



**SHANNON  
MERCADO** OF  
SOUTH CAROLINA'S  
CIRCA DOUGHNUTS  
REVOLUTIONIZES THE  
BELOVED BASIC.

BY RUTA FOX  
PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL MEHAFFEY

# FULL CIRCLE





WHEN THE IPHONE ALARM GOES OFF AT 5 A.M., Shannon Mercado awakens and heads to a commercial kitchen she rents to singlehandedly make sixty dozen of her signature “doughnz” (pronounced “doans”). Crafted and fried by hand in small batches, they’re sold under her brand name Circa (Latin for “around”), and they’re in high demand at coffee shops, juice bars, and various pop-up locations in her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina.

It’s not the vibrant Instagram presence, playful doughnut names (like Jack Sparrow, Earl of Doughnz, and Strawberry Crack), or even the gluten-free counterparts to all her regular versions that draws crowds. The icing on her fried cake is that her flavors are remarkable.

That Jack Sparrow? A mouthwatering, dense, cakey, sour cream doughnut shrouded in buttered-rum glaze and topped with toasted coconut tangles. The Earl of Doughnz turns the notion of the breakfast staple on its head with a sophisticated combination of charred grapefruit inside the dough and a charred grapefruit, Earl Grey tea, honey, and cardamom glaze. Strawberry Crack is aptly named; it’s an addictive strawberry-compote doughnut with a tangy balsamic-reduction glaze and a finishing sprinkle of black pepper.

Such heady flavor combinations would impress on a

four-star restaurant’s dessert menu. But these come out of the mind of a twenty-five-year-old experimental home cook who found her route to the dough business as many young entrepreneurs do—by sheer accident. Growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, Shannon frequented plentiful mom-and-pop doughnut shops. But in 2013, upon moving to Greenville, she bemoaned the fact that she couldn’t find any satisfaction.

A charming small town about ninety minutes south of Asheville, North Carolina, and three and a half hours north of Charleston, Greenville has recently become one of the New South’s culinary hot spots. Home to burgeoning foodie and tech cultures, it’s luring millennials away from big cities with its easy, affordable lifestyle and welcoming attitude toward “makers.” The lack of doughnut options was puzzling.

With no professional culinary background, Shannon first thought baking would be too precise an endeavor. But in early 2014, she began crafting doughnut recipes to reproduce her favorite—the classic cake-like sour cream flavor of days past. After researching for hours online, she tried numerous combinations, experimenting until she landed on what tasted exactly right.

“My wild flavor combinations come from all the culinary experiences I have, whether a restaurant meal, a crafted cocktail at a bar, or reading books such as



*The Flavor Bible*. I love the trial-and-error part of testing and experimenting with flavors,” she explains. “The whimsical names come out of my desire to give each unique creation its own personality.” (Her “doughnz” nickname for the doughnuts is a nod to the millennial habit of shortening words.)

After winning approval from taste-testing friends, she displayed her first batch in the summer of 2014 at a brand new Saturday farmers’ market—and sold out in thirty minutes.

In fall 2014, she added gluten-free variations, which, like the originals, start with subtle crunch and lead to creamy dense interiors and astonishing layered flavors.

Shannon credits cornmeal as the secret to making her gluten-free doughnuts just as good as her regular versions; since gluten-free dough has different properties when frying, this surprise ingredient results in better texture and helps imitate the expected exterior crunch.

Ironically, the fan favorite is still the Vanilla-Glazed Old-Fashioned Sour Cream Doughnut (page 86). But customers also happily pay \$3 for the spectacular and exotic Pink One (hibiscus and berry with a hint of navel orange), sweet-and-citrusy Lemon Poppyfields Doughnut (page 82), and Latin-inspired Abuela Doughnut (chocolate, cinnamon, and cayenne; page 84).

When asked about her successful journey from experimenting in her home kitchen to creating a business that now supports her even without a stand-alone bakeshop, she explains, “I make a product your grandmother would have made with the visual appeal that millennials crave, and then I use social media heavily to promote. I’ve created a means of connecting with customers as a person, not just a business entity. It’s more of an emotional conversation, and I’ve built some genuine friendships along the way.”

As a former employee at a web design and software development company, Shannon is so adept at Facebook and Instagram that she relies exclusively on them for her marketing and distribution efforts. Her delicious, visual posts let customers know where to find her fifteen flavor combinations, which continually rotate but feature locally grown herbs and are always free from preservatives.

The proverbial saying “whatever goes around, comes around,” couldn’t be truer in Shannon’s case: Her first customer at her farmers’ market debut is now her fiancé.

*Circa Doughnut*

*Instagram: Circa\_Doughnut*

*Facebook: Circa Doughnut*



## Lemon Poppyfields Doughnuts

**MAKES ABOUT 16 (3½-INCH)**

**DOUGHNUTS** Behold the luscious, lemony version of the old fashioned.

### FOR THE DOUGHNUT DOUGH:

**1 cup sugar**

**⅜ cup shortening**

**4 egg yolks**

**2¼ teaspoons kosher salt**

**1¼ cups sour cream**

**1 tablespoon poppy seeds**

**Zest and juice of 1 lemon**

**3 cups plus 6 tablespoons all-purpose gluten-free flour (Shannon uses Pillsbury Best Multi-Purpose Gluten**

**Free Flour Blend, and we also like the results with Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour)**

**½ cup cornmeal**

**1 tablespoon baking powder**

**Canola oil, for frying**

### FOR THE GLAZE:

**3½ cups powdered sugar**

**½ teaspoon kosher salt**

**Juice of 2 lemons**

**1 tablespoon light corn syrup**

**¼ cup hot water**

**Poppy seeds, for garnish**

**Lemon zest, for garnish**

Make the doughnut dough: In a mixing bowl, cream the sugar, shortening, egg yolks, and salt with a wooden spoon or a power mixer on medium speed until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the sour cream and mix until smooth. Stir in the poppy seeds and lemon zest and juice.

In another bowl, mix together the flour, cornmeal, and baking powder. Add the flour mixture to the sour cream mixture, 1 cup at a time, until fully incorporated. The dough should be slightly tacky but not too sticky to handle; add more flour, if needed.

To shape and cook the doughnuts, follow the instructions on page 86.

Make the glaze: In a mixing bowl, combine the sugar, salt, lemon juice, corn syrup, and half of the hot water and whisk until smooth. Slowly add more hot water until the glaze is slightly thick.

Dip each doughnut, cracked side down, into the glaze, submerging only one side of the doughnut. Let excess glaze drip back into the bowl. Set the doughnuts, unglazed side down, on a cooling rack. Garnish with poppy seeds and lemon zest and let dry before serving.





### FLOUR FACTS

The amount of GF flour blend you need for these doughnut recipes may vary depending on the brand you use: Shannon uses Pillsbury Best Multi-Purpose Gluten Free Flour Blend, and we also like the results using Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour. (Cup4Cup didn't work well.) If your dough is still too sticky to handle after mixing in all the dry ingredients, add more flour, 1 tablespoon at a time, until the dough is slightly tacky but easy to shape with your hands.

## Abuela Doughnuts

**MAKES ABOUT 16 (3½-INCH)**

**DOUGHNUTS** Its name and its layered flavors give a nod to the delicious chocolate and cinnamon duo that is integral to a Mexican grandma's traditional hot cocoa. Only here, they're modernized to meet your mouth in the form of a moist, dense, gourmet doughnut coated with cinnamon and sugar and a surprising cayenne kick.

### FOR THE SUGAR AND SPICE MIX:

**¾ cup sugar**

**2 tablespoons cinnamon**

**1 teaspoon cayenne pepper**

**½ teaspoon kosher salt**

### FOR THE DOUGHNUT DOUGH:

**1 cup sugar**

**⅓ cup vegetable shortening**

**4 egg yolks**

**2¼ teaspoons kosher salt**

**1¼ cups sour cream**

**3 cups all-purpose gluten-free flour**

**(Shannon uses Pillsbury Best**

**Multi-Purpose Gluten Free Flour**

**Blend, and we also like the results**

**with Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free**

**1-to-1 Baking Flour)**

**½ cup cornmeal**

**1 tablespoon baking powder**

**½ cup cocoa powder**

**1½ teaspoons ground nutmeg**

**1 tablespoon cinnamon**

**1½ teaspoons cayenne pepper**

**Canola oil, for frying**

Make the sugar and spice mix: In a large bowl, mix together all of the ingredients until fully incorporated. Reserve.

Make the doughnut dough: In a mixing bowl, cream the sugar, shortening, egg yolks, and salt with a wooden spoon or a power mixer on medium speed until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the sour cream and mix until smooth.

In another bowl, mix together the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, cocoa, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cayenne.

Gently mix the flour mixture into the sour cream mixture, 1 cup at a time, until fully incorporated. The dough should be slightly tacky but not too sticky to handle; add more flour, if needed.

To shape and cook the doughnuts, see page 86. While still hot, dip each doughnut into the sugar and spice mix, generously covering all sides. Allow to cool, then serve.





## Vanilla-Glazed Old-Fashioned Sour Cream Doughnuts

MAKES ABOUT 16 (3½-INCH)

**DOUGHNUTS** These traditional old-fashioned doughnuts are tangy and moist with crispy, cracked edges, just like their glutenous counterparts. Adorn them with vanilla glaze as Shannon does here, or coat them with melted dark chocolate or cinnamon and sugar.

### FOR THE DOUGHNUT DOUGH:

**1 cup sugar**  
**⅛ cup vegetable shortening**  
**4 egg yolks**  
**2¼ teaspoons kosher salt**  
**¼ cups sour cream**  
**3 cups plus 6 tablespoons all-purpose gluten-free flour (Shannon uses Pillsbury Best Multi-Purpose Gluten Free Flour Blend, and we also like the results with Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour)**  
**½ cup cornmeal**  
**1 tablespoon baking powder**  
**1½ teaspoons ground nutmeg**  
**Canola oil, for frying**

### FOR THE VANILLA GLAZE:

**3½ cups powdered sugar**  
**¾ teaspoon kosher salt**  
**½ teaspoon gluten-free pure vanilla extract**  
**1 tablespoon light corn syrup**  
**½ cup hot water**

Make the doughnut dough: In a mixing bowl, cream the sugar, shortening, egg yolks, and salt with a wooden spoon or a power mixer on medium speed until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the sour cream and mix until smooth.

In another bowl, mix together the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, and nutmeg. Gently mix the flour mixture into the sour cream mixture, 1 cup at a time, until fully incorporated. The dough should be slightly tacky but not too sticky to handle; add more flour, if needed.

To shape and cook, follow the instructions at right.

Make the glaze: In a mixing bowl, whisk the sugar, salt, vanilla, corn syrup, and half of the hot water until smooth. Slowly add more hot water until the glaze is slightly thick.

Dip each doughnut, cracked side down, into the glaze, submerging only one side of the doughnut. Let excess glaze drip back into the bowl. Set the

doughnuts, unglazed side down, to dry on a cooling rack before serving.

## DOUGHNUT SHAPING AND COOKING INSTRUCTIONS

The temperature of the oil is important: too hot and the outside will cook too quickly. And don't overcrowd the pot with doughnuts; add only a few at a time.

In a large pot, heat 3 inches of canola oil to 350°F on a candy thermometer; track and adjust the heat to maintain the temperature. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper.

Scoop the dough into 16 (¼-cup) portions. Shape each into a ball. Roll each ball into a 5-inch snake and pinch the ends together to make a ring 3½ inches in diameter. Set the rings on the prepared sheet pan and slightly flatten them to ½ inch thick.

Gently drop a few dough rings into the oil. After they sink to the bottom and rise back to the surface, wait 20 seconds, then, using a slotted spoon, flip them and let cook for 90 seconds longer. Flip them again and let cook for another 30 seconds. (The tops of the doughnuts will begin to crack open; that's okay.) With the slotted spoon, lift the doughnuts from the oil, transfer to a cooling rack, and cool for at least 10 minutes. ■

