

'Ace of Cakes' star Duff Goldman gives the 'skinny' on Los Angeles indulgences

By Stephanie Citron



Last year, Baltimore's "Ace Of Cakes" star Duff Goldman added more layers to his rising confectionary empire, founding Charm City Cakes West and Duff's Cake Mix in Los Angeles.

Strategically centered near the world's most prominent movie and television studios and the city's swankiest neighborhoods, Goldman caters to L.A.'s famously extravagant (and often half-baked) personalities, who relentlessly challenge him to take his cakes to the next tier. And when the Food Network's baking alchemist is not commuting coast to coast, he serves as a culinary ambassador for the American Chef Corps, a government initiative assembled to trade culinary techniques with chefs around the world.

We managed to persuade Goldman to take a break from cake to share his favorite sweet spots around Los Angeles.

You have two enterprises in Los Angeles: Charm City Cakes West and also Duff's Cakemix. What is Cakemix?

It's a do-it-yourself bakery where people can come and learn how to what I do, create custom cakes. Essentially, we invite them to play with food. People are amazed to discover that pretty often, they actually can work with one of us.

Where are the shops?

They're right next door to each other in West Hollywood. We put a bunch of windows in the wall so people in Cakemix can see into Charm City Cakes and watch us work.

What made you choose West Hollywood for the location?

It's central, and it's nice being on Melrose [Avenue], there's a lot of good traffic.

Good traffic? That sounds like an oxymoron in Los Angeles.

[Laughs.] Yeah, well, it's a really cool neighborhood with a lot of great stuff happening.

I can only imagine the over-the-top cake requests you receive in L.A. Care to share some standouts?

Oh, there's been a bunch. We've made a 5-foot-long Jabba the Hutt. If you've seen "Lord of The Rings," do you remember there was the war elephant? We had to make one of those. That was about 4 feet high.

How did you deliver it?

We have a really tall van.

Surely you've ventured out to see what tempts a sweet-tooth around Los Angeles. What are some of your favorite sweet spots?

I really like my cake the best. But there's a great ice cream shop called the Sweet Rose Creamery. They have a sweet corn ice cream; while it's no Maryland Silver Queen, it's really good. You can take any one of their flavors and turn it into a malt. So, I get Sweet Corn Malt. And there are doughnuts everywhere in LA. There's a store called Fonuts — they're doughnuts but they're baked [instead of deep-fried]. I get an old-school glazed with a strawberry on top — oh, man.

L.A. is food truck central. Where would you send visitors to find the best ones?

The best place is outside of the headquarters of the E! Network on Wilshire. Everyday, there's probably 15 to 20 food trucks out there serving lunch. I've been doing a lot of work with E lately, and there's just so many parked outside — and you might see a Kardashian! [Laughs.]

Do you have a favorite?

I really like the original L.A. taco trucks. They're really authentic. There's all these cool, fancy food trucks, but I mean, I'm in L.A., and you just can't get tacos like this in Baltimore.

Along with movie stars, you're in a town full of celebrity chefs. Have you gotten to know any of the others?

Michael Voltaggio is right down the street. He's from Frederick. He's got those two great restaurants, ink., and his lunch place, ink.sack. In the next month or two, he and I are planning to close off a huge section of Melrose and do a humongous crab feast. Crabs, corn and Maryland beer. We want to call it "Maryland on Melrose." We're just waiting for permission from the city.

That sounds like a fabulous event. Do you miss Maryland seafood?

We have this cool place in Koreatown called The Boiling Crab. It has, like, a two-hour wait. You get a giant plastic bag of steamed and boiled seafood — crawfish, mussels, clams and Dungeness crab. They have blue crab but, you know, I'm not going to get that. You get real messy; it's really, really good.

What do you miss most about Baltimore, food-wise?

The pit beef — Chaps.

What are some of your other favorite restaurants around town?

There's this really amazing place, Kings. OK, it's in Northridge, out in the Valley, totally not a chic area, like the Dundalk of L.A. A Korean family bought this old burger place and opened it as King's Burgers. But their son went to culinary school and went back to Korea and learned to make Korean sushi. And inside the burger place, he opened a sushi bar. This sushi is beautiful. I don't like uni [sea urchin roe], but this guy made me love uni. So you get this amazing sushi but you eat it in these vinyl booths with linoleum tabletops. When I bring people there and we pull into the parking lot of a burger joint, they say, "I thought you were taking me to a sushi bar." My favorite Mexican is El Flamin on Sunset [Boulevard]. You just can't get Mexican food like that in Baltimore. ink.sack has the best sandwich in town.

I know you grew up in a traditional Jewish family. Have you found any good delicatessens in Los Angeles?

Yes, there's an amazing Jewish deli downtown called Langer's — it's an L.A. staple. I was in Langer's one time and [Guns 'N Roses lead guitarist] Slash was in front of me. I sat at a booth near him and I was like, "Holy [expletive] — there's Slash eating matzo ball soup!"

You're also a musician. Have you gotten into the local music scene?

[Sighs.] I haven't been playing, I've been so busy. The Whisky [a Go Go] is a really neat place to see a band because it's so small. The Troubadour is really awesome — a great place to see a show as well.

L.A. is one of the most sprawling cities in the country. Where do you live?

In Santa Monica. We like to eat at Upper West. It's like L.A.'s version of [Baltimore's] Salt. On the weekends, we usually go to the beach or rent bikes to go up and down from Santa Monica to Venice Beach — its fun. [Venice Beach is where you find] all the freaks and every kind of person doing their thing — so many interesting people. Everyone is having a good time, riding their bikes, playing volleyball, basketball tournaments ... some people are spray-painting graffiti. Nobody cares. There's just so much going on.

When friends from Baltimore come to visit, where do you take them?

Definitely to Venice Beach. And it's fun to go for a workout at Gold's — that's the gym where all the crazy huge dudes you see on the cover of muscle magazines work out. My friends say, "Wow, those are real people?"

Where do you recommend friends stay?

I love The London off of Sunset. And across from The Grove is Farmer's Daughter; it used to be a motel, then somebody made it nice.

Finish this sentence: "The thing I most love about LA is ..."

The people. Everyone out here is really cool. Before I moved out here, I was a little worried because everyone was like, "Oh, it's so fake, so plastic." But I have found that to be completely untrue. I've met some really cool people out here. The thing to avoid in Los Angeles is ... Hollywood Boulevard. The Walk of Fame, and all of that ... so touristy and crappy and disgusting.

You get to see so many places through your work. Where are your favorite foodie travel destinations?

Chicago has incredible places to eat. I love the Italian pastry shops in the North End of Boston. I was just in Algeria. Oh, man, I had the best couscous of my life. It was off of a street cart. They were a colony of France for so long, so their food is really good — the pastry culture is on-point. There are incredible pastry chefs there.

What were you doing in Algeria?

Oh, I'm a culinary diplomat for the State Department. They started this program called the Diplomatic Chef Corps and picked a few chefs to represent America. They want me go abroad to places where people don't necessarily hate Americans but they think don't really know much about them. So I go and we share food culture, and they realize Americans are pretty cool and we do have a food culture. I've also been to Bogota, Colombia, with that. It was really eye-opening for me. Colombian food is very challenging. The flavors were astringent and the meat preparation — it's a lot of textures we haven't seen. You've got all of these varieties of potatoes in the high Andes. [I tasted] one [that] was roasted and lightly whipped ... it was really slimy. A tough texture to reconile.

Any upcoming travel plans?

I'll be in Italy late summer or early fall.

Which area?

Florence.

What are you going to be doing there?

It's a secret.

If you go

Los Angeles is 2,650 miles from Baltimore. It is a bounty of endless sunshine, dramatic landscape, glitz and glamour, and it has what is arguably the largest cluster of creative cuisine eateries in the United States. Info: discoverlosangeles.com

Getting there

Three airlines — Southwest, Air Tran and United — offer nonstop flights from BWI to LAX. Flights take about five hours, with fares beginning at \$300 round trip. Once you arrive, there is no comprehensive mass transit system, so you will need a car or someone to drive you. Los Angeles County measures 4,084 square miles, with more than 28 freeways, and is famous for having the worst traffic in the country — so a GPS is essential for finding your destinations.

Lodging

Los Angeles hosts more than 40 million visitors a year, so there are an enormous range of hotels from which to choose. One that Duff Goldman likes to recommend is the glamorous all-suite London in West Hollywood, with a Gordon Ramsay restaurant on site, poolside cabanas and complimentary breakfast. Rates from \$250. 1020 N. San Vicente Blvd., 866-282-4560, thelondonwesthollywood.com.

Or you can lounge oceanfront at the boutique-y Venice on the Beach Hotel. Rates from \$179. 2819 Ocean Front Walk, Venice, 310-429-0234. veniceonthebeachhotel.com

Duff's delectable destinations:

Charm City Cakes West and Duff's Cakemix, 8302 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood., 323-642-7234 charmcitycakes.com and duffscakemix.com.

Sweet Rose Creamery, 225 26th St., Santa Monica, sweetrosecreamery.com

Fonuts, 8104 W. Third St., L.A., 323-592-3075, fonuts.com

Ink.sack, 8360 Melrose Ave., L.A., 323-655-7225, mvink.com

King's Burgers, 9345 Reseda Blvd., Northridge, 818-885-6456

The Upper West, 3321 W. Pico Blvd., Santa Monica, 310-576-1111, theupperwest.com

Don't miss:

Southern California's famous beaches. Los Angeles has 75 miles of coastline spanning from Malibu to Long Beach, which you can sightsee while driving along the Pacific Coast Highway. It's worth stopping in Venice Beach (venicebeach.com) to experience its famously funky glory, and the star-laden Manhattan Beach (manhattanbeachchamber.com) where you can stroll the Strand — a stunning oceanfront promenade — and score glimpses of the swanky residences.

