

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Business](#) | [Investing](#) | [Sports](#) | [Life](#) | [Arts](#)[Movies](#) | [Television](#) | [Theatre](#) | [Music](#) | [Books](#)[John Doyle](#)[Andrew Ryan](#)[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Arts](#) » [Television](#) » [John Doyle](#)

JOHN DOYLE: TELEVISION

The Cupcake Girls cooks up more drama than most soaps

[JOHN DOYLE](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

VANCOUVER — From Monday's Globe and Mail

here's a light snow falling on a stretch of West Broadway in Kitsilano when I arrive at 11 a.m. It's shockingly cold. Inside the store called Cupcakes, all is warm, calm, and boy, does it smell delicious.

Three young women staff, Rachel, Kelsey and Tori, are finishing the presentation of a small batch of cupcakes. A taste-test is about to happen. They move around, deftly putting the cupcakes in order, cleaning away the unused batter and washing some dishes. All the while, two camera operators and a sound engineer follow them around a small space. The staff chat and joke, seemingly blind to the cameras.

Minutes later, Lori Joyce, co-owner of the business strides in from the back. "Ohmygawd!" she says, looking at the cupcake presentation. Then she and co-owner Heather White, proceed to taste and grade the new flavours as the cameras capture everything.

This all sounds a little ordinary. A standard cooking show being made. Well, *The Cupcake Girls* is far from ordinary TV. The show, a Gemini-winner last week, is seen in 63 countries and has a fanatical following. Mostly, you see, it's not about the cupcakes. The stars don't cook. It's about the people

running the business and *The Cupcake Girls* has more drama and emotion than most soap operas on TV.

It's part of the second season, coming in April on the W channel, that I'm watching being filmed. In its first season (airing Sundays, 11 p.m. on W), the show introduced the sort of characters that make for the very best kind of reality TV. Lori and Heather, both thirtysomethings and best friends since their teen years, were trying to expand their five-store business in Vancouver, and then just hold on to it as the recession struck. In the first episode, Lori had to drop everything to go for an in vitro-fertilization appointment. Heather had to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, so she couldn't deliver a wedding cake.

Heather's dad Brian did the delivery, as he's supposed to, but made it clear he didn't like taking orders from women. Heather's mom, who manages the day-to-day finances and administration, almost lost it with him on the phone. So Brian sulked a bit and stopped for lunch before delivering the urgently needed cake.

Meanwhile, at one of the stores, there was an issue with an employee named Cadence, a transitioning transgender woman who doesn't like taking orders but is a supersalesperson. In particular, Cadence didn't want to wear a hairnet because she was really proud of her long hair.

"The biggest connection with the audience was the story of the risks in starting and running your own business," says Heather. "But Lori's in-vitro treatment really, really made the first season a hit."

I'm sitting with Heather and Lori in the tiny office at the back of the Kitsilano store, their home base. The women are so close they finish each other's sentences and a conversation with them is a surreal experience – a barrage of anecdotes about the show, the staff, the business, the in-vitro drama.

Lori is obsessed with branding and marketing. That's clear. She explains that they had no plan to appear on TV, but saw the marketing possibilities. "We

had just started this business a few years ago. No money, no plan, no marketing. Then we were invited to appear on the show *The Shopping Bags*. We tested recipes. We agreed to do it because we were struggling to establish ourselves. Any publicity was good. The producers of the series noticed the dynamic between us and approached us about a series just about us.”

“We agreed to do a pilot,” Heather says, continuing Lori’s story without missing a beat. “But we weren’t sure about it. Who would be? Cameras in your face all the time. Then we figured out some boundaries. The cameras would never enter our homes.”

Lori then continues: “Initially I was drawing a line with the in-vitro thing. I wanted nothing to do with the filming. It was my first argument with the producers. But then I let it happen, and it went on and on. The viewers were absolutely absorbed by it. They were rooting for me.”

Eventually, Lori did become pregnant (viewers saw more than they bargained for) and now has a baby son. “My son will not be in the second season,” she says. “The cameras still don’t go into my house. But thank God I got pregnant. Otherwise, season two would have been a real downer!”

The Cupcake Girls airs on the cable channel WE tv in the United States and is one of three reality shows focused on cupcakes. The other two are *D.C. Cupcakes* on TLC and *Cupcake Wars* on the U.S. version of the Food Network. As Lori and Heather explain, the Canadian *Cupcake Girls* was supposed to become TLC’s cupcake show, but things didn’t work out.

Lori says, “They wanted us to bake and be like sisters who shout at each other. I’m not a baker and I don’t want to be a baker. So TLC said no to us because we wouldn’t change the show. Our show is about us, about marketing and running a business. It’s not about baking. The beauty of the first season is that it was about us, in the raw.”

This is all well and good, but most people are skeptical about reality-TV shows. How much is faked? How much is manipulated by TV producers wanting big emotions?

“There was no exaggeration in the first season,” Heather says. “Our financial situation was exposed and that was very real. Some people thought we were crazy putting information about the finances on TV, and yeah, some people we do business with were worried about the stability of the business after they saw that on TV. But if your show is about the risks in running your own business, you have to be real. Things have gotten a lot better financially, you’ll see.”

And what to expect in the second season? Lori’s “maternity leave” lasts all of two days. Heather is looking for a new house and her preoccupation with that worries the others. Her dad Brian is back, as “senior v-p of facilities management.” Not sure what happens with the charismatic, no-hairnet Cadence.

When I leave, I’m given some cupcakes to take away. Just a few. At the front of the store, the three executives of Force Four Entertainment, who produce *The Cupcake Girls*, are waiting to say hello. They’re beaming, as well they might. The show’s hot and a hit. The cupcakes prove to be rather good too.