

## Steve 'Cake Man' Himelfarb has found the recipe for happiness in his new Marigny cafe

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The chocolate cake takes the cake. But then, so do the pineapple upside-down cake, the red velvet, the bananas Foster, and the German chocolate.

Those are just some of the reasons they call Steve Himelfarb the "Cake Man."

He first earned the moniker selling slices of chocolate cake door-to-door across the city, quickly developing a local following.

"I made the same chocolate cake every day for four years," he said. "It was very Zen-like to repeat that daily. With repetition comes perfection."

Eventually, Himelfarb opened a small cafe and bakery in Faubourg Marigny. The road to the bakery, however, was as roundabout as the twisted cinnamon rolls he serves each morning.



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW

HINTON 'Cake Man' Steve Himelfarb ices a German chocolate cake at his new bakery and restaurant, New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery at 2440 Chartres St.

"I grew up in Washington, D.C., and always wanted to be in the music business," he said. As a young man, he moved to Los Angeles where he broke into the industry.

"In L.A., recording studios are like restaurants here in New Orleans - there's one on every block."

Learning the business and honing his recording engineering skills, he landed a job at Capitol Records, where he would score engineering credits on platinum records working with such musicians as Bob Seger and Pat Benatar, among others. He eventually moved to Louisiana, doing Grammy-nominated work with such artists as Buckwheat Zydeco and Beausoleil.

Still, something different was beckoning.

"After about 15 years in the music business, I knew I didn't want to sit in a studio for the rest of my life," Himelfarb said. "I always really enjoyed cooking and baking, and friends encouraged me to pursue that."

The "Cake Man" was born. Developing a strong customer base from the door-to-door sales, he closed his small recording studio and opened the New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery on Exchange Alley in the French Quarter. Days before his first anniversary there, Hurricane Katrina hit.

Riding out the storm in an apartment above the cafe, Himelfarb took whatever food was left and helped feed the police around the corner for a few days before leaving town. He wound up in New York, where he landed a job managing the Jacques-Imos in Grand Central Station.

After several months there, Himelfarb said he missed New Orleans and was ready to return.

"I heard they needed chefs for the first Jazzfest after the storm." He figured that was reason enough to return home. Cooking there, he met Allison Gorlin - "a great baker" - who would become a business partner.

When they learned that the Faubourg Marigny space housing La Spiga was becoming available, they leapt at the opportunity. The New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery was back. Himelfarb signed the lease on Aug. 29 of this year, reclaiming a tragic date.

"We have something much better to remember that date for now," he said, reflecting his attitude throughout his career, but particularly post-Katrina. "I know I have to keep moving forward. Our whole community has to keep moving forward."



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW HINTON Patrons enjoy breakfasts at New Orleans Cake Cafe & Bakery on Chartres Street.

That sense of community is important to Himelfarb, and he wants his cafe to play a role in the neighborhood and the community at large.

"There's a real synergy around the community and the cafe," he said. "People come here to eat breakfast or lunch, but they also come to connect with one another."

"We love the foundation that we're building."

Open just over a month, Himelfarb has reconnected with many of his old customers, even some from his door-to-door days.

"I still have customers who have been with me from the start," he said. "Many friendships have developed along the way."

Crowds develop early, ready for Gorlin's popular omelets or other breakfast specials, or some of Himelfarb's sweet pastries. The lunch menu features salads, soups and sandwiches, all made on Gorlin's freshly baked breads.

True to his nickname, Himelfarb's cakes remain a foundation of the business and the chief outlet for his creative side - especially in the early morning hours in the bakery.

"I like to be here at 3 in the morning, when it's quiet and I can focus on what cakes I want to make that week," he said. That creativity has led to several traditional New Orleans desserts interpreted in cake, including a pecan praline cake with butter pecan frosting, and a bananas Foster cake with banana frosting.

Gorlin's recipes for breads and the meals the cafe serves also seek those special creative touches, Himelfarb said.

"Allison also really works on her recipes to come up with new ideas, new tastes," he said. A simple turkey sandwich gets dressed up with a sweet red pepper aioli, a melange of fresh roasted vegetables on a sandwich satisfies the vegetarian taste, and a variety of daily soups round out the lunch menu.



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW HINTON Along with cakes, Himelfarb and his partner, Allison Gorlin, serve house-made bagels and breads at their Faubourg Marigny shop.

"Nothing goes out of our kitchen that we're not 150 percent proud of," Himelfarb said.

While his cake designs have included elaborate feats of engineering and "cake sculptures," like those popularized on TV food challenges and the like, Himelfarb prefers expressing his creativity in the ingredients and development of simply delicious cakes.

"The elements you need to build those extravaganza cakes, as impressive as they look, usually don't taste very good," he said. "On the other hand, when people eat my German chocolate cake, or the pineapple upside-down cake, they smile. They tell me it reminds them of their childhood."

"That's when I know I've made a good cake. It's one that people can taste the love that we put into it."

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