



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Warren Brown made the jump from law to food with his CakeLove bakeries, but now he branches out into all foods at Love Cafe.

# A delicious end result

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Changing careers is nothing new. But jumping from lawyer to baker deserves more than just a little attention. In the case of Warren Brown and his brilliant bakery, CakeLove, and its various minibakeries around town, both have received media praise — including a stint on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and “Today” — and customer adulation. Brown, himself, has hosted the two-year-long Food Network show “Sugar Rush.” Not bad for a young man who about 10 years ago left practicing law to follow his sugar passion.

Leaving the legal profession wasn’t so hard for Brown, after all. As he conceded, he was just following a life dream. Well, more than that.

“I knew I loved food,” he said, “and I wanted to spend time developing knowledge about the world of food. It would be an interesting way to live.”

But before he took the big leap, Brown moonlighted as a baker, pushing himself in ways that could be both interesting and life-fulfilling — that is, through food he wanted to create and build a business.

“I was very comfortable in the kitchen,” he said. “I had no idea it would work. Would people buy the cakes I would make?”

To achieve success, Brown, who had done a lot of savory cooking up to that point — “I had cooked for my mom and siblings,” he said — took a year off to learn the art of baking.

“I thought [a cake] was a one-dimensional product,” he said. “It’s not that at all. Once I understood the dynamics of baking, I could build new cakes.”

Part of his cake education included, of course, not only the traditions of baking, but also the mysteries of flavor profiling and the challenges of

## IF YOU GO Love Cafe

» **Where:** 1501 U St. NW, Washington  
 » **Info:** 202-265-9800  
 » **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Tuesday; 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesday to Thursday and Sunday; 9 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday

building bigger, better buttercream frostings.

“I found it exciting to explore different flavor profiles,” he said. “And what about icings versus frostings versus piping on [decoration]? It was all a big eye-opener.”

Brown got his first big break when he carried in five sample cakes — Brown remembers these flavors were Neil’s Hat Trick, Sassy, Susie’s a Pink Lady, Carrot Souffle (no longer available), and Strawberries & Cream — to the food section offices of the Washington Post.

“They liked them all,” he said, though the food writer at the time was expecting maybe a few slices, not whole cakes.

“No one cake is a specialty,” he said. “I give people a whole array of choices. I don’t discriminate against one flavor. Each should taste as good as the other.”

Brown’s cakes and cupcakes have become a local sensation, and much of their appeal comes not so much from the decorations, but from the simple fact that Brown uses quality ingredients and produces from-scratch masterpieces of flavor. As he explains, his bakers make their own toffee chips, candy-sliced nuts, lightly toasted flaked coconut, raspberries puree, lemon curd, vanilla pastry cream and more.

“While I love talking about the dif-

ferences of buttercream,” he said, “the long list of other easy-to-grasp ways we put love into baking — by preparing items in-house — makes it clearer that the cakes are anything but plain and ordinary.”

However, Brown steadfastly steers clear of fancy cake decorations. It’s a personal issue, for he wants the flavors and textures to speak for him and his style.

“My frosting does not lend itself well to piped-on work,” he explained. He remembers the occasion when he did spend extra time putting flourishes on a finished cake, a gift for a friend’s birthday.

“When they presented the cake,” he said, “it had candles and went into a darkened room. No one ever saw the cake.”

Having achieved so much success plus the publication of two cookbooks — “CakeLove, How to Bake Cakes from Scratch” (2008) and “United Cakes of America: Recipes Celebrating Every State” (2010) — Brown says he is thrilled that his life has come about as it has. Maybe one other and newer aspect of his life is giving Brown even greater pleasure: being a dad to his 4 1/2-month-old daughter, Piper.

“This has been a different experience,” he said. “It is very moving to have a child, so I think of all I want to do. That would be so hard as a parent.”

Brown also mentions that he has just opened his seventh CakeLove at Fair Oaks Mall in Fairfax. While these minishops showcase his wares, to get the full Brown experience, fans should stop at his Love Cafe on U Street in D.C. There, over a sandwich, cup of coffee and tremendous wedge of a favorite cake, they can understand why every cake eater should rejoice that Brown picked up a spoon and spatula, and left behind dusty law books.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg All-American zinfandel for the Fourth of July

Celebrating the birth of our nation in the nation’s capital is about as patriotic of an experience as one can have. Between the National Symphony Orchestra playing on the lawn of the Capitol and the amazing fireworks display on the Mall, it’s enough to want to jump up and give the Washington Monument a big ol’ hug. So it’s only natural that the wine we should drink this weekend to commemorate the founding of our country is the one grape that America lays claim to as its own — zinfandel.

Zinfandel long has been considered the all-American grape. According to zinfandel lore, a Bostonian nursery owner, George Gibbs, brought the first vine cuttings back from Vienna, Austria, in the 1820s. By 1832, the hearty red grape became popular throughout the Northeast. During the gold rush, zinfandel hitched its wagon and headed west, where it gained popularity among Italian farmers for the vine’s ability to grow free-standing, making it easy to care for and harvest. Some of these original “gold rush vines” still exist and have earned the title “old vines” (loosely defined as vines that have been in active use for at least 40 years).

Today, there are more than 50,000 acres of zinfandel planted in the America. Most of the vineyards are in California, but there are plantings scattered throughout the Pacific Northwest and the southwestern United States.

Zinfandel wines traditionally offer a range of dark and red fruit flavors, but the most common tend to proffer cherry and berry notes, hints of black pepper, Asian spices and even melted black licorice. This combination provides plenty of pairing power for a wide variety of grilled and barbecue fare.

One of my favorite characters in winedom is Nils Venge of Saddleback Vineyards in Napa Valley. This tall, broad-shouldered Danish cowboy is a legend in the Oakville area of the valley where his winery is located. He and his son, Kirk, have collaborated since 2003 to produce a phenomenal version of classic zinfandel. The 2007 Saddleback Vineyards “Old Vine” Zinfandel (\$38) has amazing balance and finesse. The fragrant nose of blackberry, pepper and orange rind is a tantalizing precursor to the full, ripe flavors of red plum, raspberry and toasty vanilla on the full-bodied frame. Charismatic hints of cherry, mocha and black pepper blend together on the lengthy finish and would work wonders with dry-rub barbecue ribs.

Italian immigrants were the first to settle in the Dry

Creek Valley — located in the northernmost portion of Sonoma County — in the latter part of the 19th century. They reserved the fertile valley floor for cash crops, such as wheat, apricots and prunes, and relegated the rocky slopes of the hillsides to the zinfandel grapevines, which they vinified for personal use. However, the rich and spicy wines quickly gained popularity and a new industry was born. The 2007 Dry Creek Vineyards Old Vine Zinfandel, Sonoma County (\$28) is a wonderful example of how vibrant old-vine wines can be. The average vine age is 90 years and produces a complex and delicious wine with aromas of black fruit, chocolate and just a hint of cinnamon, while the palate revels in a well-balanced combination of blackberries, cherries and plums that coats the tongue. The touch of pepper on the long finish sings classic zinfandel.

What do you get when you cross a successful movie mogul with a passion for Napa Valley? You get Rich Frank, owner of Frank Family Vineyards in Calistoga. Frank is considered one of the most creative minds in Hollywood, where he proved his talents as the chairman of Walt Disney Television and then as president of Walt Disney Studios. Today, Rich and his wife, Connie, produce more than a dozen wines with their talented winemaker, Todd Graff. One of my favorites is the 2007 Frank Family Vineyards Zinfandel. The black cherry bouquet is accented by scents of cinnamon stick and clove. Flavors of ripe raspberry, spicy cherry and black pepper sing on the front of the tongue while hints of savory Asian spices round out the long finish. At \$37, it is an “E Ticket” ride for your palate.

Paso Robles, in the heart of California, is quickly gaining a well-deserved reputation as a major wine-producing region, particularly for Rhone varietals (such as syrah, viognier and roussanne) as well as zinfandel. The 2007 Four Vine Winery Zinfandel “Biker” (\$22) is made from a combination of low-yield vines from the legendary Dusi and Preston Zin vineyards and exhibits the traditional trademark notes of spicy earth on both the nose and the palate. Additional flavors of dark cherry, black raspberry and cocoa glide across the tongue with charm and complexity. The notes of melted black licorice on the smooth finish make this a tempting choice to pair with a dense chocolate tort.

Have a spectacular Fourth of July and enjoy the fireworks with America’s firecracker red wine made from zinfandel.

