

Let them eat cake



If it's your birthday, your letter carrier probably won't bake you a gourmet cake or play "Happy Birthday" on the violin—unless you are on **Steven Guzman's** route. Guzman specializes in delivering joy, not just mail.

A member of San Francisco Branch 214, Guzman has carried the mail in Redwood City, CA, since April 2020, shortly after being furloughed from his job as a pastry chef at a hotel, where he baked and decorated cakes

for catered events and for the hotel's restaurant. The COVID-19 pandemic forced his former employer, the Ritz-Carlton in Half Moon Bay, CA, to shut down its banquet operations and restaurant and lay off nearly half of its staff, including Guzman.

After a few months of searching for a new job in a different craft—restaurants everywhere were shuttered for the pandemic, so finding another position as a chef was out of the question—he found work at the Post Office.

Though he traded his chef's toque for a postal blue hat, Guzman brought his baking skills with him.

He got to know his customers quickly, and word got out that he was a chef. "Some people know that I can bake, and some asked me if I could make them a cake," he said. "It's usually people who have birthdays. I've become friends with some people on my route. I talk to the kids a lot, and the kids tell me it's their birthday coming up."

On his days off, he began bringing cakes to lucky customers. He doesn't charge for the birthday cakes or other treats he brings to friends he has made on his route; he just makes them to please himself and his customers. Guzman estimates that he has brought cakes, assorted pastries or candy to 18 customers to date.

They aren't the average cake—Guzman puts as much care into these cakes as he did as a full-time chef. "They really rave about my cakes, because the cakes I make them are the same cakes I made at the Ritz," he said. Part of the fun is surprising them with a fancy cake they never imagined a letter carrier could create. The recipients of his cakes "are really amazed by the different textures and flavors," Guzman said.

No wonder the cakes are so good—Guzman isn't just any baker. He studied pastry-making at the French Culinary Institute in New York City, earning a Grand Diplôme in pastry arts, and baked cakes professionally for eight years before losing his chef job. The last cake he made for a customer was composed of a blueberry financier and an almond sponge cake,

Steven Guzman plays music for some young patrons on his route while they enjoy one of his cakes.

Above: Another of Guzman's creations



and combined with mango jam, pistachio cremeux and passionfruit cream. “It took me three days to make,” he said. “It’s my wife’s favorite, and I make it for her every year.”

As word of Guzman’s pastry skills spread, customers even asked him for baking lessons. “There was this one lady on my route who found out I made pastry, so she asked me if I could come to her house, because she wanted to learn to make cream puffs,” he said. On a day off, he ended up teaching a kitchen full of kids how to make them—again, for no charge.

As if baking world-class pastries isn’t enough talent, Guzman also plays the violin and has brought his instrument along with his cakes to play for customers. He’s played since he was 10 years old and was orchestra concertmaster in high school. He has played with the Redwood Symphony and the Palo Alto Philharmonic, and still plays in a church orchestra on Sundays—easier now that he has every Sunday off as a letter carrier. At the Ritz-Carlton, he would sometimes play the violin for diners, so he continued that tradition, playing “Happy Birthday” for customers who receive cakes or when they invite him to weekend social gatherings.

Guzman’s unique sense of service has attracted local media attention. Customers credit him for bringing a sense of community to his route, not just with cakes and music, but with his friendly demeanor and excellent service. Despite the pandemic, said one customer, Guzman went “above and beyond what most people would do.” The customer, Katherine



A photo of Guzman in his previous uniform, from his time at the Ritz Carlton.

Machemer, said that she appreciated Guzman visiting her third-floor apartment to deliver packages during the shut-down period. “We really got to know him because of the pandemic,” Machemer told *Climate Magazine*. “We kept ordering more and more things, and he was the only person we would see.”

Guzman even surprised an 8-year-old girl with a Christmas gift—a Lego nutcracker like the one he enjoyed as a child—after the girl, unbeknownst to her mother, asked him to deliver her a present when he came to her door. “I had to explain to my daughter that he’s a mailman, not Santa Claus,” the mother, Adela Novotna, told *Climate*

Magazine. “He just brings so much joy. He’s unique.”

Even though restaurants and hotels are reopening, Guzman is sticking with the mail for now. He isn’t sure that going back to baking would work for him, especially since the food and hospitality business is still facing challenges and risks brought on by COVID-19.

“People ask me if I want to go back to pastry. If I do, I think I’ll have to wait a long time because the whole entire pandemic thing changed things around, especially in the food industry,” he said. “Right now, carrying the mail is fine for me. I’ve gotten to know a good majority of the people on my route. I like what I’m doing.” **PR**