

Parting, such sweet sorrow

AFTER three years in Athens, cupcake queen Rita Halkias, aka Simply Rita, is moving back to the home of the brave, but her legacy will remain. Having followed her husband on an international professional trail, little did US-born Halkias know the one thing she'd miss the most would be cupcakes. Her move to Athens was accompanied by the sobering realisation that locals had no appreciation for the bite-sized cakes that made her life a better place.

“Most Greeks haven’t taken cupcakes to heart because they’re not aware of what a cupcake is, and what a good cupcake should taste like,” she says.

Before proceeding any further, the record needs to be set straight: a cupcake is not the same as a muffin. The most obvious difference would be that muffins are not frost-

ed. They also tend to be a bit denser. A good cupcake should be moist, light and fluffy - otherwise known as a little chunk of heaven.

Funny that seemingly the only Greek who knows how to bake them honed her craft in between prison stints.

“My background is a bit intriguing,” she says.

It sure is. Halkias went to college in New Haven, Con-



Sonia Hondraki (L) and Rita Halkias, rocking their cupcake creations

necticut, where she obtained a bachelor’s degree in special education and a master’s degree in assistive technology, which involves various devices to help students with special needs communicate in a regular education setting.

After graduating from college, she began to work for the state of Connecticut at a maximum security facility. In the prison, Halkias taught adolescents diagnosed with severe emotional disturbances and learning disabilities.

“Being able to teach this diverse population gave me great satisfaction, as I was able to help students who others had given up on,” Halkias says. “I learned to look past their mistakes and treat them with dignity and respect. My eagerness to help them turned their lives around, motivated them to reach goals they didn’t even know they were capable of.”

Jailhouse crock

What does that have to do with cupcakes?

“Although I taught in a

prison, I always had a passion for baking,” she explains.

Halkias was able to scratch her itch for baking when her parents allowed her to create the dessert menu at their family restaurant.

“That’s when I began to experiment with different ingredients, flavours and techniques,” she says. “Most people associate baking with all things warm and fluffy, so I guess you could say I’m tough as nails and sweet as sugar.”

With that kind of background, no way was Halkias going to let a little thing like Greeks not being aware of cupcakes stop her from spreading the word. Hence, Simply Rita was born.

For those of you scouring the internet looking for where she’s located, be advised this isn’t your traditional walk-in cake shop.

“My approach to baking is first and foremost freshness, which is why Simply Rita only bakes to order,” says Halkias, who is planning to keep the business going even though by the time this issue of the Athens News hits the newsstands, she will be gone - but

not forgotten.

Passing the spatula

That’s because Simply Rita co-owner Sonia Hondraki will take over the Athens branch, while Halkias sets about opening a new Simply Rita location in Connecticut. She also plans to consult part-time in her field of special education.

The two women don’t only share a common birthplace (New York), but also nurture freakishly similar baking philosophies.

Since Simply Rita came to Athens, Halkias has introduced so-called cupcake towers to replace wedding cakes, thereby avoiding potential social disasters. (Have you ever seen a wedding cake collapse?) She’s also helped clean up invariably messy kids’ parties by doling out individual desserts the size of children’s drooling mouths.

Keeping it real in the flavour department is their No 1 concern.

“There’s been a fondant (sweet dough that covers a cake to make it appear smooth) craze within the past few years,” says Halkias critically. “People would spend a fortune on a cake that looked appealing but would taste like the sole of a flip-flop when you’d bite into it.”

She adds that her approach to baking is first and foremost freshness.

“I also believe in only using the finest ingredients, even if it means importing. The difference between myself and mainstream bakeries is that I ensure the customer receives a product that is not only stunning, but also delectable.”

As for Halkias’ memories of Greece, they will soon be immortalised in a galaktoboureko-flavoured cupcake. She didn’t spend three years in Athens for nothing.

Article from Athens News



Serifos
Silence is golden

Endowed with outstanding scenery, this Cycladic island has shunned glam and retains a rare authentic quality

Nobel Prize-winning poet Odysseas Elytis may not have realized that even before the battle of the ideologies formally reached Greek shores in the early 20th century, actual guns that augured their coming had already taken their toll on Serifos – one of the western Cyclades, 73 nautical miles from Piraeus.

Serifos is a rare example of a Greek island without a noteworthy maritime tradition; it prospered thanks to its iron ore mining industry for a long period after 1870. A collapse in metal prices in 1915, however, led to labor unrest, motivated by demands for an eight-hour workday. It resulted in a violent confrontation the following year, which left several workers and police officers dead.

The event is commemorated annually on August