

'The baddest biker girls in the world:' Meet New Orleans' Caramel Curves

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By Laura Testino, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

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CoCo shines on her motorcycle. This is, perhaps, because her favorite color “is bling, period,” and everything that can be covered in rhinestones is, from the fingernails she did herself to the headband under her pink mohawk helmet.

In addition to her favorite color, she alters nearly every outfit to be a peplum, her favorite style. The cut of fabric, a flowy addition to her shirts or pants, flares out from her waist and is as much of a signature as the high heels she wears while she rides.

On a recent Sunday, the white peplum on Nakosha “CoCo” Smith’s sparkling silver tracksuit flutters like a halo.

“I look like an angel,” she said, talking over the dozens of other revving engines at a New Orleans gas station.

An angel that wears high heels while popping wheelies and burning out in a cloud of pink smoke, that is.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and Sundays are Smith’s favorite day. That’s when the Caramel Curves ride around New Orleans, no destination in mind.

Smith co-founded the all-female motorcycle club 11 years ago with fellow New Orleans biker Shanika “Tru” Beatty. At the time, Smith envisioned a group of “regular girls, just riding bikes, looking cute in our city,” partying and having fun. Now, the Caramel Curves are juggling television appearances and interviews with *Essence* and *The New York Times*. Most recently, its members are featured as stars of a new tourism campaign for New Orleans.



Nakosha "CoCo" Smith of the Caramel Curves Motorcycle Club does a pink smoke burnout outside her business CoCo's Unique Nails and Hair Studio on Wednesday, April 3, 2019. (Photo by Michael DeMocker, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

Sparkly, stand-out and in charge

Looking good is part of the Caramel Curves lifestyle. On a recent Sunday (March 17), about half of the 13 members gathered at the gas station, all matching in silvery tracksuits with "Caramel Curves" printed on the front and black jackets with the club's name in pink and purple on the back. Andrea "Hoodpriss" Shepherd, the club's president, used the side mirrors on her motorcycle to add final touches to her makeup.

These outfits must fit into a “sparkly” and “stand-out” criteria, Smith said. “I look for something that’s poppin.”

Each member’s personality is as distinctly vibrant as those outfits.

A longtime friend of Smith, Nellie “Quiet Storm” Brooks considers herself “the mild version” of a Caramel Curve biker, though the barber stylist dons her own pompadour of bright pink curls. She started working at Smith’s salon and now owns Headlinerz, her own shop in Houma.

Brooks became an official member in 2012 after first hanging out and trying to coordinate outfits with the club. Brooks describes herself as one of the club’s first honorary members, to which Beatty laughs. Beatty, whose blunt comments earned her the nickname “Tru,” joked that Brooks was their first “groupie.”

Beatty has been adding the “extra sauce” to the Caramel Curves’ outfits from the start, customizing each ensemble with rhinestones and the club’s name. She moved to New Orleans 18 years ago and earned a pharmacy degree at Xavier University, but learned she’d rather work for herself. Her work for the Caramel Curves inspired her to open a T-shirt shop.

Now she owns House of Vinyl, where she still makes some T-shirts, but instead focuses on selling supplies and teaching other motorcycle and social clubs how to brand themselves.

When she’s on her bike, Beatty is in control. It’s the same with owning a business, she said. She likes that power.

Put simply: “I like to do what I want, when I feel like doing it.”



Shanika "Tru" Beatty of the Caramel Curves Motorcycle Club at her business House of Vinyl on Wednesday, April 3, 2019. (Photo by Michael DeMocker, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

High-heeled beginnings

Many of the members were introduced to motorcycles by fathers who rode them. For Smith, it was the boyfriend she had at 16. She started riding on the back of his bike, but soon enough, she was taking it out for rides on her own. She bought her own motorcycle four years later, at age 20, and has owned one ever since.

Most female bikers Smith knew then had a tough, no-frills look. But that wasn't her style. For one, she didn't like or own any tennis shoes, so she rode in heels.

"When I met that girl (Smith), she walked around in high-heel shoes to work, to the grocery store, on her motorcycle, everywhere," Beatty said. "And I said, 'CoCo, why don't you wear flat shoes?' 'Oh they hurt my feet,'" Smith had replied. "I need heels."

Men didn't wear heels and still fell off bikes, so what was so unsafe?

Smith said it was her high-heeled riding that led to the birth of the Caramel Curves. In that case wearing heels "was the best thing I ever did," she said.

Smith came up with the idea for the group a couple of months before Hurricane Katrina, so the vision was put on pause when she evacuated to Baton Rouge and then Houston. But in those cities on Sundays – her day to play – there was nothing going on, she said.

So, she returned to New Orleans in late 2005 as soon as she heard the second lines were back, as one of the first female riders back in the city, she said.

In March 2008, the Caramel Curves were official.



Frankie Prijatel

The Caramel Curves MC rides with the Mystic Krewe of Femme Fatale, an all-female krewe, on Sunday, Feb. 24, 2019. (Photo by Frankie Prijatel, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune) - Femme Fatale 2019 Frankie Prijatel

Going worldwide

In September of last year, the Caramel Curves gave Steve Harvey a sparkly gold jacket. They've also been featured wearing heels in their clouds of pink burnout in The New York Times, VICE, Essence and O, The Oprah Magazine.

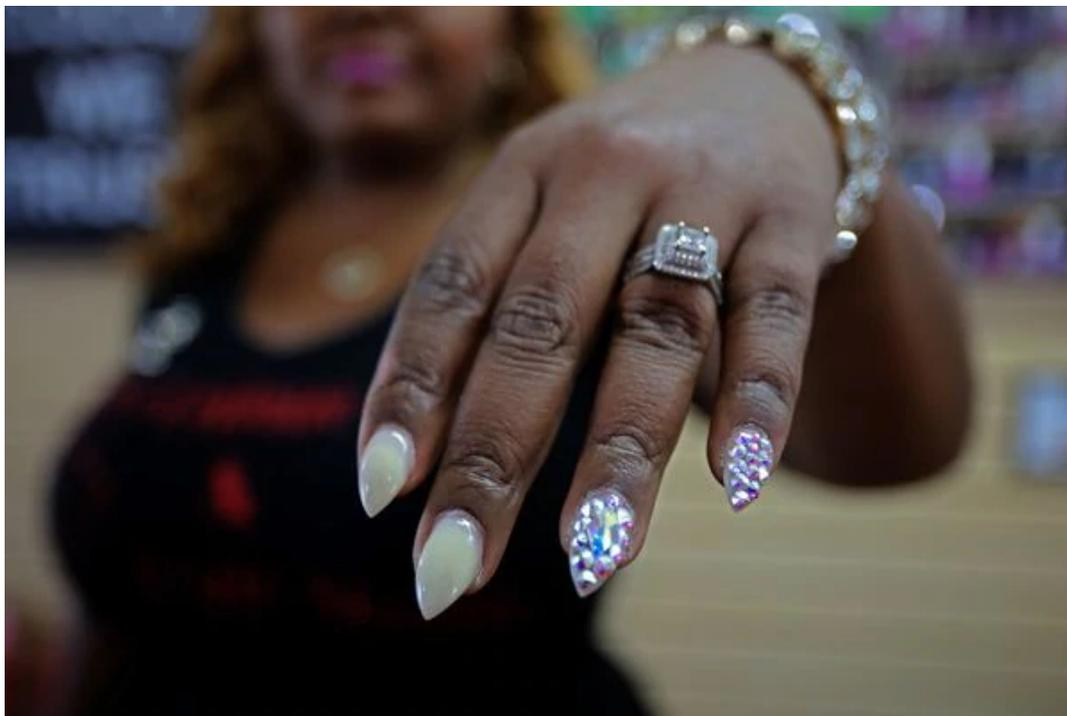
Speaking with the media has become a new element to consider for prospective members, Betty said.

Prospects have to take three different rides, coordinate outfits, do community service and complete a game that shows they know the other members. If the tasks are completed within 90 days at 80 percent or more, the prospect is put to a club vote.

Each Caramel Curve has to own her own motorcycle, too, which means taking care of it. And neither maintaining a bike nor looking good comes cheap.

Each back tire, at \$220 apiece plus fees, yields between six and 10 pink burnouts, she said. Add on another \$100 or so to mount and balance for safety, and Beatty said she spends an estimated \$350 a month replacing it. That's between \$35 and \$58 for each billowing burnout.

It's no small price to pay, but it's part of being a Caramel Curve.



Nakosha "CoCo" Smith of the Caramel Curves Motorcycle Club shows off her nail design at her business CoCo's Unique Nails and Hair Studio on Wednesday, April 3, 2019. (Photo by Michael DeMocker, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

Charlene "Mz Tattoo" Perry rides with Jokers Wrath Motorcycle Club and came into town from Birmingham, Alabama, to celebrate with the Caramel Curves during their recent anniversary weekend. A glittery gold phone case poked out of a pocket of her black pants as she watched members of the Caramel Curve Social Club, a non-biker sister organization, surround the Caramel Curves bikers before a recent ride.

The rest of Perry's black ensemble was made shinier by a gold necklace and earrings and blingy nails, like Smith's. The biker of 20 years has loved watching the "full-figured women" be "independent and have fun" as they launched into the public eye over the past few years, she said.

"Bikers love other bikers," including the flashy Caramel Curves, Beatty said of her community. It's the love from the broader public that the women never planned for.



Nakosha "CoCo" Smith of the Caramel Curves Motorcycle Club in the rearview of her motorcycle at her business CoCo's Unique Nails and Hair Studio on Wednesday, April 3, 2019. (Photo by Michael DeMocker, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

The balancing act

The Caramel Curves' pink burnout is catchy. Today, it billows around them in a billboard on top of the Saenger Theatre downtown, advertising the club as "Unexpected Tour Guides" for the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation.

They're the stars of the mini-series, shot over a weekend in November for the New Orleans' tourism's IGTV, Instagram's video-only platform. The three five-minute episodes debuted in mid-March and feature Smith, Beatty and Shepherd, the club's current president, each showing an Instagram influencer around town on the back of their bikes.

Bikers from in and out of state attended the club's anniversary meet-and-greet, hosted by New Orleans' Streetmade Rydaz Motorcycle Club on March 15.

There, Beatty helped surprise the rest of the club with new jackets, gifts from local tourism leaders. Laid out on chairs, the backs of the embroidered jackets faced outward, showing the vibrant pink and purple "Caramel Curves" name.

Sure, some of the other bikers call the club "commercial," Beatty said, but her group still cleans up with awards at other biker events. Displayed in her office, the Caramel Curves trophies are mostly for being the best-dressed or the most-represented of the all-female clubs.

These days, it seems everyone has an opinion about the heels or the way the Caramel Curves look and who they are. Smith emphasized the group welcomes women of all races and ethnicities. She doesn't concern herself with the chatter, though, and encourages the rest of the club to do the same. If they're talking about you, you're *somebody*, she said.

"The Caramel Curves," Smith said, "are the baddest biker girls in the world."

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