

Cheesecake REVIVAL

Have you noticed? Cheesecake is experiencing a resurgence in popularity. From grocery stores and bakeries to specialty shops such as KelSas SweetBox, the dessert is once again enjoying must-have status due to an ever-growing array of flavors and innovative toppings.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JORDAN BUSH

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isters-in-law Kelly Carlucci and Sasha Santana (KelSas) have known one another for 20 years. Between their two households are 11 kids, many of the same age (“cousin twins,” they call them). When cooking meals for large family gatherings, the two were accustomed to going all-out.

Prior to opening KelSas, Kelly worked in food service for over 20 years, while Sasha was a state employee. In the balance, they were left with little personal time. Still, their busy schedules didn’t deter them from discussing a shared dream of starting a family business together. Calling one another while driving their kids around or commuting to work, the pair carved out whatever time they could to discuss ideas.

Ultimately, the yummy, boxed desserts they created for friends and family led them to launch KelSas SweetBox in 2020. In September 2023, they opened a brick-and-mortar storefront at 25 North Prince Street (once the home of Carmen & David’s Creamery) in Lancaster, offering cheesecakes and other desserts, charcuterie, graze tables, samplers and catering.

FAMILY FIRST

Their cheesecake recipe was born in Sasha’s kitchen. “Three years ago, at the very beginning of Covid, I started to work from home, and we began to bake,” Sasha says of collaborating with Kelly. “I posted the picture of the first order, and it never stopped. In the morning, on my way to work, I would call Kelly and we would talk about our ideas, how we would start.” They made that all-important first step by meeting with SCORE and gaining a mentor.

“I wanted a future of financial freedom for our families,” says Kelly of her motivation to become a business owner. “We come from working hard, nothing has been handed to us. We have many children to keep this going, to pass the torch,” she says of instilling the entrepreneurial spirit in the next generation. “Every dollar we make goes back into the business,” she adds.

While everyone in the family pitches in where they can, it’s basically just Sasha and Kelly on a daily basis. “We’ve stayed up a whole weekend,” says Sasha of baking and meeting orders. “I haven’t slept in 17 years,” Kelly adds, only half-jokingly. “My youngest daughter’s first birthday is in two weeks. My oldest is 17. I started over,” she says. When it comes to running lean, she simply says, “I’m used to it.”

CHEESECAKES, MADE MINI

Modern cheesecakes are generally made with a smooth, carefully combined mix of cream cheese, eggs, sugar and vanilla. According to Sasha, baking “low and slow” is the path to a cheesecake’s creamy texture, devoid of air bubbles and cracks. To further achieve a cool, creamy texture, KelSas refrigerates their cheesecakes overnight. Building on their base recipe, varieties as colorful as they are flavorful are made into full- and mini-size cheesecakes. Full-sized cheesecakes generally range in size from 10 to 12 inches, but can be customized for special requests and catering orders. The minis are approximately 2 inches in diameter, making them slightly smaller than a cupcake and just the right size for a rich dessert.

Kelly and Sasha’s cheesecake recipe book has reached into the triple digits, featuring a regular rotation complete with seasonal specialties.

Clockwise from top left: Mini-cheesecake flavors include Peanut Butter & Jelly (strawberry preserves), Classic, Peanut Butter Cup, Double Chocolate, Cannoli, Lemon Curd and, in the middle, Cherry with an Oreo bottom.



WELCOME
to
KELSAS SWEET BOX
It's The Mini Things

Clockwise from left:
The sign says it all.

The cheesecake base is mixed carefully, combining the core ingredients of cream cheese, eggs, sugar and vanilla.

Should you have a last-minute need for dessert, the shop's case is stocked with mini-cheesecakes.

Perfect for Easter: the Peanut Butter Cup cheesecake.

Kelly Carlucci zests lemon on top of a blueberry cheesecake.

Sasha Santana then pipes icing atop the cheesecake.



Flavors such as Fruity Pebbles, Banana Pudding, Andes Mint and Double Peanut Butter Cup are playfully named treats that both dazzle the eyes and tempt the taste buds.

"With the base of the cheesecake changing, that creates a whole different feel," Sasha observes. "A lot of [recipes] are a classic base with a different topping. Our Strawberry Champagne has a cooked-off champagne base," she points out.

Ask them to name their favorite cheesecake variety and they respond that it depends on the day; however, Sasha admits she "could drink" the banana pudding variety and names Peanut Butter and Jelly as her favorite "right now, as of today." Kelly cites Banana Pudding and Fruity Pebbles as her current favorites.

THE EVOLUTION OF CHEESECAKE

Offering a different texture though similar in spirit, the primitive ancestor of the modern-day cheesecake can be traced to Ancient Greece. This distant recipe was rumored to have been served at the first Olympic Games in 776 B.C. Later, in 230 A.D., the Greek writer, Athenaeus, recorded a Greek version of the cheesecake.

The Romans took this basic recipe a step further by adding eggs to cheese, flour and honey and calling it "Libum" or "Savillum." Recorded in the second century B.C., Cato the Elder's *De Agricultura* (or "On Farming") contains three recipes for cakes used for religious purposes. One, called "Placenta," most resembles a modern cheesecake, as it details specific quantities of flour, cheese, honey and eggs in an oiled, covered earthenware bowl lined with bay leaves.

By 1390, the English had put their spin on cheesecake. An English cookbook, *Forme of Cury*, contained a cheesecake-like recipe whose ingredients included elderflower and rose water.

The American version we know today was made possible when dairyman William A. Lawrence, the maker of Neufchâtel cheese in Chester, New York, added cream to the recipe in 1872. The resulting product was ultimately named Philadelphia Cream Cheese (1880), due to the softer

versions of cheese that were made popular in southeast Pennsylvania. It wasn't until 1929, after the Kraft-Phenix Cheese Company purchased the Philadelphia Cream Cheese trademark, that it was implemented into a cheesecake recipe by Arnold Reuben at his New York City restaurant, Turf.

Lancaster, of course, has been a connoisseur of cheesecake for the past 50 years thanks to Bill and Ruth Pellman, who turned their kitchen enterprise into a thriving business called Pellman Foods in 1973. Based in New Holland, Pellman products, which includes cheesecakes, pies, layer cakes and tortes, are sold at farmers markets, grocery and specialty stores in a four-state area. Pellman products are also served in restaurants and are made available to fundraising endeavors.

YOUTH PAID WORK EXPERIENCE

For any food business, ingredients, kitchen equipment and labor are expensive; Kelly and Sasha realized that fact early in their journey. Now they are ready to expand where labor is concerned. Kelsas SweetBox will be making their first hire outside of family through a program in which they will partner with The Mix, a local organization helping "to develop youth and families to be leaders of and within thriving communities."

Funded at the federal level, the Youth Paid Work Experience program is a paid work internship for students to learn from small businesses and expand their skills and résumés, while working to help a small business grow. "Our first student will get paid through a Career Link grant [in partnership with] The Mix. The student will help us out, and we will help him learn. This student really loves baking, so this helps him on his career path," Sasha says.

Kelsas SweetBox is located at 25 North Prince Street in Lancaster. Follow along on Instagram and Facebook, @kelsassweetbox. When placing small orders, a 24-hour notice is required at a minimum. Larger catering orders are requested with a minimum of one week's notice.



Kelly Carlucci (left) and Sasha Santana opened their North Prince Street dessert shop, Kelsas SweetBox, last September.



The sisters-in-law and business partners perfected the recipe for their cheesecake in Sasha's kitchen during the pandemic.

