

Cupcakes and kebabs

Satisfy your sweet tooth or skewer your hunger. ■ By Brian Ries



CHERRIED OUT: The Cupcake Spot's strawberry cupcake with vanilla buttercream frosting is intensely moist.

The Cupcake Spot ***

2401 S. Dale Mabry, Tampa, 813-258-3111 or thecupcakespotinc.com, 11 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Tues.-Fri., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat.

Gengiz Khan *** 1/2

6102 S. MacDill Ave., Tampa, 813-805-6400 or gengizkhan.com, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Tues.-Sat., 3-10 p.m. Sun.

Just six weeks after opening The Cupcake Spot in south Tampa, Nicole Rogers is slammed. "We're going through 600 to 800 cupcakes a day," she tells me between customers. There are three people lined up at the counter, and while I'm waiting for a chance to place my own order, four high-school boys walk in.

"We just heard about the place and wanted to check it out," says one. They don't leave with any of the luscious treats, but it's a safe bet they'll tell their parents. They may even be back for a couple of delicate cakes for themselves. After working my way through more than a dozen of the single-serving cakes myself, I know I'll be joining them.

There's no doubt that cupcakes are enjoying a hip little renaissance. It started in the last decade with specialty bakeries like Magnolia in New York and Sprinkles in Los Angeles, humble little shops that served the simple, homespun desserts. Soon enough, the shops had lines down the block, extra locations and dozens of competitors. Rogers says that over 75 cupcake stores opened across the country just last month.

It took Rogers to bring the trend to Tampa. After 18 years in the corporate world, mostly branding and marketing companies and their products, she can identify an opportunity. "I just grew weary of the rat race," she explains. "This is equally difficult but quite different."

Rogers and her boyfriend spend a whole day prepping ingredients for the week and as much as

four hours a day just assembling boxes. Some days they sell out hours before closing time and have to stick around and wait for folks to come pick up special orders. It's not all cake and icing.

Unless you're a customer. Sure, Rogers is vivacious and energetic, and the store trades on nostalgia well enough — with pink walls and a white-and-black-checked linoleum floor, but most people are focused on the cakes.

The Cupcake Spot features about a dozen different types of icing and almost that many types of cake, which they'll combine any way you want if you place a special order. They also keep a rotating selection of about 14 varieties in the display case for immediate consumption.

The vanilla cake is all about texture, light and delicate, relying on the icing to keep it from floating away. Chocolate has the same ethereal feel but lacks the rich and deep hit of chocolate that I'd hoped for. Chocolate chip is better, the soft cake studded by little bursts of dark flavor. Red velvet is somewhat moist, if a little bland, while carrot cupcakes manage moisture with a profusion of nuts and spices.

Two stand out from the sweet pack: intensely moist and delightfully rosy strawberry packed with bright fruit flavor, and rich and creamy banana. The strawberry I can eat naked, but the joy of the banana cake relies on chocolate buttercream or peanut butter icing. Ask nice and they'll even swirl them together.

On the whole, The Cupcake Spot's buttercream is a little lighter than I like, but it's hard to complain when your mouth is packed with decadent amounts of sugar and fat. That combination is surely at the core of cupcakes' popularity, but there's gotta be more. You don't see people lining up down at the

layer cake store. What's the real draw?

"They're timeless and traditional," explains Rogers. That's another part of the puzzle, but there are subtler psychological reasons behind this fad. "It's because of the size," she admits. "It's your very own. No sharing."

That's it.

Prices are \$30 a dozen, \$15.50 a half dozen and \$2.75 apiece.

THE INTERSECTION OF MACDILL AND INTERBAY

has turned into quite the culinary hotspot. On the west side is Interbay Meat Market, with heaping sandwiches and a hearty cafeteria line. On the northwest corner is the Tun-Du-Ree trailer, where Pat Saravana serves up no-nonsense, inexpensive Indian cuisine. On the Southeast corner, in a recently remodeled strip mall, is Gengiz Khan.

Although named for a bloodthirsty, world-conquering warlord, Gengiz Khan is actually the most genteel part of this restaurant corner, the interior decked out in artful black-and-white photographs of average Turks that look over booths constructed of rich fabrics and dark woods. The food is as elegant as the décor.

The menu has a familiar lineup found at most generic Middle Eastern joints, albeit with a Turkish bent that's drawn largely from the kebab cuisine of Southeast Turkey. Along with standards like rich hummus (\$6.50), intensely smoky baba ganoush (\$6.75) and grape leaves stuffed with rice and dried fruit (\$6.75), you'll find a bright salsa of eggplant, tomatoes, peppers and parsley. Yoghurt dip (\$6.75) is seriously thick and fortified by walnuts, dill, mint and a big hit of garlic.

Falafel (\$6.25) is delicately spiced and served with hummus — a great touch since I always end up dipping the fried fritters into the stuff anyway. Cheese pies (\$6.25) are rolled in unfortunately soggy sections of phyllo, and fried eggplant covered in yoghurt (\$7.75) ends up sodden. When it comes to appetizers, I'd stick to the stellar cold offerings.

Khan does know its way around meat, though: Chicken (\$13.75) and lamb (\$14.75) shish are both exceptionally juicy and subtly flavored with olive oil and herbs; tiny lamb chops are salty and slashed with smoky grill marks; adana (ground lamb mixed with red pepper, \$14.75) is tender and marked by the subtle heat of spicy smoked paprika.

Anyone who's seen a dull gray spit of gyro meat should try Khan's version (\$12.75). This one's made from strictly ground and seasoned lamb — and tastes like it; each slender shaved bit has a dark, caramelized crust on one side that is packed with salty flavor.

Gengiz Khan is yet another reason to visit this culinary corner of South Tampa.