

# A FAMILY TRADITION

After her father's retirement, Louise Johncox found that she wanted to know more about the Surrey bakery he had run with her mother all her life. So began their short-lived but illuminating baking lessons together

PHOTOGRAPHY IAN GARLICK



Simnel cake

Louise, pictured below with her father as a child, and (bottom) in later years, as she learned all about the family tea shop business, as well as how to bake some time-honoured recipes



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MY CHILDHOOD WAS shaped by cake. Growing up, I watched my father bake and decorate cakes for our family tea shop, Peter's, in Weybridge. As children, we played in the bakehouse – our toys were tins and wooden spoons. I helped out with little jobs in the kitchen, sprinkling nutmeg on custard tarts, stirring big bowls of cake mixture, rolling doughnuts in sugar and piping cream in meringues. Dad was also a chocolatier and sometimes he let us dip the sweet centres in his chocolate-making machine. The store room, full of ingredients, was a child's paradise where heady scents mingled in the air. We held our birthday parties in the tea shop where the tables groaned under the weight of our favourite cakes.

Dad opened Peter's in 1958 and married my mother, Frankie, on 10 October 1960, when they sealed their tea shop future together. For 42 years, they offered tea, cakes and a genuine welcome to the local community, providing a cosy haven for all who walked through the doors.

Throughout my childhood, there was never any need for me to bake. At home, we were lucky enough to find leftover cakes in our fridge. Besides, I had always wanted

to be a writer, and after my A-levels I left home to study English and train to become a journalist.

In January 2000, when the tea shop closed, I was working for *The Sunday Times Style* magazine, focused on my career. Neither I nor my three siblings had continued the family's pastry chef tradition, which dated back more than 100 years. A few years later, by this time the mother of two young children, Lara and Joe, I realised I wanted to write about our tea shops. I turned up at my parents' home in Weybridge and announced this plan. Dad was now in his mid-seventies and his health was in decline. It felt like the time was right to find out about our family business and learn the recipes to pass on to my own children.

## It's all in my head...

Up until we baked together, Dad and I had what I'd describe as a good father-daughter relationship. He'd always worked long hours, but I spent so much of my childhood in the bakehouse I saw a lot of him before and after school and in the holidays. Instead of telling me he loved me, he would always offer me cake and I knew his love was there. When >>>



>>> I told him that I planned to write about our pastry chef tradition as part of a PhD, he looked perplexed. I started with a journalistic approach, switching on a tape recorder and asking questions about the family tea shops, including those run by my grandparents and great-grandparents.

Dad had a family book written by a relative in Canada who'd traced our pastry chef ancestors back to the town of Poschiavo, on the Swiss-Italian border. I started to realise it was high time I learned to bake. I asked Dad for his recipes, expecting him to pop upstairs and return with a boxload. But he looked at me with a quizzical expression and said: 'They're all in my head. What do you want to know, dear?' My mother went to put the kettle on, as she usually does in any kind of emergency. Admittedly, I'd never seen Dad refer to any recipe books, although I did recall ingredient lists on bits of cards.

### Getting messy

So, the day came to 'get my hands messy' as Dad said, and start baking. He proposed a loaf of white bread for the first class. I arrived at the family home with the children, a bag of aprons, flour, a tub of margarine and some yeast. Dad was wearing his old apron, splattered with chocolate. He was sitting on his stool in the homely kitchen with its stainless-steel double oven, primrose-painted walls and mugs with 'Granddad' and 'Nan' scrawled on them.

I loved seeing my children excited at the prospect of baking with their baker grandfather. While I was worried about Dad's health and more frequent visits to hospital, the kitchen became our sanctuary. Lara and Joe brought joy into the baking classes, and Mum and Dad constantly surprised me with their stories. They talked about the day Dad stopped Mum going to Australia despite the fact her trunk was on board and she was ready to depart. They shared the highs and lows of running the business for more than 40 years, the rising costs, and the competition from international coffee chains. We shared happy memories of customers who became family friends and cared as much about the cosy atmosphere as the cakes.

For my first class Dad became once again the baker I'd always known him to be, not an elderly man battling poor health. 'Get your apron on then,' he said in a tone that signalled 'no messing'. My mobile went off. 'Are you baking or talking?' he asked me. I ignored the call and switched my phone off. 'Right, measure the flour and margarine,' he said. Once I'd measured the right amounts I stared into

the bowl. 'Now, get your hands into the mixture. Come on, get stuck in, get your hands messy,' he encouraged.

For the first time, I wasn't watching Dad bake, I was doing it myself. Once I'd finished the kneading and let the dough 'rest', I spooned it into an old greased bread tin from the bakehouse. Thirty minutes later, he took the bread out of the oven. He shook the loaf from the tin and knocked it on the base. It sounded hollow. 'If you hear that sound you know it's baked,' he said. Back home in my own kitchen, I cut into the loaf and touched the soft slice. I tasted it, savouring the moment. This was my first baking baby step.

After that first class, I turned up regularly with Lara and

Joe, to bake time-honoured tea shop recipes. Looking back, that first class didn't just teach me how to make a loaf, it inspired the whole family to bake. As our journey progressed, Dad's health worsened and he began to need regular blood transfusions. I realised how much energy baking required, that in his prime my father's hands and forearms had been twice the size of a typical man's. I had flashbacks to Dad in the bakehouse kneading dough or decorating cakes while I served in the tea room and

Mum was behind the counter with my siblings all around. Towards the end, Dad was too ill to bake, but he liked to sit in the kitchen and watch us making a mess, having fun as we baked the classics that he had made all his life.

### Lessons from my father

Dad died on 25 April 2012. Now, I can reflect on the experience of baking with him, I believe he taught me far more than just the recipes from Peter's. He gave me an insight into his life and my mother's, sharing tales of their courtship and running a family business. I marvelled at the success they made of the shop and also their strong, marriage of over 50 years. In the kitchen Dad helped to bring our tea shop alive again, transporting me back to my childhood through the sight, smell and taste of cakes. I was brought up in a gentle world where all we wanted to do was make people happy with tea, cakes and a warm welcome.

As we baked, Dad shared memories of tea shops run by his parents and grandparents which took me on an extraordinary journey to Poschiavo in search of pastry chef ancestors and long-lost bakes. I couldn't have predicted where my baking journey would take me with my father after our first bread class – and I will forever be grateful. Bread is the gift of life – and my father gave that to me. >>>

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White square sandwich loaf



## >>> WHITE SQUARE SANDWICH LOAF

**MAKES 2 X 450G LOAVES OR 1 X 900G LOAF**

• 500g super strong premium white flour • 2 tsp sugar (optional) • 1¼ tsp salt • 25g margarine • 1½ tsp fast action dried yeast • 300ml warm water

**STEP ONE** Lightly grease your loaf tin (or baking sheet). In a large bowl, mix together the flour, sugar (if using) and salt. Rub in the margarine and stir in the yeast. Stir in the warm water and mix into a soft dough by hand.

**STEP TWO** Knead the dough for 5 minutes in a freestanding food mixer fitted with a dough hook, or turn it out onto a floured surface and knead well by hand for about 10 minutes. Flatten the dough with your knuckles and pull both edges apart before folding them inwards on top of themselves so you have 3 layers of dough. Tightly roll it forwards in order to form a giant Swiss roll shape. Keep kneading this way for 5-10 minutes.

**STEP THREE** When your dough feels smooth, place it in a lightly oiled bowl. Cover it with a clean, damp tea towel and leave in a warm place to prove or until it has almost doubled in size. My dad had a proving cabinet for this – an airing cupboard has proved fine for me. This stage can take up to an hour, so don't rush. You can leave dough to rise in the kitchen, but it will take longer.

**STEP FOUR** Tip your dough onto the floured surface. Divide it in half if you are making two small loaves. Shape the dough into a ball, folding it inwards repeatedly until the air is knocked out. Form the dough into an oblong, flatten it out and fold the sides into the middle. Ensure the join runs along the base and the top is smooth.

**STEP FIVE** Place the dough in the prepared tin or on a baking sheet. Leave the dough to prove for about 1 hour or until it has almost doubled in size. Preheat the oven to 220°C/gas mark 7. Bake for 25-35 minutes or until the bread is baked through.

**TIP** To check if bread is baked, tip it upside down out of the oven and tap it on the base. If it sounds hollow, it's done. Remove from the tin and place on a wire rack to cool.

## SIMNEL CAKE

(from opening page)

**SERVES 10-12**

• 225g natural marzipan • 175g caster sugar • 175g butter • 3 eggs • 225g plain flour • ½ tsp grated nutmeg • ½ tsp ground cinnamon • Pinch of salt • 115g sultanas • 350g currants • 75g mixed peel • 50g glacé cherries (chopped) • 1-2 tbsp milk • 4 tbsp apricot jam • 1 egg yolk, beaten  
**FOR THE YELLOW ICING (optional)**  
• 85g icing sugar • 1 tbsp water • 2-3 drops yellow food colouring

**STEP ONE** Preheat the oven to 160°C/gas mark 3. Grease an 18cm round, 7cm deep cake tin and line it with baking parchment. Knead the marzipan on a board dusted with icing sugar until it softens. Divide into 3 equal portions. Roll out 2 of these into 18cm circles to fit the cake tin. Divide the remaining amount into 11 equal portions, roll these into 11 balls, cover with cling film and set aside.

**STEP TWO** Cream the sugar and butter together. Add the eggs gradually, plus 1 tbsp flour if the mixture shows signs of curdling. Sift the flour, spices and salt into a large bowl. Add the sultanas, currants, peel and cherries. Mix the flour and fruit into the creamed mixture, adding a little milk, if required. Aim for a soft consistency.

**STEP THREE** Place half the mixture in the tin and flatten. Place a circle of marzipan on top. Put the remaining mixture on top of this and smooth out. Put the tin on a baking sheet and bake for 1 hour, then reduce the temperature to 150°C/gas mark 2. Bake for 2-2½ hours or until a skewer inserted into the centre of the cake comes out clean. Once baked, allow it to cool completely.

**STEP FOUR** Preheat the grill to medium. Gently heat the apricot jam in a pan until it's warm, or in a microwave for 1 minute until it's soft. Brush the top of the cake with the warm jam. Place the second circle of marzipan or almond paste on top. Decorate with the 11 marzipan balls. Brush the marzipan with egg yolk, then place it under the grill until the marzipan colours just a little.

**STEP FIVE** If you like, you can add yellow icing. Simply mix the icing sugar, water and yellow food colouring to decorate your cake.



*The Baker's Daughter* by Louise Johncox (Macmillan, £20) is available to Psychologies readers for £18 (free UK postage & packing). To order, call 01256 302699, quoting code 'GLR 9YN'. Offer available from 25 March to 30 April.