

Cristina's Tortina Shop is baking up a fresh perspective on people with special needs

Since opening in 2013, Cristina's Tortina Shop in Brampton has developed a reputation for its delicious cupcakes, specialty cakes, cookies and other treats. But, what makes Cristina's Tortina Shop unique is that almost all its employees are people with Down syndrome, autism or other disabilities.

Owner Mary Iusso opened the bakery in honour of her daughter Cristina, who has Down syndrome. In watching Cristina and others like her grow, Ms. Iusso has seen firsthand that while great strides have been made in education, there continues to be low expectations for people with Down syndrome, autism, and other disabilities. This means relatively few meaningful employment opportunities.

Ms. Iusso knows through personal experience that this misconception is completely misguided and that all of her staff have much to offer. The bakery proves to be not only an important employment opportunity, but also an excellent way to showcase the skills and talent of diverse staff.

Combating myths one treat at a time

Many employers not only continue to be skeptical about the skills and abilities of people with disabilities, but also have concerns about accommodation costs, reliability, turnover and perceived human resource challenges.

Ms. Iusso opened the shop to show firsthand that myths like this are unfounded. While Ms. Iusso maintains a hands-on supervisory role with the baking, employees are active in all areas of the business, including sales and customer service, cleaning and maintenance, order fulfillment and shipping. And of course, baking, decorating and sampling the goodies!

Ms. Iusso has found that very few special accommodations are required. Like any good employer, she prioritizes flexible work hours and being more patient, empathetic and respectful of her employees' individual needs. As a result, she has little difficulty finding suitable candidates for employment opportunities and doesn't need to work with community support agencies to do so. All employees are trained in different areas of the business. Once fully trained they work independently. While turnover is very low, several former employees have been successful in growing their careers by finding employment with other businesses that recognize their talent.

Cristina's Tortina Shop has achieved a great deal of success thanks to the capabilities of people with Down syndrome, autism and other disabilities. The shop's customers not

only come back again and again for delicious goods, but also for the great service and cheerful atmosphere. If you're in the neighbourhood, drop in, pick up some treats and say hello to Cristina and the team!

Numbers you need to know: restaurant and food services sector

Ontario's restaurant and food services sector has been particularly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing significant job losses as a result. As Ontario's economy recovers, the number of job postings in the restaurant and food services sector has increased dramatically. According to Indeed, a major on-line job posting portal, the number of job postings in June 2021 has actually increased by 37 per cent from pre-pandemic levels. As the recovery continues, the sector is experiencing additional challenges because many former restaurant and food service workers are not returning to fill vacancies.

People with disabilities are an underused resource that can help employers fill vacancies. As demonstrated by successful businesses like Cristina's Tortina Shop, people with disabilities have the talent, skills and enthusiasm to do the job and do it well. In fact, a study found that 90 per cent of people with disabilities rate average or better on job performance than those without.ⁱ

ⁱ Stark, Bob, Chair (2016), Employable Until Proven Otherwise. Partnership Council on Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Report