

>> [Music] This is Matt Raymond and welcome to this podcast from the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its eighth year this free event held on the National Mall Saturday September 27th will spark readers' passion for reading as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even those not attending the festival in person can participate online. These podcast interviews with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). Now I have the honor of talking with the famed pastry chef Warren Brown. You might be familiar with Mr. Brown as the host of the Food Network program Sugar Rush, or if you live here in the Washington D.C. metro area like I do, you may better know him for his delicious confections that he creates in his local Cake Love bakeries. Mr. Brown has appeared on Oprah, The Today Show, on Fox News and has been featured by People Magazine, Forbes, Reader's Digest and numerous other publications. His latest cookbook is called Cake Love and it shares the same name, of course, of his bakeries and captures his passion for baking cakes that please his family, friends and customers alike. Mr. Brown, thank you very much for joining us.

>> Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be with you.

>> Now I have to tell you I took a look at a press release for this book and I love this opening line. It says that you gave up a law career studying torts to pursue your true happiness, baking torts.

>> That's right.

>> Of course different spellings. Tell us a little bit about that and how you came to do what you're doing now.

>> I came to Washington back in '95 to go to George Washington Law School and I, you know, studied and graduated, did two years as the healthcare litigation attorney with the federal government and in the midst of practicing, really at the outset of practicing, I had a really good, strong feeling that it wasn't right for me. I can't say that I was daydreaming I guess any more than anybody else at their desk, but my colleagues and I would always gripe over how much we didn't like practicing law at lunch and we'd think about and dream about and talk about what else we would do. We even came up with a little website; [leavingthelaw.com](http://leavingthelaw.com), and we're hoping that I think secretly and collectively to take a bolt. You know I don't think I, I don't know, maybe I just took it more seriously than they did but I began really thinking about what could I do if I wanted to leave the law and I always have loved cooking. I've loved food and making food, studying it, reading recipe books. I've done that since I was a kid and my version of a fun read is a cookbook. So I said to myself, you know, let's just dive more into your love for food and cooking just for fun, and as I did that I said well I want to really learn how to bake because I didn't know how to do that, and baking just kind of took off. It was one thing after another. Bring, you know, a cake into work and friends and family started

asking to order them and I really have just been playing catchup I guess since then.

>> Well and we all know, those of us in Washington at least that there is no shortage of lawyers in this town.

>> That's right.

>> Are there any role models who inspired you or anybody that sort of inspired you to make this break?

>> I talked to lots of people and I really enjoy meeting different people and different types of people in whatever setting, and I try to listen deeply to the things that anybody says. There isn't one specific person that comes to mind that kind of inspired me to follow my dream and to follow an idea, it's really, and this is the thing that's been the most pleasant and rewarding and surprising thing of about being an entrepreneur is that I feel like I draw on the lessons that I've had and received for my whole life from small little encounters that seemed otherwise totally innocuous to you know the nuns when I was in grade school driving a point home, I feel like it's like a nice gigantic patchwork of everybody that's taught me things and that has helped me, that I able to pull their, you know, really to just pull up their voice in my head and go with that as my guidance. It's always been like that for me and this is really no exception.

>> How did you learn and hone the skills that you have today? Are you self-taught or?

>> I'm self-taught. I guess I like to watch things and then to mimic or you know just imitate what I've seen. I was traveling through Europe I remember one time when I was in college, I was pack backing and I was in Germany. It was one day it was raining to I could really go outside so I was wandering through a mall and I stumbled upon a kind of Italian kind of restaurant, and the chef was preparing food right in this window so you could watch it if you were just walking by the mall. Having nothing to do, no money and soaking wet, I decided to just stand there and watch and see what I could learn, and I really learned a lot of basic stuff about like cooking pasta and the sauce preparation and how they get the sauce to stick to the pasta. And that kind of lesson, that kind of learning and watching for cooking is something that's really has always helped me. Watching cooking shows when I was growing up when Julia Child, Frugal Gourmet, I mean I used to watch those a lot with my sister Lenore. My sister will claim she taught me how to cook and taught me everything I know, which she did teach me a few things for sure, but it's really about to me watching somebody else whether on TV or in person and just going at it and trying it, and while I'm working on it like the books that I've read have given me a base knowledge of what tastes good with what, identifying herbs and spices, you know, talking about how best to prepare a certain meat and I just kind of played with that a lot.

>> Your new book is called Cake Love How to Bake Cakes from Scratch, and not a lot of people know this but we have quite a selection of cookbooks

here at the Library of Congress and we will be glad to take that one into our collections. What can you tell us about your book?

>> My book is my method of baking and what I feel is the way that you've got to [inaudible] the ingredients in the bowl and not rush them but also not you know not go too slowly, so that you can have a very good mixture of ingredients that will go into the pan and it will bake so that you have the right texture that you want. I like to think of cake batter as just a bunch of ingredients that surround air and making sure that air gets into the batter is very, very important for it to bake correctly, for it to rise to the level that you want it, really so that you have enough air pockets and distribution of everything so it's not too dense so you have that right texture after its baked, after its cooled and you want to assemble it into a layer cake or if you just want to pour something over it if it's like a bunt or pound cake. I ask people to follow my steps in going through the recipes and I've broken the steps out so that they can be followed easily, especially when you're working on it like at arm's length because I know that's how you use the book in the kitchen, and particularly what I want people to do is follow some of the pictures that give you a step by step guide of what it looks like when it's correct versus this kind of going off in a territory by yourself without pictures as a guide. A lot of times people ask me what's one important thing to take away from the book and if there's anything that separated my baking, you know, the kinds of before and after like before it tasted good and then once I feel like I hit the Cake Love type of a product is that I started baking with a scale and it's nothing revolutionary, it's really just what all the professionals insist that you do, but when you bake with a scale you're weighing your flour on the scale and I sift my flour right onto my scale, usually into a bowl that's set on top of my scale, and that's how I take the measurement of how much flour I'm going to put into my batter. A lot of times people will scoop and level, that's a very frequently referred to method of measuring flour is to scoop and level.

>> Is that more imprecise that way?

>> Much more imprecise. You typically will pack in extra flour, more flour than you need into that cup measure because you're doing it like in some kind of vessel that you kind of scoop into the bag of flour and just basically condense it. And on top of it I just feel that a lot of recipes that are out there call for more flour than is necessary and so you get, you know, you get a lot of extra flour, and in a cake where all those ingredients need to surround air, with too much flour you're going to pack the air out of there, you're just going to condense it, and I just think that that's a kind of a catastrophic error that you just can't recover from when making a cake.

>> Now I'm the kind of guy who considers it at least a minor achievement if I'm able to heat something up in the microwave. Could this book benefit someone like me?

>> I think so. I think so. There's hope. There's a recipe in the book that's a no mixer cake, something you don't need fancy equipment for at least to bake the cake part. Just a bowl, whisk, couple basic

ingredients, butter, flour, sugar, eggs and you can just go. Whips together really fast and you know is really easy to bake and fairly reliable. The thing that I think is a little complicated is in making buttercream. A lot of people get scared. When making a cake you've got your cake part, you know, the bread part, you've got something for the filling if you desire it, but then you always have to have the frosting or the buttercream; some people call it the icing. I've never really actually found a definition that really differentiates frosting from buttercream but there are many different types of buttercream, many different ways to get there, and I prefer the types that are made with some kind of egg, whether it's whites or yolk and you're cooking them somehow. Excuse me. If you're using egg whites then we do it as Italian meringue buttercream. If you're doing it with egg yolks, and I do it as usually as a pastry cream based buttercream and the difference is, really quickly, are the Italian meringue buttercream I'm going to take and whip up the egg whites to a stiff peak, I'll pour in a hot sugar syrup that will cook the egg whites, I will whip that till it's cool in the standing mixes then I'll add in butter. You need a standing mixer for that. You really need a candy thermometer for that too and a pot and you're cooking that sugar syrup up to like 250 degrees; just a little under but basically 250. And a lot of people get scared thinking that oh, I'm going to burn myself, I'm going to burn myself on the sugar syrup when I pour it into the mixer, I'll mess it up, and the multiple steps that it involves in the heat I think really turn people off and so they just go for this very common type of buttercream that's on the side of the confectioner's sugar box. And there's nothing wrong with that, that's what people do, you know, it's more convenient, etc. I choose not to do that though because I think that the other buttercream with confectioner's sugar is just much too sweet. Much too sweet for what adults like. It typically calls for milk, which I just kind of cut out of my diet even though I'm a cake guy, I don't really eat milk or drink milk, and I just think that the one that's the Italian meringue buttercream, more of this pastry cream buttercream, is much more flavorful. The depth of the flavor and the depth of just the texture is much more engaging and different. It's old fashioned, it's old school, so I feel that you know in making cakes making the cake isn't really the hardest part, it's the buttercream and then just kind of dealing with what type of buttercream you're going to make. If you're a novice and you want to get into baking I always suggest you start with a pound cake, chocolate or vanilla or if you want to get a little more adventurous I've got a lot of different flavors of pound cakes one can put together, but they're just simple, easy, people know what they are. You bring it to the room, they want to try it, you don't need frosting and they got a lot of flavor in them, they definitely get the job done. But if you want to take it to the next level then you can go about doing fillings and frostings or buttercreams and I'm just a huge, huge fan of the Italian meringue.

>> Now take me into this, into your creative process a little bit. What, how do you develop your recipes? I mean how do you start from just the idea to the actual execution?

>> Yes, I, a lot of times my ideas come from different things and different, I guess different sources, usually in the culinary world rather than just the sweet world, but I'll find one or two flavors that I

want to focus on and I will let the spirit move me I guess in terms of finding, okay, well is this going to be cake or is it a buttercream or is it a pastry cream, is it a meringue? What's the format it's going to go on? Some ingredients just lend themselves to certain ways of presenting and some are very universal. I was one time looking to do something that involved heat and something spicy but like a hot spice and a smokiness, so a friend of mine and I were talking in the very early days and we were thinking well how in the world could you do that, get a smoky fiery feeling? And years later or a year later or sometime after that I was reading this book on Malaysian cooking and it was talking about this woman who was smashing some peppers with a mortar and pestle and the pepper like splashed into her eye. Instantly she's kind of like immobilized by the searing heat from one of these hot peppers, and her father or grandfather goes and makes this sugar and water paste and he brings it to her and puts it on her eye and almost instantly the pain just ceases. She's kind of amazed. She's like what in the world is that? It's just sugar and water but the sugar and [inaudible] was like your body, it's like a barrier between your body and the heat units and the same thing happens if you're going to eat it. So when I combine cayenne pepper into the dry ingredients of one of my pound cakes, when you swallow it, when you're biting on the cake you can kind of sense the pepper, you can sense it a lot more when you swallow it because it passes over your voice box and it begins to tingle, but if you use just a little bit the heat remains just a tingle and that is a neat play, I think, on like brining a cake to a different type of place, a different flavor dimension, a different realm and it's like customers at Cake Love like that. We have a cake called Sassy where we add that cayenne pepper to the dry mix and I also found that it can work pretty well when you bring the pepper into the buttercream, like when you steep the pepper into milk and go ahead and make a pastry cream based buttercream. So I take my inspiration from fun and joking around with my friends and then just like other sources of culinary use of ingredients and just saying well what if I do that or what if I do this. So I like to play around. I'm just thinking briefly too like one other thing. I was making a ginger, I think it was ginger and pineapple and I wanted to see if I could fold those into a meringue because I like meringues very much, I think they're very interesting and they're great because they have either low or no fat in them and they're just great vehicles and dry ginger powder that I took and fold into the dry ingredients of a meringue, I baked at a very high, well not very high but relatively high temperature like around 325 or 350 for a short period of time, you get a nice crisp exterior and you get a nice soft gooey center, and with the spices thrown in there it just lifted, to me, the taste and flavor of the meringue kind of to a different level where you get about as close to the spice powder flavorish you can get, but without it like drying out your tongue.

>> Well there was a time in my younger life when I was shocked by the idea of putting carrots into a cake, so hearing cayenne pepper and some of these ingredients is quite a revelation.

>> Yes, yes. So many things can work in them and it's not secretive. I mean there's even beets like I like to work with in cakes. It works.

>> What are some of the biggest mistakes that people make when they bake?

>> Short of like not weighing the flour I think a lot of times people under mix the batter or over mix it. And typically the under mixing comes at the stage when you're combining the butter and sugar. You're doing this thing called creaming the butter and sugar and that is usually instructed to mix the two in the mixer or by hand but usually with a mixer until it's light and fluffy. And that is an unknown, you know, event occurrence. Like when does the butter and sugar become light and fluffy? I never really knew that, when that stage happened, and even more important I never really knew what speeds to mix the butter and sugar at. I kind of figured it, at first I remember, when I got a standing mixer I was like great, I have more power, I can do this quickly, you know turn it on the high speed and get going, and that's just entirely wrong. We mix our butter and sugar like on the lowest speed or like next to the lowest speed and we do that because we don't want to beat the air out of the batter; again, the air being the important thing. So when I in mixing them all I do three stages where the butter and sugar are dancing together in the bowl and then they begin to clump onto the beater and then they will begin to come off the beater and coat the side of the bowl. Those three stages are pretty distinct. You can see them visually without too much effort and without like stretching the limits of the imagination. And you know then you're ready to go once it coats the side of the bowl. Usually you have to have your butter and sugar at room temperature, you know, if the butter is between 60 and 70 degrees or so, and the right size crystal of the sugar is important too. A lot of times people just grab the granulated sugar that's commonly in the five pound bag, it's on the shelf in the grocery store and that's okay but I would always recommend people to pulse that in a food processor a little bit because you want to make sure that the crystal size is something closer to extra fine or fine granulation rather than just granulated, and that small difference in the size, you know, from like I don't know, I don't even really know a good reference but basically you don't want large crystals you want smaller ones because you want more surface area so that when you're mixing that flat paddle, you're pushing that paddle, that paddle pushes the sugar into the butter, that butter gives enough resistance so that when the sugar comes in, a little bit of air comes right behind the sugar and gets trapped in the butter, again air, and the more crystals you have to bring in that air the better aeration you'll have for that butter, sugar combo. Creaming butter and sugar is the first step in most cakes that are made like as American butter based cakes, I think is really the most important ones. Just really quickly a second thing that I think people do in terms of over mixing the batter is that all kinds of books and recipes will say, you know, as you're adding your dry and wet ingredients, add one scoop of flour and its other dry things and mix until thoroughly combined, then add a little bit of the milk or whatever the liquid stuff is and mix until thoroughly combined. I want to take that mix until thoroughly combined whole statement and just X that out, because what I do is I go about adding in the dry and wet ingredients really as rapidly as I can, you know, a little bit at a time, little bit at a time but I want to keep on going. As soon as I put one down I pick up the other one and so forth, because I don't want to give the flour and the gluten proteins that are in that flour any more time than absolutely necessary to develop their strength because if the gluten gets stronger, really a function of how long it's in the batter, like

it's wet and it's just getting stronger, the tougher the cake will be. So I want to move quickly as I'm adding the dry and wet ingredients and the only time I'm really going to let the mixer run is once everything's in the bowl all mixed together, I've scraped on my sides and I'm just going to run the mixer for about 15 to 20 seconds to make sure it's all thoroughly combined, but I don't want to mix and just kind of wait until every single thing is mixed in before I add the next batch of the dry or the wet.

>> Well this is probably the first time I've thought of baking as much a science as it is an art. It's certainly an education. We're very excited to have you at the National Book Festival on September 27th. Why do you think it's important to participate in the book festival? What has motivated you?

>> One of the things that motivated me to write the book is that I want, and I didn't even realize this to tell you the truth while I was doing it, I was kind of writing it but I get so much pleasure out of being in the kitchen. I really just want people to get in there and try to experience something of what I do too, and it's not just the pleasure for the sake of being in the kitchen and the warmth of the family and the company that's there. I mean there's that for sure, but I mean I guess as a guy who's kind of a student of food and how it interacts with the body and what you can get out of it and all that kind of stuff, I feel like it's an underutilized resource, that the kitchen is a totally underutilized resource in this country. And that like if people just got into the kitchen and made more food for themselves that they'd be better off in so many ways; in the pocketbook, when you go to the doctor's office, at their waistline, their inner psyche, so many things would benefit from it. You'd have less diabetes, you'd have less overeating of like junk foods, people would spend more time together with their families, people would see company more because someone's got to come over and eat all that food. I mean there's a lot of things I think that could come out of it that just are derived from spending time in the kitchen. They'd, you really don't even anticipate when you being but it's just the magic that comes out of there and I enjoy cooking and being in the kitchen a lot because no matter how much I pour into it, it gives me back more, you know? The rewards, the return are a heck of a lot more than I ever put into it. You know a lot of people ask me why am I happy or am I happy, how am I happy, how I'm doing what I'm doing with Cake Love, starting a business, running a business. Well one of the main things that I do is just I spend time in the kitchen and I cook and I listen to what I want and one of those things that I want is food and eating and you know in some sense it's a little bit silly because it seems like such a mundane thing. You've got to eat so you know is it really all that special but it is and it gives me a chance to check in with myself and to give me something that I want, to please a desire that I have and frankly when you get in the habit of giving yourself something that you want, you just begin to not expect other things if you don't want them because you're used to being able to satisfy yourself. I don't know through one of the most basic things in life I began to do that when I was still in grade school because that's when I started cooking. So whether it's quantity of food or the choice in type of food, I've been able to and I've been blessed with the opportunity to make what I want

and that's really all I'm doing with Cake Love and writing the book and all that stuff.

>> Well Warren Brown before we let you go what's next for you? What's coming up?

>> Next steps are really just kind of growing the business, adding a couple more stores and lucky that expand the business locally in D.C. and I guess next step is go beyond that through the Mid-Atlantic.

>> Well Warren Brown the book and the business are both called Cake Love and we appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

>> Thanks very much. I look forward to the festival in September and I'll see you down there.

>> Well and we're very excited and again that is the National Book Festival Saturday September 27th on the National Mall from 10 am to 5 pm. It's free and open to the public. If you'd like a list of details and all the participating authors you can visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress this has been Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

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