
STYLE
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THE SUNDAY TIMES
WILL YOUNG
HOW FAME RUINED MY LIFE
LADY LOCO
HAS GAGA FINALLY LOST IT?
LET THEM EAT CAKE
LORRAINE PASCALE'S BRILLIANT TREATS TO BAKE WITH KIDS

# I BAKE *THEREFORE I AM*

**WITH RECORD VIEWING FIGURES FOR BAKE OFF, AND SALES OF CAKE STANDS SOARING, THE NATION IS IN THE GRIP OF BAKING FEVER. *STEPHANIE THEOBALD* ASKS WHY**

One of modern literature's seminal cake moments comes in The Hours by Michael Cunningham – the 1950s Valium housewife Laura Brown, played by Julianne Moore in the film, believes her life might turn around on the baking of a birthday cake ("It will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety"). Yet when it goes wrong (crumbs in the icing, squished piping), the perfidious sponge becomes a metaphor for Laura's empty life: her dull marriage, her unfulfilled dreams. She tries not to mind. "It is only a cake," she tells herself. "It is only a cake."



As anyone who has been glued to the hit television show The Great British Bake Off will know, cake is never just cake. Some male reviewers have referred to the show as a "surprise" hit, but actually it's not surprising at all. Like live sport, the public spectacle of baking is drama in real time. It's the Cuban missile crisis played out in sticky toffee pudding and baked Alaska. As the frighteningly intense 63-year-old Irish contestant Brendan put it: "Your destiny can change in the blink of an eye." Brendan was speaking shortly after near-elimination for decorating his rich torte like a 1970s Indian restaurant. But he might have been paraphrasing the Aristotelian definition of a tragic hero: you rise (if you've put in enough baking powder) and then you fall (if you've got the egg/flour ratio wrong).

Baking, if you haven't noticed, is officially huge. The Great British Bake Off is pulling in 5m viewers a week; Marks & Spencer is trumpeting that, in the month after the latest series started in August, sales of cake stands went up by 243% compared with last year; and about 1 in 10 of Amazon's top 100 cookbooks in Britain is about baking.

Actually, cakes have been fundamental to our national identity since the day the founding father of the English nation, King Alfred, supposedly burnt some while he was seeking shelter in a peasant woman's hovel. Whatever else this story might signify, it suggests that men are rubbish at making cakes. This makes sense. Men are more bread people, because bread is straightforward: it either works or it doesn't. A failed cake, on the other hand, can be veiled in layers

REX, JON ENOCH

***Having their cake*** *From top, Gwyneth Paltrow cooking live on TV; Great British Bake Off judges Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry; the cult baker Lily Vanilli; and Great British Bake Off presenters Mel and Sue*

# BAKING BOOTY

Patisse animal cutters, £8; brandalley.co.uk

Sagaform heart bowl and ladle, £32.50; cloudberryliving.co.uk

Kitchen utensils, from £4 each, from Home Sense

Birdcage glass cake stand, £20; dotcomgiftshop.com

Caravan cake tins, £15 for two, from Marks & Spencer



Cake stands, from £8 each, from Home Sense

Oven dishes, £40 for the pair; berryred.co.uk


Tunnocks Caramel Wafer apron, £19; hunkydoryhome.co.uk

Artisan stand mixer, £800, by KitchenAid

Baking hat, £8; littlechef-bigchef.co.uk

of butter cream and fancy decoration, and is thus very female. Bread can only ever be wholesome, while cake-making can be secret, intimate, soothing, manipulative, fantastical, terrifying, vainglorious, dangerous. It's not bread that bears the thrilling words "Eat me" in Alice in Wonderland, it's cake. It's not the cobwebs and rotting toile of Miss Havisham's abandoned wedding breakfast that stay with us long after we've finished Great Expectations. It's the abandoned cake that is Dickens's stroke of genius. What could be more tragic than a dusty cake?

"Cake is embedded with complex ideas," says the psychoanalyst and author Anouchka Grose. "Cake baking can be about power, deferred pleasure and violence – about acting out violence in order to get to a state of peace." She also argues that by making bread, men are seeking a veiled way back to the bosom, since "soft bread is a breast-like object".

And if men find unconscious sexual kicks from bread, women find them in cakes. Forget "mummy porn" and think "bun smut". A silicone piping kit or a set of Lakeland's ceramic baking beads are much better birthday presents for your girlfriend than some fetish tape and a set of jiggle balls. The Zen-like trance produced by stirring a bowl of orange polenta cake batter will soon numb her nagging anxiety that, by this stage in her life, she really should have had sex in a sling while blindfolded and listening to the works of Thomas Tallis.

Words such as "gooey white chocolate pudding", "rum baba" and "tarte tatin" deliver a transgressive thrill to women. It's about vicarious thrill: you say the words to yourself, instead of eating the calories – much like Orson Welles's rumoured diet technique: he would make his dining companion order the richest dessert on the menu and then watch as they ate it, all the while ordering them to tell him "What are you thinking?" and "How does it feel?"

Both Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry, judges on The Great British Bake Off, chide contestants about things like "soggy bottoms" and "gooey middles", but perfection isn't always the point. As Grose points out: "There are two kinds of cake: stupidly ambitious cakes that consume you for hours on end, and then the private comfort cakes."

The head baker at St John's Bakery in London, Justin Gellatly, who co-authored Beyond Nose to Tail (Bloomsbury) with the St John founder, Fergus Henderson, dismisses the baking gender stereotype. "The people who contact me through Twitter to ask questions about things like cold fermentation are usually women." In fact, he goes so far as to hazard that "bread baking is a new area of baking, and there's a certain type of woman who likes to be where things are new and happening".

Nina Parker, 26, is just such a woman. "Alpha girls are into baking with yeast because it's such a challenge," she says. "I mean, if you can make brioche then you're tops."

Parker, who launched her baking business, Nina Ice Cream and Cake, six months ago, says she lives for baking approval. "I'm controlled and a perfectionist. I boss people around. If I don't get that wow factor when I've made a cake, I feel terrible."

She confesses that even her "secret comfort cake" – dark chocolate cupcakes – involves sophisticated Valrhona chocolate. Her aesthetic, though, is, rustic. "I don't like things if they look too complicated," she says.

And there we go, back full circle to Alfred and his cakes. The reason this weird story of how a 9th-century king saved us from the marauding Vikings, but burnt a poor peasant woman's cakes in the process, has survived is because we Brits revel in amateurism. We are proud of being fallible and a bit hopeless. While French people will offer hospitality by taking you to Angelina to drink sophisticated *chocolat chaud* and pick at a shard of *belle époque* patisserie while sitting at the table next to Catherine Deneuve, the Brits will give you something much more intimate. We will invite you into our homes for tea and scones, which might well have soggy bottoms and an uneven bake, but they will make you feel that you are loved. It is the small, homely things in life that are hugely important.