



## Crazy About Cupcakes: Dough Cupcakes

*by Ahmed Dialdin*

Cupcakes played a major role during my elementary school years. Every so often, in my lunchbox, there would be the coveted Hostess Cupcake. Black as night, creamy little center and topped with a layer of sinfully delicious chocolate icing and that familiar white icing doodle. During recess? That's black and white gold, dear readers. More precious than Sauron's ring and just as likely to cause riots. Whether it were traded for other foods, camaraderie, or perhaps simply given in return for a favor (Godfather-style), it was a lot of power packaged in a nice little cup.

Okay, perhaps I'm looking back through the hyperbolic lens of youthful nostalgia, but the point remains: cupcakes are awesome. And the past couple of years have seen a veritable boom in bakeries in Saudi Arabia, specializing in these delicious mini cakes. I had a chance to sit down with the owners of two such bakeries here in the Eastern Region of the country, Dough and A Cup of Cake, each with their own unique background and approach, both aiming towards the same goal: serving damn tasty treats to the community.

### Dough Cookies & Cupcakes

It all started with fruit bouquets. Perhaps some context is needed. The Al-



Nammari siblings had a simple idea: to bring in a popular franchise from the United States that served fruits arranged in bouquets. However, that idea had already been taken and so they shifted their outlook towards the cooler part of the food spectrum: dessert.

Starting in 2007 and working from home, Samar Al-Nammari and her mother brainstormed cookie recipes, played with different variations and ingredients, and gave out free samples to friends and family. Their first major order was for a large batch of Halloween cookies for a local American school. As successful as their cookies were, business remained slow.

Enter sister Maha who noted the rising popularity of cupcakes and, cooking aficionado that she was, went to work developing new recipes and ideas. Soon enough, they started passing their latest creations around.

"I had taken cupcakes to work one day and someone asked for an order," said Samar. "We stayed up all through the night to get it done." ("Till 4am," chimes in Maha). "It was the simplest order too; just four flavors. We were underprepared and we didn't even have boxes. To top it all off, I confused baking powder with baking soda. They tasted fine the first day, but the next day... hard as rocks."

Yes, it was a rocky start, but they persevered. Their brother, Khalil, figured out logistics such as the logo and boxes, while also building up their social media presence through Facebook and Twitter. Maha worked on the recipes, and Samar handled their supply management of bulk raw materials, decorative items and so on.

"There were two things I wanted us to focus on," said Khalil, "brand awareness and customer service. If it's late 20 minutes, it's free. If it's too expensive, we'll work with the customer on what they can pay." Six months of building up their brand, they pulled off their biggest order yet: a wedding event for 1,100 cupcakes.

After that, it clicked for them: this is an actual business. They invested their own money, hired a full-time baker, built up a workshop at home and crossed the thin line from hobby into fullfledged business.

Soon enough, demand grew, supply grew, and they developed a decent variety of cupcakes: giant ones, mini ones, seasonal flavors, ones filled with marshmallow fluff, and, in a nice touch of customer relations, specialty flavors developed alongside loyal customers.

"Essa's Red Velvet was the first one," said Samar. "He requested a special flavor, we went back and forth trying out several concepts until we got the right mix, and he decided on the final version. As an added bonus, he basically becomes a marketing agent for us."

**Oasis:** So, are you sick of looking at all day cupcakes?

**Maha:** Sometimes, you come home from work and the best feeling in the world is seeing a new cupcake to eat, and sometimes you just can't have anymore and can't bear the smell of it. But, there's always cupcakes...always.

**Samar:** of course, we gained lots of weight in the beginning because we kept

tasting and trying more and more variations; we had to be sure the flavor was just right. We still taste them now but at least we share one or just take a bite.

**Oasis:** What has been your strangest request?

Lots of nasty stuff. You don't want to know...next question.

(Laughing)

**Oasis:** What do you consider to be your defining characteristics?

**Samar:** We pride ourselves on the fact that our standard size is a smaller bite than others, and we have even smaller sizes. We want people to enjoy and have more than just one. We want them to try different flavors and experience the variety offered.

**Khalil:** Our Twitter account is a big hit. We take orders through it all the time and get lots of constructive criticism and feedback. It helps us get lots of immediate advertising too. All we have to do is put up a picture of our latest creation and people can see it right away and make orders.

**Oasis:** Do you get involved with community events?

We love to do social events, be responsible and simply give back to the community. Yes, it's a home business, but we still like to get out there and participate in community events, especially during Ramadan or special days such as World Cancer Day. We even worked with the Saudi Cancer Foundation by making special batches of cupcakes to give away and raise awareness.

**Oasis:** What are your plans for the future?

We thought of opening up our own store, but it's quite an undertaking and involves a lot of heavy costs. Sure, we've been approached by investors, but, this is our baby. We don't want to go down that path. Right now we are just trying to build it up ourselves and at our own pace. In the meantime, we're working with different cafes to see if we can partner with them and serve our goods there. There is the intention to expand and grow in time. The demand is there after all; we actually ship cookies to Riyadh and Jeddah sometimes.

**Oasis:** Any personal favorite cupcakes?

**Maha:** red velvet.

**Khalil:** roasted banana.

**Samar:** Lemon. But, you know it's all about the mood. If I'm craving something filling, I'll go with Nutella; or perhaps something light, then it'll be lemon or carrot. Want to indulge? Red velvet. We have flavors for every type and we'll always customize to suit the tastes of our customers.

**[www.flavors.me/doughcupcakes](http://www.flavors.me/doughcupcakes)**

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