

## Sweet Success



One sunny Fort Lauderdale morning, Lori Karmel set out to find a birthday cake; in the process, she also found her calling.

Now, just a handful of years after buying We Take The Cake, she has turned a small storefront bakery and mail-order business into a million-dollar-plus venture whose fans include Oprah Winfrey and thousands of dessert lovers across the country. Not bad for a woman who couldn't get into the business program at her university!

Lori, a native of Ontario, Canada, always wanted a career in business. She even ran two small ventures while in her teens, one specializing in t-shirts, the other selling custom pillowcases. Despite her clear entrepreneurial drive, though, she could not get into the business major at the University of Western Ontario.

Remembering this, she laughs. "The business program emphasized economics and math. I'm lousy at economics and math!" She settled on a philosophy major but quit a few credits shy of her degree, "I couldn't see what it was going to do for me."

Next, she studied securities and worked as a stockbroker. When that did not progress the way she wanted it to, she turned to commercial and residential real estate. Those two early careers, she sees now, provided excellent entrepreneurial training: as a stockbroker and real estate agent, she worked for larger firms, but her success depended on her sales and marketing skills and her ability to win clients.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAN WILCO, WILCO STUDIO  
& COURTESY WE TAKE THE CAKE



Whether her clients request a confectionary designer purse or a layered tribute to Nemo, We Take the Cake owner Lori Karmel lives by the motto "Customers get what they want."



Holding a box with her company's signature black diamond design and sitting beside a deliciously bejeweled custom cake, Lori takes a rare moment to relax. (opposite) Her Chocolate Layer Cake is an award winner.

Who or what was your greatest source of inspiration?

“The customer!”



She brought that sales and marketing know-how with her to the United States in 2000, when she, her husband, Patrick, and their young son moved to Florida to be near her father and grandmother. American immigration restrictions prevented her from taking a job. She could, however, create her own job by buying a business. Working with a business broker, she explored the options in South Florida. When one day he called to tell her that a “small mail-order company” was available, on an impulse she asked, “Is it We Take The Cake?” To this day, she says, “I don’t know why I said that.” Clearly, it was fate.

As it turned out, she was already a We Take The Cake customer. She had discovered the bakery not long after moving to Florida. “Toronto was full of boutique bakeries,” she explains, “but in Fort Lauderdale, the standard way to get a cake was to buy it at the grocery store.” For her son’s third birthday, though, she wanted something a bit more special. She made calls, and when she reached We Take The Cake and heard about their homemade chocolate cream-cheese frosting, she hopped in the car to go try a sample. Delicious! She placed her order.

When she bought We Take The Cake in 2003, Lori acquired a small but skilled team and many superb tried-and-true recipes. She knew, though, that to succeed, she would need more than that. She hired designer Barry Zaid to update the business’s look, asking for ideas that were “a bit whimsical, a bit retro, and sophisticated.” The designer got it, and his ebony diamonds on a striped field of green and pink remains We Take The Cake’s signature.

Next, Lori decided, a new attitude was needed. “It took a year to get my vision,” she says. During that time, she mulled over her initial experiences with the bakery. “I came in and asked if they could do this design or that design. They said no; they would write ‘Happy Birthday’ on the cake, but they charged two dollars for that.” She decided to transform We Take The Cake into a bakery that would provide what she had



been looking for that day she went in search of a birthday cake for her son. She hired people who would bake into a cake her clients’ visions. Today the company mantra is: “Customers get what they want!”

Lori has found that aiming to please has not been difficult at all; her customers are, in fact, an endless source of inspiration for new products. “We do custom baking,” she explains. “The customers bring us their idea—it might be a piece of fabric or ribbon, and we’ll take our cue from that.” The variety of cake possibilities is staggering, as the We Take The Cake web site shows. There’s the Baptism Dress cake, with white frosting “fabric” draped and bowed just like a baby’s dress. There are the oversized Southern Red Velvet cupcakes topped with brilliant frosting blossoms. There’s the buttercream and fondant Louis Vuitton



Members of the We Take the Cake team at work: Fondant designer Dominique Beckers crafts flowers, while Lori consults with Katherine Foley and Kimberly Arcas. Katherine Stork (opposite) swirls green leaves.





Lori loves hard work and stimulating challenges, but she knows it is important now and then to taste the sweetness of her success. The company's signature Key Lime Bundt Cake (opposite) remains a favorite. Their Combo Cake offers the best of both worlds with alternating golden butter and chocolate layers.



## Imagine ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS

Do you have a favorite quote?  
“No’ means ‘not right now.’  
If I’m told ‘no,’ I’m not bummed—  
and I will be back!”

purse cake—designer knock-offs never tasted so delicious.

We Take The Cake also continues to produce its many original recipes, including the dense and tangy Key Lime Cake that captured Oprah’s attention. As Lori recounts the tale, someone who worked for Oprah Winfrey received a Key Lime Cake as a gift. Oprah’s employee was smitten by the bundt cake soaked in key-lime juice and topped with key-lime cream cheese frosting and became a regular customer. Then, one day, she shared her discovery with Oprah. The Queen of Daytime TV decided to feature it on her 2004 “Favorite Things” show.

Lori, with her staff of five and 1100 square feet of space, thought the tough part would be baking enough cakes to satisfy the inevitable avalanche of orders. But when the onslaught hit—just minutes after the show ended—she found her order-takers completely overwhelmed. The computers and phone lines were flooded, and her voicemail filled up every forty-five seconds.

To Lori, these were just logistical glitches. She was ready to run with her opportunity. Today, upscale businesses like Dean & DeLuca, Neiman Marcus, Whole Foods, and more clamor to carry We Take The Cake creations. With its talented cake designer, Dominique Beckers, We Take The Cake now also creates exquisite multi-tiered cakes in every color and design imaginable for parties at the area’s best venues.

One of Lori’s most notable achievements, though, is that in the leap from struggling local bakery to national sensation, We Take The Cake’s product quality has not changed. Her daily routine, on the other hand, has. “I used to get caught up in the little things,” she recalls. “I was the gopher. Now I spend my days creating business opportunities. I focus on the sales, marketing, and PR.” She admits sometimes feeling that she should have her hand in everything, but that is simply not possible any more. Besides, she says, “If I bring in enough sales, then I have the ability to hire all the staff we need to do



what needs to be done.”

Success has allowed her to dream big and look ahead. “I never know what I’m going to do tomorrow. Sometimes I put out fires. Mostly, I pursue ideas. When I get an idea now, I act on it.” Today that might mean exploring the possibility of ice-cream cakes; tomorrow it could mean considering a major overseas expansion (a Middle East firm has been in touch...). What little time she has off-duty she enjoys with her family, though if you ask her husband what she does in her “down time,” he will say, “Answer email.” Lori laughingly agrees, adding, “If I were to take time off, I’d like to go to a spa. Or go shopping. But that,” she concedes, “doesn’t happen very often.” And that seems to suit her just fine; as owner of a thriving boutique bakery, Lori Karmel’s life is already very sweet. ☺