

LET THEM EAT (CUP) CAKES

Three Dubai women are on a mission to tempt our taste buds with their versions of the world's most frivolous and fashionable cake. But **Helena Frith Powell** finds that behind the baking trays are three businesses driven by a fierce but allegedly friendly rivalry

The shops are gleaming and decorated in baby-bright colours; yellow, pink and turquoise. The staff are smiling and friendly. The cupcakes feature all the colours and flavours you can imagine, from peanut butter to vanilla and chocolate, to strawberry and banana. There is an atmosphere of jolliness all around. As one motto reads: our aim is to spread happiness, one cupcake at a time.

But underneath the fluffy pink façade of the Dubai cupcake scene, there is something going on. Rather like Hamlet's conclusion about his stepfather (that one may "smile, and smile, and be a villain"), a day hanging out on Jumeirah Beach Road, where three cupcake shops have sprung up in the past year, could lead one to conclude that one may bake, and bake, and be a tigress.

Tales of skulduggery abound. Rumour has it one of the owners was recently caught interrogating the staff of another shop. "Make mine a Red Velvet, and by the way, how many cupcakes do you sell a day?" That kind of thing. A customer we ran into says she spotted cupcakes with uncannily similar names, although she couldn't remember which she had seen where, first. One source who does not wish to be named told us there have been leaks to newspapers about owners using ready-mix to make their cupcakes; possibly the gravest insult you can level at someone in the bakery business. It's a little bit like calling a sportsman a cheat, or a

writer a plagiarist. Only much more serious. The women at the centre of the cupcake wars deny all this of, course. Nothing will remove that sweet smile, even talking about the competition. But ask any of them how many cupcakes they make a day and they will refuse to tell you. They won't even say how many staff they have. So is competition really that fierce?

"We compete like any other business," says



Dana Jallad, the owner of Sugar Daddy's, says competition is healthy for her business.

Dana Jallad, who runs Sugar Daddy's. Jallad is an attractive Lebanese/Jordanian blonde who has lived in Dubai for four years. "Competition is healthy, it makes you want to be the best, means that you keep reinventing yourself."

She says that she and Farah Gokal-Ghazzawi, who runs Sweet Stuff across the road with her sister Aaliya, are friends from college days. "We were having coffee and then discovered we were both going to be doing the same thing. It took her longer to set up, though."

But why did all three decide to install themselves on Jumeirah Beach Road? Would it perhaps not have been easier to spread their sugary delights across town instead of baking on each other's doorstep?

Gokal-Ghazzawi says it is not an issue. "In New York you have lots of cupcake shops on the same block and they all have their own client base," she explains. "We try to offer clients a very personalised service; we know about all our regular clients, when their birthdays are and how many children they have."

"I decided on this location more than two and a half years ago," says Dalia Dogmoch who owns Kitsch, just a few kilometres away from the other two. Despite those long-laid plans, she opened only in November last year; in fact, during the same week that Sugar Daddy's opened. Sweet Stuff, the final contender in this triumvirate, opened a couple of months ago. There is one more

Dubai's Jumeirah Beach Road is home to three cupcake shops, where customers often spill out on to the street waiting to feed their sweet-toothed desires.



PHOTOGRAPHS (THIS PAGE) IRVAN CARTER / THE NATIONAL; (OPPOSITE PAGE) COURTESY KITSCH CUPCAKES



Dalia Dogmoch, the co-founder of Kitsch Cupcakes, pays close attention to the icing.

10 things you didn't know about cupcakes

1 Cupcakes are so named because they were first baked in ramekins or cups.

2 They first tickled our fancy in the early 19th century.

3 The television show *Sex And The City* launched the modern craze, when Miranda and Carrie had one at the Magnolia Bakery in New York, which has now hired a bouncer.

4 In the UK, cupcakes are known as fairy cakes.

5 Cake is a serious business. In the past 12



months, sales of cupcakes in the UK increased by 13.6 per cent to £33.5 million (Dh123m).

6 Cupcakes are a clear social barometer. New York academics believe cupcake shops can reveal the extent of an area's gentrification more accurately than demographic surveys.

7 The most popular flavours are vanilla and Red Velvet (a chocolate cupcake dyed red).

8 The most unusual flavours include Salad Dressing, with an olive-flavoured cake and balsamic frosting, and Pickle and Ice-cream cupcake.

9 According to the Guinness World Records, the largest cupcake, weighing 596kg, was unveiled in Florida, USA last month.

10 A typical frosted cupcake contains 400 calories.

potential player, called Sprinklez, which will soon open in Sharjah and was part of our cupcake tasting by the celebrity chef Marco Pierre White (see, right).

But the cupcake wars are really being fought by the three players on Jumeirah Beach Road, where it's a case of drawing your piping bags at dawn. Or not, if you work at Sugar Daddy's, by far the most brand and image-conscious of the three.

"I want the chef to leave his or her mark on the icing," says Jallad, who has created a company that looks set to expand all over the Middle East. The most recent addition (to her Bahrain and Dubai branches) is a presence on the Abu Dhabi Corniche, next to the restaurant area at the public beach entrance. "The cakes are hand-iced by our chef from New York, who trains the staff. We want every chef to have his or her own character reflected on a cupcake."

Jallad is the only one of the three owners whose passion is business as opposed to baking. "I grew up in a family where cakes were baked but I was always the one who wanted to eat them rather than bake them. I

have a very sweet tooth and what better way to indulge your greatest weakness than running a successful business dedicated to cupcakes?"

Sugar Daddy's is located in the Village Mall and, according to Jallad, every weekend there are queues all the way out to the street of people keen to get their hands on cheekily named cakes such as Never Kiss And Tella (chocolate and hazelnut) and Fake Blonde.

Jallad's two daughters call her "the cupcake Queen" and judging by the steady flow of customers into her shop, she certainly has some loyal subjects. Catherine Kelly, for example, an Australian who moved to Dubai a year ago, says she comes in most days because she misses her local cupcake shop back home. Eman, an Emirati, comes every day and usually buys the Red Velvet.

Red Velvet is a bit of a legend among cupcake aficionados. It originally came from the southern states of America and is a mixture of vanilla and chocolate. "But everyone puts their own secret ingredients into it," says Jallad. "That's what gives it its mysterious aura."

Dogmoch says she uses cream cheese for the topping of her Red Velvet, which is the original way it was made. "It is our bestseller, closely followed by Triple Chocolate." She eats between two and four cupcakes a day, which seems impossible; she looks more like a model than a baker.

"My body has just got used to it," she laughs. How does she cope with the competition?

"Some people say a cupcake is just a cupcake, but I don't believe that. We use mainly French ingredients; French chocolate and French flour and all our sprinkles are French. We never use chemicals unless we have to and we bake everything from scratch."

So no ready-mix?

Who is the queen of cake couture?

Do the UAE's cupcakes stand up to professional scrutiny? Marco Pierre White, the British celebrity chef, puts them to the test. Here is his verdict:

"You have to look at cupcakes through the eyes of a child to see true beauty in them. If we look at them as adults they just look horrible; all sickly and sweet. These all look good, the Sprinklez ones don't have icing so I think they are not really more than a sponge, although personally I might prefer them without icing. I am going to try each one and try to imagine which one my seven-year-old daughter Mirabelle would like the most. The icing is nice and soft on all of them, but that could be something to do with the heat. This one, for example, the Sugar Daddy's chocolate one is like a delicious chocolate fudge cake. Actually, I don't much like the texture of the Sweet Stuff ones; the body is more like a sponge than a cake. And a sponge is a sponge, a cake is a cake, there is a difference. The key to a successful cupcake is getting the moisture level right; it has to be nice and moist but not wet, and definitely not crumbly. I like the tops to Kitsch, they are quite simple, they are not trying to be anything else. In fact overall I think Kitsch has the balance just right and they win the tasting. I like the texture, they've got some body; they are nice and moist. Sugar Daddy's is the runner up."



She looks as if I have just suggested she run up Jumeirah Beach Road wearing nothing but a cupcake box on her head. "No, no, I would never, ever, ever use a mix," she says gravely.

Dogmoch's Kitsch cupcake brand seems to be the professionals' favourite. Not only did Marco Pierre White rate her cupcakes over the others but Ruth Gaule, who runs the Cup Cake Society (a cup-cake-baking service) in Abu Dhabi, says Kitsch is her favourite above all the others on the market.

"They are the ones that to me taste homemade. I think Sugar Daddy's has tried

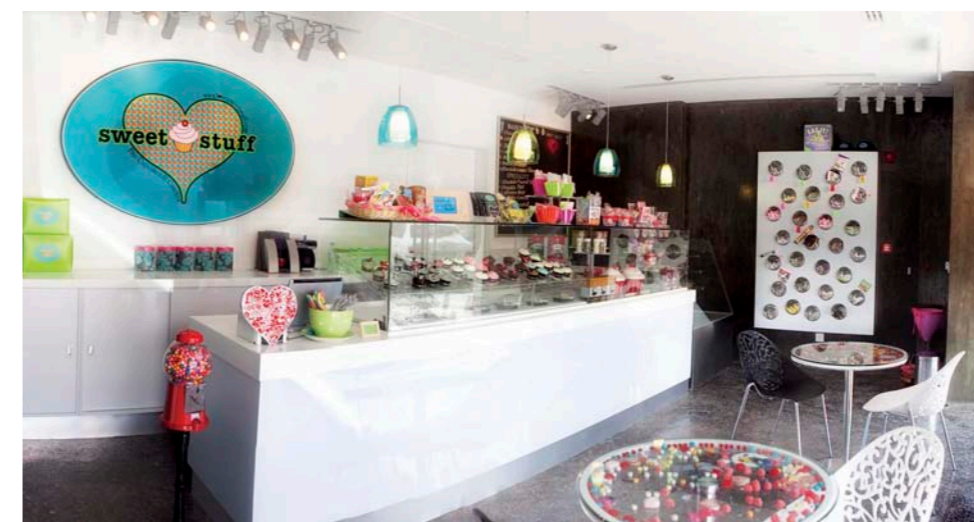
to copy the Magnolia cupcake from New York (see box, facing page) and I'm not sure how far they have succeeded. But Kitsch definitely retain that home-baked feel."

But not everyone agrees. In Sweet Stuff we bump into Riwa, who is originally from Syria, but was brought up in the United States.

"These are the best," she says. "They remind me of the ones I used to eat while I was growing up in the States. The frosting is full of flavour and stays firm but is smooth at the same time. I used to go to Kitsch but now I come here." Riwa is pregnant and blames her cupcake obsession on that. "I started eating cupcakes when I got pregnant. I hope it will stop when the baby is born." Bill Clinton agrees with her; not only did one of his staff come in to buy some cupcakes for him on his recent visit to Dubai but he also picked Sweet Stuff cupcakes to take as a gift to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

Even if Riwa and a former US president prefer her competitor's cupcakes, Dogmoch is sanguine about the competition. "Dubai is a big market and there is enough space for all of us," she says. "The fact that more shops have opened is good for the consumer. It keeps us on our toes."

Her latest initiative to attract customers is a loyalty card. "I suppose if you write about it, the others will copy it," she laughs. But she doesn't seem worried.



Sweet Stuff has an impressive selection of cupcakes and is one of the three leading outlets in Dubai.

Additional reporting by Elizabeth Pearson