



INNOVATORS

The Cheesecake Ambassador

Rusty Federman has perfected the recipe for a dessert you'll find irresistible — even if you think you don't like cheesecake. **BY HALEY SHAPLEY**

WHEN MERCER ISLAND'S Rusty Federman was a kid, he saw how hard his parents worked as the owners of the U District restaurant Lox, Stock & Bagel. While he enjoyed playing around in the kitchen and eating the food — particularly the cheesecake his mom made — he didn't intend to follow the same path.

Instead, Federman became a serial entrepreneur, founding five different companies, none in the food industry. All the while, he took up baking cheesecake as a hobby, which made him popular with friends. One friend in particular asked Federman if he'd make a couple of cheesecakes to try out in his restaurants.

Federman complied, and the friend asked for four more. He said no. But then he started looking into what it would take to scale production and turn his hobby into a viable business. Fast-forward about seven years, and you don't have to be besties with Federman to taste Rusty's Famous Cheesecake yourself — you can find it from area restaurants like Daniel's Broiler to specialty grocers like Whole Foods.

"It's like true New York cheesecake in that it's got that dense body to it, but it's also really creamy," Federman says. "A lot of cheesecake

just falls down. We make our own gluten-free graham crust from a recipe I developed. It's crispy; it doesn't get mushy." Federman's winning recipe received KING5 Evening Magazine's Best Dessert in Western Washington four years in a row.

The bestselling flavor is Esther's Classic, the original cheesecake named in honor of his mother. Slightly Salted Caramel and Chocoholic, made with 100 percent Valrhona cocoa, are other favorites, while seasonal options like Marionberry Cabernet and Basil Hayden's Bourbon Pumpkin please more adventurous palates.

The company is developing a few new products and also working out the final details to distribute through AmazonFresh and Prime Now, making it easier than ever to satiate cheesecake cravings.

While the food business remains as challenging as he always knew it was, Federman finds his hobby-turned-livelihood rewarding — especially when the self-proclaimed "cheesecake pusher" can share a good slice with someone who previously thought they didn't like it.

"We're really staying true to the principles we were founded on, keeping it real for people with local, all-natural ingredients," he says. "We're sharing what we think is the world's best cheesecake." ●