don't actually. My sister is celiac, my mom is sensitive, but I have no dietary issues at all.

[00:07:54] **David Crabill:** So if you don't eat gluten free yourself, why did you choose to start a gluten free bakery as opposed to just making gluten items as well?

[00:08:05] **Denise Golia:** I felt like I wanted to help people find something good because at that time, to find something gluten free that actually tasted like a good pastry, we're few and far between.

[00:08:16] Most of the stuff was kind of, it tasted a little sandy, a little dry. Sometimes a little of both. Um, so I wanted to test and create cupcakes or cookies that resembled more of a standard cupcake or cookie so you can't tell the difference. And from the feedback I get, I've, I've achieved that and I'm so happy.

[00:08:36] **David Crabill:** Um, you mentioned at the time, the gluten free options, it was pretty hard to find things that tasted the same. Do you feel like that's still the case today?

[00:08:47] **Denise Golia:** I think there are better options today. Gluten free has definitely come a long way. So that's why I've also decided to include gluten free vegan options as well.

[00:08:57] **David Crabill:** So your focus on gluten free wasn't so much you thinking that it's like a trend or it's a good business angle, but just more from the sense of wanting to serve people.

[00:09:12] **Denise Golia:** Yes, they should be able to, even though they're gluten free, I feel they should be able to have something yummy. You know, not just have to deal with what they get.

[00:09:18] You know what I mean?

[00:09:21] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I'm just kind of correlating it with your cosmetology career, and that's a very service oriented business, so I think it kind of makes sense to me that that was the motive in this case. Yes. When you started the business, were you solely focused on gluten free?

[00:09:42] **Denise Golia:** Yes.

[00:09:44] **David Crabill:** So when you started the business, why didn't you consider doing both, right?

[00:09:50] Like offering gluten free and also offering traditional baked goods?

[00:09:55] **Denise Golia:** I wanted to avoid cross contamination. That was my biggest thing. I wanted a dedicated gluten free bakery. And

[00:10:02] **David Crabill:** I know that at that time in 2020. Rhode Island did not have a cottage food lot yet. So were you operating under the table? Did you actually go to the effort of getting a commercial kitchen?

[00:10:17] **Denise Golia:** Yep. I went into a commercial kitchen. I love the space and I love the equipment. The bill, not so much.

[00:10:25] **David Crabill:** And was this your own dedicated commercial kitchen?

[00:10:30] **Denise Golia:** Oh, I wish. No, I'd still, if that were the case, I'd still have it. It's called Millrace Kitchen, and they're based out of Rhode Island, and they, uh, host a lot of vendors.

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[00:10:39] **David Crabill:** Wouldn't there be cross contamination concerns in that case?

[00:10:45] **Denise Golia:** It would have been very minuscule, because that place, you scrubbed it when you walked in, and it got scrubbed when you walked out. Everything was completely sanitized, so risk JS

[00:10:59] **David Crabill:** And what were the hours like? Were you having to work at night in order to find time?

[00:11:06] If there's a lot of vendors there, was it easy for them to accommodate the hours you wanted to work?

[00:11:12] **Denise Golia:** I

[00:11:12] **David Crabill:** wasn't

[00:11:12] **Denise Golia:** too picky about the hours as long as I wasn't working in the middle of the night. They had um, like a scheduler that we could look at online and you would just find time that was available and insert yourself in there.

[00:11:25] Anytime you booked time, it had to be a minimum of two hours.

[00:11:30] **David Crabill:** Uh, was there a minimum that you had to hit per month?

[00:11:34] **Denise Golia:** No, they were very, very reasonable. And their rates were reasonable as well.

[00:11:39] **David Crabill:** So you obviously had this connection with your grandson, with the celiac thing, the gluten free thing. I know there are some entrepreneurs that see a trend come along, like gluten free was a big trend, still is in a large way, and they want to pursue the trend even though they may not actually have their own personal connection to it.

[00:12:02] Do you feel like having that connection with your grandson was necessary for you to be successful?

[00:12:09] **Denise Golia:** I would say yes, because I don't think I would have gone there otherwise.

[00:12:13] **David Crabill:** Is it something that you talk with people about a lot at the markets?

[00:12:19] **Denise Golia:** Yes. A lot of people ask me why I started going gluten free, and when I talk about my grandson, they love the story, and they love cupcakes, so that's all good.

[00:12:29] **David Crabill:** And are your customers mostly gluten free? Or are they just looking for healthier options?

[00:12:37] **Denise Golia:** Well, I get a range of both. I get more people that are gluten free and have allergies to dairy and eggs and things like that, but then again, I also get customers that are like me and they just want a good cupcake or, you know what, you know what I mean?

[00:12:51] It doesn't matter that it's a gluten free item to them.

[00:12:55] **David Crabill:** What would you estimate as the percentage in terms of what percentage of your customers have a specific diet?

[00:13:04] **Denise Golia:** I would say 70-30. 70 have a specific diet and 30 percent don't.

[00:13:10] **David Crabill:** That's pretty interesting to me. I actually feel like that's really high, because a lot of the guests that I've had on the show that are gluten free or vegan, do keto. I'd say most of their customers tend to just be people that don't have specific dietary needs.

[00:13:27] So it sounds to me like you're in an area where there's a strong demand for this.

[00:13:34] **Denise Golia:** Yes, and there are only a few actual, even storefront bakeries that carry a variety of flavors. I think I have the highest variety of flavors in the state, to be honest.

[00:13:46] **David Crabill:** So would you say that the brick and mortar bakeries in your area, pretty much all of them cater to gluten free in some way?

[00:13:55] **Denise Golia:** Yes, they'll do a couple of flavors, maybe like chocolate and vanilla. And other gluten free bakeries in the area carry other items that aren't cupcakes. They'll do cinnamon rolls or um, actual cakes, different things.

[00:14:11] **David Crabill:** If you say your grandson wasn't celiac and you never learned how to make gluten free items, but you still had this injury, you still got pushed out of your cosmetology career, do you think you would have ever started another kind of food business?

[00:14:26] Like, do you think you would have ended up here since you said you love to bake?

[00:14:30] **Denise Golia:** It's very

[00:14:31] **David Crabill:** possible. Do you think you would have been successful doing a non diet specific, maybe more traditional bakery from home?

[00:14:42] **Denise Golia:** I don't know. I think I could have been successful, but not maybe as successful because there's way more competition in a general baking area as opposed to something that's a specialty.

[00:14:53] **David Crabill:** And it sounds like your products, your gluten free products, are exceptionally good. Can people just simply not tell the difference between your items and a traditional cupcake?

[00:15:07] **Denise Golia:** No, they can't tell the difference. No, and my favorite thing is having people try, because I give samples when I'm at the markets and they try it and the look on their face just tells me everything I want to know.

[00:15:18] And it always makes me so happy.

[00:15:21] **David Crabill:** Do you find the markets where you sell only gluten free and then they just turn away?

[00:15:29] **Denise Golia:** I get a few people like that. Yes. They'll walk by my table and go, oh, we don't like gluten-free. And I'm like, okay, what are you gonna do? You know, gluten-free comes with stigma attached to it.

[00:15:39] People that have had gluten-free in the past and haven't tried anything new that people make now. Not just me, other people make great gluten-free stuff too, and they just stay away from it because they had a bad experience with it.

[00:15:53] **David Crabill:** And now Rhode Island passed their cottage food law in 2022, I believe.

[00:16:01] They were the last state to have a cottage food law that applied to the general public. So when they passed that, did you switch over to be in a cottage food business? Immediately. Oh yes. So what were the first two years like? Because that's a pretty long time, right? From the beginning of 2022. 2022, where you are operating out of this commercial kitchen.

[00:16:27] **Denise Golia:** It was nice to have all that space and equipment, but it was a time crunch because you have other people coming in and you needed to be all cleaned up and done and everything sanitized and looking nice before you could leave and you didn't want to infringe on the time that they booked. So you were playing beat the clock.

[00:16:45] So I always had to have help in the commercial kitchen, my mom and my grandson. Sometimes my husband, if he was available, they'd all be helping me in the kitchen so I could get those cupcakes made for an order or a market. In my own home, I don't need any help because I can just do it on my own time.

[00:17:04] **David Crabill:** Yeah. In terms of talking about the pressure of meeting time demands, I mean, I feel like your injury comes into play here, right? That was one of the reasons why you couldn't continue working a typical job.

[00:17:18] **Denise Golia:** Exactly. You hit the nail on the head there.

[00:17:21] **David Crabill:** But you weren't able to just, like, book more time, or it just wasn't economically feasible to do that?

[00:17:28] **Denise Golia:** No, it wouldn't have been economically feasible. When I became a cottage food kitchen instead, my business was instantly profitable.

[00:17:37] **David Crabill:** So were you working in the red for those first two years? Yes. So what kept you going?

[00:17:46] **Denise Golia:** Well, I was trying to have faith in the system. I was watching the cottage food laws and all the other states that were doing it.

[00:17:51] And I figured Rhode Island has to do it eventually. They can't be the only state that doesn't. So I figured I'd just bide my time and see what happens or I can end up having to hire people.

[00:18:02] **David Crabill:** I was actually pretty surprised when they finally put that law together in 2022. I didn't necessarily see it coming.

[00:18:10] Were you involved in any way in the passage of the law?

[00:18:15] **Denise Golia:** No, I wasn't, but I was one of the first six bakeries to make use of it.

[00:18:22] **David Crabill:** Can you take me through that first year, you know, as a new business? Obviously, you went the traditional route, had to get a shared kitchen, had to pay those costs. But you were doing markets, and you said you weren't necessarily making money, but do you feel like your business was fairly successful in that first year?

[00:18:43] **Denise Golia:** I do. I gained popularity quickly. The more I got out there and found more markets, you had to find the right markets. So I tried doing some big events that didn't go too well for me. So sticking with the smaller markets did, and I kind of had to find the right places where people wanted what I had in abundance.

[00:19:02] And once that happened, things started going very well.

[00:19:07] **David Crabill:** Are there aspects of markets other than maybe the fact that they're smaller? Are you able to predict whether or not your products will do well there based on certain aspects of that market?

[00:19:18] **Denise Golia:** I found that the markets on the south end of Rhode Island do extremely well with what I have to offer.

[00:19:25] But on the north end, like where I live, it's a little slower. So I just don't bring as much with me because I do want to have a presence in my own community. I do a couple of markets in my own area, but most of them are on the south side because that's where the money is.

[00:19:40] **David Crabill:** After that first year, say in 2021, were you doing multiple markets per week?

[00:19:49] Were you doing multiple locations?

[00:19:52] **Denise Golia:** Let's see, um, by 2021, I would say during the summer season, I would do about three to four markets a week. And during the winter season, about maybe two at that time.

[00:20:05] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like your business just took off in terms of people finding it and it becoming popular, or do you feel like it's grown very organically?

[00:20:15] **Denise Golia:** That's a tough question to answer. Um, I felt like it went pretty quickly, especially during the spring and summer, the markets are crazy. So it definitely went quickly during that time of year because my business has expanded every year after that.

[00:20:29] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like it grew just because you had an exceptional product that nobody else had, or do you think it was just due to the lack of gluten free options in an area?

[00:20:42] **Denise Golia:** I'd say it's the product. Because even if there were more options in the area, if the option isn't good, people aren't going to come back for it. Can

[00:20:51] **David Crabill:** you share, you know, sort of what you sell at a market?

[00:20:56] **Denise Golia:** What I bring to the markets, I try to rotate my flavors because I have over 40 of them that I do regularly.

[00:21:02] I always make sure that I have either a chocolate or a vanilla option because, you know, with the sprinkles, because the kids like that. Other than that, I usually bring three other flavors, usually something with fruit, something more traditional like a carrot cake, something with peanut butter. I try to cater to popular but different flavors that people might like.

[00:21:25] **David Crabill:** Do you only make cupcakes?

[00:21:29] **Denise Golia:** No, actually, I also do cake pucks. They're kind of like a cake pop, but they're shaped like a hockey puck.

[00:21:36] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I don't know if I've seen anyone else do a cake puck. How did you land on that idea?

[00:21:43] **Denise Golia:** By mistake, actually. A friend of mine who's a chef suggested that I try to repurpose any cupcakes that didn't sell because I would just give them away to the vendors or donate them to police and fire departments or a homeless shelter.

[00:21:58] He suggested I repurpose them into cake pops. So I tried that. Didn't do very well at it. It was, um, something I just, I knew to throw in the towel. Let's put it that way. And I stumbled upon, uh, the cake puck molds by mistake.

It was just something I happened to find. It came up during a search. So I'm like, okay, that looks like fun.

[00:22:18] And I bought some molds, and I gave it a shot, and it worked, and people loved them. The beauty of it is, I don't operate at a loss anymore because cake pucks have a long shelf life.

[00:22:30] **David Crabill:** That's interesting. I feel like you're the first person who has preserved their unsold items in that way. You know, like you've essentially put them in chocolate, right?

[00:22:43] Yes. Or some kind of candy melt.

[00:22:46] **Denise Golia:** It's exactly what I do. I mix the cake and frosting together and cover it with candy.

[00:22:51] **David Crabill:** That's really interesting. And they sell well?

[00:22:55] **Denise Golia:** Very well.

[00:22:57] **David Crabill:** Now, are you at the point where they're selling well enough, where you don't have enough unsold product that you have to make them new?

[00:23:05] **Denise Golia:** I've had to do that, yes. So I try to just bake extra cupcakes, and I bring them with me, and if they sell, they sell. That's fine. But I try to make it so I have some extra, so I don't have to bake more cakes separately.

[00:23:20] **David Crabill:** That's really nice from a market perspective because you don't necessarily know how much you're going to sell at any given market or maybe it'll rain one day, right, and you can't sell everything.

[00:23:30] So you have a contingency plan in case you don't sell. It's really interesting. Very creative. Thank you. And so you have the cupcakes and the cake pucks and that's it. Like that's the entirety of your business.

[00:23:46] **Denise Golia:** That's what I bring to the markets. On my website, I also have cookies.

[00:23:51] **David Crabill:** And why don't you sell the cookies at the markets as well?

[00:23:56] **Denise Golia:** We have other gluten free bakers that do that. And there are also other general bakers that also have cookies at the markets. It's kind of oversaturated. You know, so I'd rather have the cupcakes and then I have the cake pucks that no one does. I don't think anyone other than me does them in this state.

[00:24:12] I could be wrong, but I haven't seen them anywhere else.

[00:24:16] **David Crabill:** I haven't seen anyone using them anywhere, so you're definitely the first one I've seen that does that. I know you said you felt like the cookies were over-saturated. There's a lot of other gluten free items that you could do, though. Have you experimented with other gluten free things?

[00:24:34] **Denise Golia:** Um, not really. I've tried making cakes, but my shoulder injury prevents me from doing anything elaborate because my range of motion isn't there anymore. So I can't really do anything fancy. I don't like to roll dough to make bread or things like eclairs or anything like that. I have to be very selective in what I do and how long that I have to do it for.

[00:24:59] **David Crabill:** And what have you been pricing your cupcakes at? Like, what were the prices at when you started?

[00:25:07] **Denise Golia:** When I started, I was doing about \$4 per cupcake. And then we would bundle from there. Like, they'd get four at a reduced rate, or they could get six at like a bundle price.

[00:25:19] **David Crabill:** And then what are they now?

[00:25:21] **Denise Golia:** They're \$4.50. I haven't raised my prices in two years.

[00:25:27] **David Crabill:** And it seems like your prices should have been raised by more than that. You know, considering. The pandemic, cost of ingredients. Why have you not raised it more than, I guess, 50 cents?

[00:25:41] **Denise Golia:** The cost of ingredients hasn't made it so that I have to, let's put it that way. I thought, to me, if I'm not paying an arm and a leg to make something, I'm not going to charge you an arm and a leg to buy it.

[00:25:52] Because I don't have the cost of the kitchen anymore, and honestly my margins are pretty, they're pretty decent, and my cost of goods is low. I buy in bulk. You have a place here called Restaurant Depot, and that's for a lot of people. People who own restaurants or do what I do, they'll go there for the big stuff, like flour, powdered sugar, brown sugar, baking powder, things like that.

[00:26:16] And you can get the smaller stuff online. What do you call it? The extracts, things like that. The little things. You can actually get pretty good amounts at lower prices online than you would going into a market. And when I do a breakdown, because I have a program that allows me to enter in my, um, cost of goods, and it tells me what it would cost me per unit, and it's low, so I don't feel the need to just raise my prices because I can.

[00:26:43] **David Crabill:** How have you found any resistance to your pricing?

[00:26:47] **Denise Golia:** No, no, it's pretty competitive to, um, what we have here in Rhode Island, as far as gluten free goes. I try to stay competitive and not go too below or too much higher than what other bakeries are doing.

[00:27:00] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like you could raise your pricing?

[00:27:04] **Denise Golia:** I could, and I've had, um, other vendors say that to me, and they say, Oh, Pete, we would pay \$5 for these, these are fantastic, and, you know, I, I thank them and I appreciate it.

[00:27:14] But I just, at this point, I don't feel right doing it.

[00:27:18] **David Crabill:** I know that some of your cupcakes are also vegan. Did you focus on veganism just to simply try to differentiate your products? Or was that also with the mind of being of service to people?

[00:27:34] **Denise Golia:** During the markets, I got asked by several people, do you do anything dairy free?

[00:27:39] Do you do anything egg free? And I got asked often enough that I said, well, maybe I should, because obviously now I could see a need for it, you know, and I've heard a lot of people say, People do gluten free, people do vegan, but they don't see a lot of gluten free vegan that's done well. So I'm like, okay, I'll give it a shot and we'll see what happens.

[00:27:59] And it's a winner. People love it.

[00:28:03] **David Crabill:** Did you find it challenging to create a gluten free vegan cupcake?

[00:28:09] **Denise Golia:** Uh, oh yeah, a lot of mishaps from the oven, some sunken cupcakes, and I think until I got the, um, ratios right and I found the right products that work well together.

[00:28:21] **David Crabill:** Now, you've said that your cupcakes are pretty much indistinguishable from a traditional cupcake.

[00:28:28] Would you also say that's true of your gluten free vegan cupcakes?

[00:28:33] **Denise Golia:** I think they're better than the standard gluten free. And I've heard that from other people and, oh, they just can't tell the difference at all. They're like, this is a vegan cupcake, are you kidding?

[00:28:44] **David Crabill:** And do you price those even higher? Nope, they're the same.

[00:28:51] Do they have more expensive ingredients in them?

[00:28:56] **Denise Golia:** Honestly, my cost of goods might go up by 5 cents, maybe 10 cents. It doesn't go up that high to make me have to charge more for them.

[00:29:05] **David Crabill:** Well, you're taking out eggs and we know how much that's increased in price recently, so.

[00:29:10] **Denise Golia:** That's the reason I did it. I couldn't stand it anymore.

[00:29:13] The egg prices were up and then they went down and then they went up and then they went down. I'm like, okay, that's it. I'm done. We're getting rid of the eggs.

[00:29:21] **David Crabill:** Well, if you feel like they're better, why wouldn't you just switch fully to vegan?

[00:29:26] **Denise Golia:** I've thought about it. I honestly have. I'm just trying to figure out a way to kind of name it.

[00:29:32] It's just a gluten free vegan meal, gluten free vegan bakery. I'm not sure how it would go over because some just buy the gluten free but they stay away from the vegan and then you have the people that have no choice but to have the vegan because they can't have the gluten free and I don't mind doing both.

[00:29:49] **David Crabill:** And I noticed that you said you do the cookies, and I saw on your website that some of those you brand as keto. So I'm just curious about, you know, if you've been trying to hop onto that trend or if you've gotten requests for that.

[00:30:04] **Denise Golia:** The keto started, uh, I started making those for my husband because he's a type 2 diabetic.

[00:30:09] And then I brought them to a market, and people liked them. They didn't sell as well as the other things did, the cupcakes and the cake pucks. But I'm actually working on sugar free. I've got the cake right. The frosting is a little challenging.

[00:30:26] **David Crabill:** It's this a gluten free, vegan, sugar free cupcake?

[00:30:31] **Denise Golia:** Yeah. I'm hoping.

[00:30:32] **David Crabill:** Well, you said you have the cake right.

[00:30:37] **Denise Golia:** I do. I do. It's the frosting that's driving me crazy.

[00:30:42] **David Crabill:** Well, even just getting the cake right on that sounds like I don't really see that very much. Or at all, you probably have a very strong market for sugar free.

[00:30:54] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes, yes. I see it all the time. They come by, they look, I offer a sample.

[00:31:00] I can't, I can't have sugar. And I see it so often that I keep trying to, to get it right so I can bring something for them too.

[00:31:08] **David Crabill:** And when you say sugar free, you just mean cutting out the refined sugar? Yes. So, what are you using as a sweetener?

[00:31:20] **Denise Golia:** Uh, I use, um, it's a Splenda product, uh, brown sugar, because I don't use white cane sugar in anything.

[00:31:26] Everything I bake is with brown sugar. It's tough to keep gluten free moist. It wants to dry up all the time, so you gotta have the right balance of moisture in there without things sinking on you. You know, so this, um, this Splenda product, brown sugar, works very well.

[00:31:43] **David Crabill:** Do you have a vegan option for almost all of your flavors?

[00:31:51] **Denise Golia:** Yes, I can recreate any of them as vegan.

[00:31:55] **David Crabill:** All right, so you have them all as vegan as well.

[00:31:58] **Denise Golia:** Yes.

[00:31:59] **David Crabill:** Are there certain cupcakes that you don't do just because you can't create a vegan option for it?

[00:32:07] **Denise Golia:** No, not yet.

[00:32:09] **David Crabill:** Before you switched to the cottage food realm, you were selling out of a shared kitchen, so you didn't have the limitations of the cottage food lot, right?

[00:32:18] So you could do cheesecakes and things like that. Is that ever anything you did? Any kind of perishable baked goods?

[00:32:26] **Denise Golia:** Yeah, I did, um, things like cream cheese frosting and stuff like that. Now, I just use other flavors and extracts to create the cream cheese flavor, or I just don't refrigerate it myself.

[00:32:38] **David Crabill:** You surprised people? Did people notice the difference?

[00:32:43] **Denise Golia:** No, no one noticed a difference.

[00:32:46] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like that's limiting you at all? In terms of the limitations of the cottage food law, do you feel like they've limited your current business?

[00:32:55] **Denise Golia:** Not really. No, I've, um, found ways to do what I would like to do.

[00:33:02] **David Crabill:** And you are still under the cottage food realm, correct?

[00:33:06] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes.

[00:33:08] **David Crabill:** Have there been any flavor failures? Yes. Like, you've done a lot of experimenting with flavors. Any flavors that didn't work well?

[00:33:19] **Denise Golia:** No, if it didn't work well at first, I found a way to make it work through research and product testing.

[00:33:27] **David Crabill:** Do a lot of the flavors come from customer requests or are they just you thinking up things and creating them?

[00:33:35] **Denise Golia:** I'd say, I'd say a little bit of both. A little bit of both. I've had people say, Oh, have you done anything with cranberries or have you thought, because these are some things I just don't think they're doing because I'm not a big cranberry person. So my mind's not going to go there. The lemon cupcake.

[00:33:50] That was my mom. She said, Oh, you should do something with lemon. So I'm like, okay. So I made a lemon cupcake. It came out great. And then I grew that and did the lemon blueberry. I do a lot of research with what pairs well with what, and then I get my flavor profiles from doing that. As well as suggestions from people that, you know, some things I just wouldn't think of otherwise.

[00:34:13] **David Crabill:** So are there certain flavors that you bring back to the market every week? My customer favorites?

[00:34:20] **Denise Golia:** I always have chocolate and vanilla. A lot of people like the plain flavors, but I rotate the flavors, so I don't do anything purposely because I haven't found, like, that have just like one or two flavors that everybody asks me for.

[00:34:35] They ask me for different things. When are you bringing the carrot cake back? Oh, when are you going to bring the chocolate peanut butter or the Boston cream? You know, those are some big winners. They like the caramel

apple butter or they bought the lemon. So I have, um, a good variety of people that when I'm at the markets, there's always something that they like, but I can't say that I bring something every week specifically.

[00:34:57] If they want it, they can order it. They know that. And I'll bring it to them. No problem.

[00:35:02] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I saw on your website that you say you do free delivery. I think it was up to 45 minutes away. Is that correct?

[00:35:13] **Denise Golia:** Yes.

[00:35:15] **David Crabill:** That seems outrageous to me, like, I don't know how you could, how do you make that work in terms of, I mean, if you're driving 40 minutes to somebody and back, uh, is there a minimum order limit or something like that?

[00:35:30] **Denise Golia:** Yep. Minimum order is a dozen.

[00:35:33] **David Crabill:** That's still quite a ways to go for a dozen, but I guess, you know, if you're selling these for 4. 50 a piece, but still, that's quite a bit of your time. Or do you hire someone to do deliveries? Yes.

[00:35:45] **Denise Golia:** I don't necessarily hire someone. Um, if I'm busy and my husband isn't, he'll do some for me or my mom's done it too.

[00:35:53] Honestly, I get most of my business at farmer's markets and a lot of people pick up orders there or they'll pick up at my home. My deliveries are few and far between. I don't really get a lot of that. I have people drive here from Newport to pick up orders. That's about 40 minutes from where I live in the same state.

[00:36:13] **David Crabill:** Do you offer shipping as well?

[00:36:16] **Denise Golia:** Unfortunately, I cannot ship outside of the state of Rhode Island due to cottage food law.

[00:36:22] **David Crabill:** Right. And I guess Rhode Island's so small, it probably doesn't make any sense to ship within the state.

[00:36:29] **Denise Golia:** Nope. Not at all. It would be more cost effective. Instead of charging a customer for shipping costs, it's less money for me to just bring it to them.

[00:36:36] As I claim my mileage and everything. So.

[00:36:40] **David Crabill:** That's so funny. But before you became cottage food, you were operating out of a shared kitchen, so you could have shipped anywhere across the country, right? Is that something that you did?

[00:36:54] **Denise Golia:** I offered it, but um, I didn't have to do it. I never got an order that required shipping.

[00:36:59] But I did test it. We had family in New York. And I researched shipping cupcakes. I'd have to stabilize them with the, with the lollipop sticks that you cut in half and all that. And so I did everything that Google suggested, working out what other businesses did to ship cupcakes. And I asked, um, she was our niece.

[00:37:20] I asked her to send, um, A picture when they got there, they didn't look like cupcakes anymore. And I shipped them frozen with ice packs in a tight box so that they couldn't move. I mean, I thought I had it. And then she showed me the picture. I went, wow, that's bad. And I kind of shied away from shipping.

[00:37:38] After that, I was kind of happy that nobody ordered stuff to get shipped.

[00:37:43] **David Crabill:** So when you switched over to the cottage food realm. What you said you did immediately, you obviously went from using a commercial kitchen with commercial equipment to using your own home equipment. Were there adjustments you had to make in that process?

[00:38:01] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes. I had to do a lot more research on how to get confection oven results working with a standard oven, you know, and there is a way to do it. You separate your racks and you put your cupcakes in for a certain amount of time on the top rack and then the remainder of the time on the bottom rack, and you get the same rise that you would form a convection oven.

[00:38:23] I was actually surprised that that even worked, because I was like, no way, this is impossible. And yeah, it was possible. Space wise, you know, I've, I've taken over like two thirds of the house with ingredients and different things.

I had to buy my own refrigerator because it was just our own stuff for home. And then you add things that I need to buy just for the business.

[00:38:45] We already had a commercial freezer, so that was nice. And I had to find time savers, like mixing batter and freezing it ahead of time. Beautiful time saver. I can do the same thing with buttercream. So when it's time to bake, I just throw the stuff out, bake it, and I can bake four to six dozen cupcakes in a couple hours.

[00:39:03] Because I don't have to mix. I can do two dozen at a time in my oven, but in a convection oven that's full size, you can do eight dozen at a time, so I had to find ways to save time.

[00:39:15] **David Crabill:** Did you ever consider getting a different oven or a bigger oven and put it in your house?

[00:39:22] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes. Bob and I are talking about that now, actually.

[00:39:25] Getting a countertop convection oven.

[00:39:29] **David Crabill:** So you do most of your sales at markets and how many markets are you doing currently?

[00:39:36] **Denise Golia:** About three markets a week right now.

[00:39:40] **David Crabill:** Three days a week. And do you have employees helping you out with those?

[00:39:45] **Denise Golia:** No, it was just me.

[00:39:48] **David Crabill:** And that's quite a commitment. I mean, I think you said you were, you've been doing about three markets since close to the beginning of your business, right?

[00:39:55] **Denise Golia:** Yes. In the summertime, I do five a week.

[00:39:59] **David Crabill:** That is a lot to be doing like five markets a week or even three markets a week, and then having to do all the baking, prep, cleaning, business stuff on the side. How much time are you investing into your business on a weekly basis?

[00:40:16] **Denise Golia:** Doing something for my business just about every day.

[00:40:20] **David Crabill:** How long are you at these markets for?

[00:40:24] **Denise Golia:** Three to four

[00:40:24] **David Crabill:** hours. Well, if you're at five markets a week for three to four hours, then that's, uh, what, 15 to 20 hours per week, just sitting in markets, right? Yes. I mean, it's a lot. What keeps you going or what drives you to do as many markets as you do?

[00:40:45] **Denise Golia:** I like to be busy.

[00:40:46] I've always been driven that way. I can't sit still. I always have, I always have to be doing something and I like it to be something that's productive, not like a time waster. Even if it's just helping somebody do something, I, I, I've always been that way. If I don't have work to do, I will find work to do.

[00:41:06] **David Crabill:** Do you just pretty much focus on weekly markets? Like, do you do any pop ups or individual events?

[00:41:16] **Denise Golia:** I have done pop ups at the Providence Place Mall. I did an expo and in Providence as well, a gluten free expo. So, if they come along and I have the time for them, I will do them. But right now my business has grown to the point where I don't have to look for markets or events.

[00:41:36] They, they're looking for me now, which I, I, I love. I am so flattered that they do that, but my time is so booked that I can't always do those one day events because I'm already booked at a market. And paid to be there.

[00:41:50] **David Crabill:** Have you gotten a lot of requests to wholesale or sell in stores?

[00:41:56] **Denise Golia:** I've been asked to do wholesale, um, by a couple of places, but honestly, that would put me right back in the kitchen with a license that would cost a lot more money and that would require me to hire people because I don't know with the injuries that I have that I can do that type of production.

[00:42:13] **David Crabill:** Was it something that people asked you about in 2021 or early 2022 before you switched over?

[00:42:21] **Denise Golia:** I was asked by one place to, um, do it. She was somebody I met at a market that was opening up just a gluten free store, selling everything gluten free. And, uh, she wanted, I was hoping I'd have my cupcakes there and to do it for one place really didn't seem worth it for me because, uh, the cost of the license tripled at that point.

[00:42:41] So, I would definitely need to have to do more in order for it to, um, in order for that license to make sense to me, to pay that much. But I'm happy with what I have now.

[00:42:50] **David Crabill:** What was the gluten free expo like? Because you said that one of the reasons your business has done well is because there hasn't been a lot of competition with really good gluten free items.

[00:43:03] I would imagine at the gluten free expo there were probably quite a lot of good gluten free options. So I'm just curious, like, what was that experience like for you?

[00:43:15] **Denise Golia:** Well, um, I definitely brought too much stuff with me, but I wouldn't do it again. Let's put it that way. It wasn't worth it to me to do it again.

[00:43:22] There were a lot of people there, but they had different things. You had people who made donuts and pizza. And so it wasn't just baked goods. It was just gluten free food in general, like pasta and things like that. No, but it's just, it's not something I would do again. I don't do well at large events like that.

[00:43:40] **David Crabill:** Why do you think that is?

[00:43:42] **Denise Golia:** Because physically I can't handle it. Even when I have the help, it's a lot to try to transport 900 cupcakes. The only way I would do it again would be if I just brought the cake pucks, because I know nobody else would have them.

[00:43:57] **David Crabill:** Well, I imagine you made a lot of cake pucks after that event, sounds like.

[00:44:00] **Denise Golia:** Oh, yes. David, I had over 500 cupcakes in my house, so I'm a little bit donated, there's no way I could. 500 cupcakes would probably

give me over a thousand cake pucks. So yes, I saved some to make pucks and I donated some as well.

[00:44:17] **David Crabill:** Leading up to that event, were you really excited about that event? Like it could potentially, you know, lead you to the customer you really want to serve.

[00:44:28] **Denise Golia:** Oh, oh yeah. I was very excited about it. I was looking forward to it. My mom was helping me get everything ready. And the hype around the event, it sounded better than what it was. And the weather was terrible that day. So I'm sure that that was a factor in it too. I mean, by the time we got out there, the parking lot was practically flooded.

[00:44:47] It was raining so much.

[00:44:50] **David Crabill:** I mean, that could be it right there. You know, the weather can put a huge damper on any event.

[00:44:57] **Denise Golia:** Oh yeah. And you can't control that.

[00:44:59] **David Crabill:** Yeah. Well, was there an estimate of how many people would be there versus how many people actually came?

[00:45:05] **Denise Golia:** They were expecting at least 500 people in the first hour that purchased VIP tickets.

[00:45:11] So this was a ticketed event and they've requested us to have, um, coupons for the VIPs. So we did that, but they didn't tell the VIPs that there were coupons in the swag bags that they were giving out. So most of the people had no idea. And the expected, let's see, it was an all day event. They were talking about maybe like 5, 000 people coming through, and I don't even think we got half that many.

[00:45:34] It didn't seem like it. And by the time they got to my stand, they passed just about everybody else. I was like the third one from the way, at the exit, from the way out.

[00:45:45] **David Crabill:** Right. Yep. That, that can make a big difference too. So it could have been a really good event for you if the weather was better and you're placed in a different part of the event.

[00:45:58] Oh, yes.

[00:45:59] **Denise Golia:** I mean, I just know anytime I've tried to do a large event, uh, when I was still in the commercial kitchen, I did a different gluten free expo on the outskirts of Boston. And even that one, I came home with way too much product, which for some reason, I personally, I guess, just don't do at all the big events, but I sell out all the time at a farmer's market.

[00:46:19] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like most of the people who buy from you are recurring customers? Yes.

[00:46:27] **Denise Golia:** Definitely. I

[00:46:28] **David Crabill:** I mean, that might be why, just because maybe it takes time for people to get to know you, but then once they try it and they know you, they keep coming back.

[00:46:38] **Denise Golia:** I would agree with that. Yes.

[00:46:41] **David Crabill:** And the other thing too is, cupcakes used to be very trendy.

[00:46:45] And I would say that fad has fallen by the wayside big time. Have you noticed anything that, like, people aren't really interested in cupcakes? Yes. I'm

[00:47:00] **Denise Golia:** noticing that a little bit. That's why the cake pucks are so nice. It's something different and it's a specialty item that they're not used to seeing. But I would say yes, the cupcake fad is definitely on its day.

[00:47:15] **David Crabill:** So you're doing three to five markets per week throughout the year. Your business is clearly very successful at this point. You have a big following. What about the future? As you look ahead, where would you like this business to go?

[00:47:33] **Denise Golia:** In my mind, I would love to have a bakery, a nice storefront, a little commercial kitchen in the back, or I could just do all of my business and I talk myself into it and I could talk myself out of it just as fast.

[00:47:47] I would like to see it happen. But then again, doing the cottage food aspect of it, it's to me retail. I've done retail most of my life. It's a whole other ballgame with a whole different set of rules. You know what I mean?

[00:48:01] **David Crabill:** I'm just curious about the injury that caused you to stop working as a hairstylist. What is it about having your own brick and mortar that would allow you to make that work?

[00:48:13] Like, it seems like a lot of work to me.

[00:48:18] **Denise Golia:** No, me too. That's why I say I could talk myself right out of it just as fast. I would love to have my own commercial space because I do miss the equipment and the space of the commercial kitchen because you can do so much more in a shorter period of time if you're not held back by time restraints, you know, have it be just mine and no one else's.

[00:48:39] That I can do like I do at home, I mix and bake when I want to. I can mix and bake at 3am, I can mix and bake at 6am, it doesn't matter. You know, so I'd love to have my own space for that. And I get asked all the time where I'm located. So sometimes I wonder, you know, if I had that in the future, you know, it could be better for business.

[00:49:00] And I can offer job opportunities as well, which is needed. And I'm used to running businesses. I've been in management my entire life.

[00:49:08] **David Crabill:** Okay. Well, uh, just through the salons or anything else?

[00:49:14] **Denise Golia:** Actually, just about anything I've ever done, I end up in a management position. Uh, I did customer service for a company and I ended up, they have us in teams.

[00:49:22] And I became a team leader rather quickly. Any salon I've ever worked at, any, I became management, then I went into upper management, so it's kind of like where I fit, I think. So the aspect of running the business itself doesn't bother me. To me, that would be the easy part. It would be dealing with all the other things.

[00:49:42] It's like, uh, workman's compensation, unemployment insurance, people. You don't want a job, but you don't want to work. You know, you open up a whole new world when you go into retail and you open up a retail business.

[00:49:58] **David Crabill:** So with your business management experience, do you feel like this cottage food business was kind of easy for you to start?

[00:50:10] **Denise Golia:** Yes. It was very easy. Honestly, Rhode Island doesn't make it complicated at all. It was the easiest thing I'd ever had to do. And I didn't think it would be. I was waiting for a bunch of red tape. You know, and craziness. And it wasn't, it was easy.

[00:50:25] **David Crabill:** That's actually pretty surprising. Because like Massachusetts right next door, there's a lot of red tape in a lot of parts of Massachusetts.

[00:50:35] **Denise Golia:** There they come in and do house inspections and everything. And Rhode Island doesn't do that. You fill out the paperwork the way they tell you to, you send them a check and you're good to go.

[00:50:46] **David Crabill:** With the fact that you have such a diet specific business. You know, you're catering to people who have very special needs.

[00:50:54] Are there any moments or stories as you think back on your business in the last few years that really stand out to you?

[00:51:03] **Denise Golia:** I've had a few customers that tell me that they're very happy that I'm around because the options that are out there now aren't very good. As they say, they don't tell me what the other bakeries are.

[00:51:14] They don't feel they should, but they only come to me because they like my stuff better than anything else they've ever had. People with severe allergies are happy I'm around because I am dedicated, gluten free, I don't allow gluten in my kitchen just because of cross contamination. They're happy because people can get really, really sick if the allergy is strong enough.

[00:51:34] My grandson, I mean, he would get horrible rashes from eating gluten. And until we found out what it was, we couldn't get rid of it because he'd be eating gluten. People tell me that they're very happy that I'm around, um, vendors. I have a gluten free vendor and she's vegan. She's allergic to quite a bit.

[00:51:54] And she loves my spiced vanilla cupcakes, the vegan version. And her husband always gets them for me for her birthday, and if we're at the same event, she comes looking to see what's there. You know, so a lot of people are happy that I'm here doing what I do. And I'm happy that they're happy.

[00:52:12] **David Crabill:** As you think back on your business, what keeps you going?

[00:52:16] Why do you love it so much?

[00:52:19] **Denise Golia:** Because it makes people happy. Because I'm doing something that benefits the community. Not that they wouldn't have that if I weren't around, but I feel happy that they're coming to me for something that they enjoy and that I enjoy having something that I can call my own.

[00:52:36] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much, Denise, for coming on the show and sharing all that with us. Now, if somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:52:47] **Denise Golia:** They can reach out through, um, email or on my website. My phone number's there as well. They can always shoot me a text.

[00:52:54] **David Crabill:** I'll put a link to your website in the show notes and thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today. Thank you. Thanks for having me. I enjoyed it.

[00:53:06] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/130. 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 like you find this podcast.

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