



Mariana Cortez

Miami, Florida



Bunnie Cakes

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Mariana Cortez:

Born and raised in Venezuela, Mariana Cortez, founder and owner of Bunnie Cakes, moved to Miami in 2002 to improve her conversational English skills. The original plan was to stay for a year and then return to Venezuela to finish her degree in Communications. Unfortunately, the political climate in her home country became extremely unstable and her parents insisted, for her safety, that she stay in the United States.

Cortez got a student visa and went on to graduate from Florida International University with degrees in Mass Communication, TV Production and Photography.

After college, Cortez spent four years working as an Associate Producer for a small TV production company in Miami Beach. According to Cortez, it was during this time where the idea for Bunnie Cakes first originated.

"I started thinking about and even working on this idea months before I quit the production company," Cortez said. "I had problems finding a good vegan cake and I was also looking for gluten-free options for my son. There were no specialty bakers doing what I wanted. There was a definite gap in the market. I started doing my own trials at home. I took a family recipe and tweaked it to make it gluten-free and vegan. It took a few months to get the consistency and flavor I was looking for, but I finally got it. During my lunch hours at work, I'd go around to the small cafes in South Beach to work on setting up concession deals. After my first three or four clients, I saw there was definitely a market for my cupcakes because they were selling."

At this point, Cortez was still working full-time at the TV studio, baking at night and delivering her products on her lunch break. As demand grew and business picked up, it was no longer feasible for Cortez to keep her position as an Associate Producer. In September 2009, she quit her job to focus exclusively on Bunnie Cakes.

"That's when I really put together a business plan and built a website," Cortez said. "I didn't have enough capital to start big, so I decided to continue baking from home. I also continued to work on getting my products in more restaurants and cafes. I started to create a more structured way of production, delivery and invoicing. All that took some time, but before I knew it, I had 25 different restaurants selling my cupcakes. From there, I put together a menu and put it online. I highlighted all the flavors I offered and started making cakes as well. As people searched online for gluten-free options, they'd find Bunnie Cakes. I started getting calls directly from individuals wanting cakes and

cupcakes. That's when the business went from wholesale only to also direct to consumer."

At this point in the journey, Cortez was still using her kitchen and dining room for the business. She desperately needed more space. In 2011, she decided to move into a commercial kitchen. She acquired all the necessary permits from the Department of Agriculture and was certified as a Kosher bakery. About a year later, as a result of increased calls and customers showing up at the commercial kitchen, Cortez found a retail location in the Wynwood district of Miami. She gathered the necessary funding and signed a lease in June 2012. After renovations, Bunnie Cakes opened it's retail location in February 2013.

For the next four years, Bunnie Cakes continued to expand its customer base and solidify its reputation. As Cortez shared, the year 2017 was a big one for Bunnie Cakes. Not only did they add an additional building, they also partnered with one of the largest multinational supermarket chains in the country.

"Wholefoods was having its annual executive meeting in Miami Beach that year," she said. "While displaying our products at a local food festival, I was approached by a Wholefoods executive who put me in touch with another executive. He tried our cupcakes and really liked them. He asked if I'd be willing to cater the desserts for their annual meeting. We did it and the whole experience was a success. As a result, other executives eventually visited our store and liked what they saw.

Not long after, we started the process to have our cupcakes in Wholefoods."

Cortez continued, "In 2017, we also opened Bunnie Cakes Studios in a

space double the size of the original store. When we added Wholefoods, we needed the extra production space. We built a beautiful commercial kitchen with more ovens to bake with and machines to automate the process. We even added an area where we teach people how to decorate cupcakes and do workshops covering advanced techniques."

In 2018, Bunnie Cakes was approached by Starbucks, through a program designed to find local providers, to produce cupcakes for their South Florida stores. The collaboration produced a gluten-free passion fruit cupcake that's currently available in local stores. Cortez shared that they're in talks with Starbucks to produce additional vegan and gluten-free options.

Looking ahead, Cortez, who thoroughly enjoys watching her customers, vegans and non vegans alike, enjoy her products without sacrificing taste, texture and consistency, is planning the opening of their second location. She's also expanding their wholesale operations to include more Wholefoods locations throughout Florida.

As a mother of five kids, Cortez has some great advice for aspiring entrepreneurs. "Always follow your heart and your inspiration," she said.

"Also, never give up. Even if you have five kids. Don't make it an obstacle. To all the moms out there, it's possible to ride the entrepreneurship wave and still raise a family."

This profile made possible by the following sponsors:

