

# 'Muffin man' finds better way of life at Sunburst Café



Jerome Tocio mixed the batter for blueberry muffins.

He hands stirred the flour, eggs and sugar with a stainless steel spoon in a huge stainless steel bowl. His forearms flexed, showing off his tattoos. On the left forearm was a tattoo of his mother as a little girl. A caricature of himself holding a rolling pin and a batch of dough, dressed in a white apron and chef's hat, on the right.

It was still dark outside when Tocio poured the batter, speckled with blueberries, into a muffin tin and loaded it into the oven.

The pain from carpal tunnel in his wrists had subsided by then, but it would return the next morning at 3:30 a.m. when we would wake up, drive to work and make 10 more batters at his breakfast and lunch café, and he will do it again every day after that.

"Even after all these years I'm still passionate about what I do," he said. "I love to bake."

Sunburst Cafe in North Naples celebrated its 19th anniversary in February. In an ever-changing restaurant environment, where businesses open and close so often, especially in May when seasonal residents leave for the summer, Tocio is still baking muffins.

Regular customers call him the "muffin man."

But "it wasn't a self-proclaimed title," Tocio said, laughing.

## **Humble beginnings**

Tocio came from an Italian family that didn't have much. A household of seven shared two bedrooms, one bathroom and a "postage stamp" of a backyard in Boston.

"I don't ever remember being poor, and I don't ever remember not being loved," Tocio said. "I loved the way I was raised, and my parents did the best that they could."

But he knew he wanted more.

Tocio and his wife started a family — three kids — worked suit-and-tie jobs at hospitals in Boston and made a lot of money.

Still, he wanted more.

"I just wanted a change," Tocio said. "I just wanted to be happy and make a change in my life because you can go from the corporate world, being a suit and tie, clean shaven, short hair to doing what you're passionate about."

They packed up the family minivan and drove the 1,700 miles to Naples. They bought a coffee shop — before there were any Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts or Panera Breads — and called it Sunburst Cafe.

Nearly 20 years later, the cafe is filled with bright yellows, oranges and blues, and tiny colorful flags hang from wooden beams that run horizontal across the ceiling. A mural with a cartoon-looking jungle scene takes up one wall, and muffins fill the front case with little chalkboard labels — zucchini, lemon poppyseed, banana walnut and Nutella. Tocio prepares about 15 to 20 varieties a day.

"I'm very humble because I know my roots and I know where I came from," Tocio said.

### **Putting in the work**

The sun still wasn't up when Tocio started on the dishes. He could have waited until the dishwasher came in, but he didn't want it to get too backed up in between the batches of batter.

Tocio will also clean the floors on his hands and knees and scrub the toilets.

"There's nothing beneath me or below me that I won't do here," he said. "It's an awful lot of work to do what I do."

Tocio clocks in about 80 hours a week; the cafe is open from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily. Sunburst serves omelettes, scrambles, salads, sandwiches, wraps and more. The muffins, though, are one of the main attractions. He sells about 150 muffins in a day, 5,000 in a year and at least 100,000 in 19 years.

The "muffin man" has provided a new lifestyle for his own kids. They have their own cars, their own bedrooms, a swimming pool, and they have traveled the world on family vacations; Tocio never left Massachusetts as a kid.

When the sun came up over the Sunburst Cafe, Tocio greeted his customers by their first names. He made sure the jelly containers and the ketchup bottles were filled. All the details, he said, add to a better dining experience.

His clean shaven, suit-and-tie look has been replaced by a beard and mustache and tattooed-covered skin. The back of his T-shirt said "friends don't let friends go to Starbucks," a running joke around the café.

"We have a great, thriving business," Tocio said. "We have a great life. We have no problems."

#### Sunburst Cafe

- Open 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily
- Where: 2340 Pine Ridge Road, North Naples
- More information: 239-263-3123; [sunburstnaples.com](http://sunburstnaples.com)