

Pictured is a feminine-presenting person sporting a ponytail with delicate facial features and flashing a bright smile. Wearing an active outfit that does not hide those colorful tattoos on her arms, elevating her youthful strength and beauty. Just like that, Vivi begins to tell the story of Radical Joy Bakery and her “radical” cakes - her brand, her artistic creations.

Finding the meaning of joy

At a young age, Vivi felt and listened, with great clarity, to what her own body was telling her - *Queer* - something that she only started sharing publicly last year. It took this long because she was born and raised in the US, in a family that espouses traditional Vietnamese cultural values. The two matriarchs at home are her mother and maternal grandmother, two towering figures that kept Vivi within the traditional conception of a child’s place within the family. Then, at 15, she “broke free”, living independently, doing whatever brings her joy, which includes baking.

Vivi began baking as a hobby at perhaps the most amorphous stage in a person’s life: 15. Having left home at 15, she admits that she was homeless at many points: “Those were my most difficult moments. But I needed to prove to myself that I can live on my own. I worked hard to pay for school. After that, I lived with my paternal grandparents. While they’ve passed away, I’m certain that they are very proud of me.”

Vivi has been making all her life decisions: from majoring in philosophy at UC Berkeley to managing a non-profit, to working in communications and community-organization. Yet, even after all of this, “I didn’t feel truly happy.” Said Vivi in response to the question *“What does happiness mean?”*

She doesn’t want to have to wake up to go to work every morning. She doesn’t want to lead a repetitive, monotonous life that fits the mold. Despite having been “liberated” from her family since she was 15, she could never fully rid herself of the “safety points” that mother and grandmother had established, like many other Vietnamese families. Vivi understands this: *“Maybe a family of refugees has wrestled with and then defaulted to a formulaic expectation that they’d be proud when their children graduate from college, work, and make a living.”*

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic. So many unexpected events happened, not just in her life personally, but in the whole United States, the whole world. Work became more tiresome compared to how it was in the pre-pandemic time. One time, she requested extra time off from work. The result? She was fired. But even this couldn’t break such a strong, resilient woman. Against her friends’ advice, she didn’t even seek legal intervention to claim what was rightfully owed to her. She simply had more time for herself, and for what truly brought her joy: baking.

Radical Joy Bakery

“During those months, I made so many different kinds of cake. Sweet treats, regular cakes, birthday cakes, graduation cakes...I felt as though those cakes brought everyone together because we all felt stuck and unhappy”

For a friend who loves learning about the stories behind Guinness records, Vivi gifted her a cake decorated with Guinness beer for her birthday (I don't know how to best translate since I don't know what this cake looks like. I'm assuming it's a cake with something like a guinness beer can/bottle decorated on it?). One of her friends got married without their parents' approval. They had a wedding ceremony while facing financial struggles. She was the one who made them a wedding cake. She said that those cakes make everyone happy, *“I feel like I get to bring people joy.”*

Before, she aspired to be a leader, someone who can change or “healed” the world. But she still felt lost and trapped between closed walls every time she reached her goal. A lot of the time she felt tired. She couldn't find herself doing those things.

It is only when baking, devoting the time to those cakes, “that I feel truly happy.” Vivi finds tremendous strength in her body and soul when she puts her own touch on a cake or any other type of baked goods. She continued to elevate her baked creations.

In 2020, Radical Joy Bakery took off in New Orleans.

The “radical” cakes

Picture a painter splattering colorful paint strokes with their brush into the air. Paint drops fall onto the canvas with a sense of freedom, creating a piece of art so full of life and forwardness that it transgresses all conservative aesthetic norms. Vivi Nguyen's creations are like such pieces of art.

She admits that there is something “radical” in her baking perhaps because she herself is a progressive person who doesn't want to be tied to any one ideal about who one should be. Radical Joy Bakery's cakes represent those who are beginning a new life, those who are adventurous and willing to take risks.

A cake with uneven frosting. The icing sits on the cake in a criss-cross fashion, refusing to follow any given rule. The decorative flowers lay on the face of the cake as if they naturally fell on it. (I also don't know how to describe cakes lol) Vivi likes the natural scent of all the flowers, especially roses. There's no reason then why she wouldn't put flower petals on her creations, making them extra radical.

Vivi knows very well that she is a member of a minority group in a liberal, racially diverse place. Moreover, being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she is even more cognizant of the source and value of joy. That is also why she calls her creations “Radical Joy”. Vivi trusted herself in her journey to find joy and convinced others to believe in her dream.