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 photographs con poulos
 styling tabitha hawkins



The daughter of tea shop-owners, Louise Johncox grew up surrounded by macaroons and meringues. But it wasn't until her father retired that her own passion for baking took hold

LOUISE JOHNCOX FOOD INSPIRATION

My life has been shaped by cakes, not just one or two but hundreds and thousands – plus all the sprinkles. My father, Peter, was a baker and I grew up in our family's tea shop, Peter's, in Weybridge, Surrey, which my parents ran for more than 40 years. My mother, Frankie, a former nurse, was the welcoming face of the shop while my father was the craftsman confectioner.

My father grew up playing with pastry. His grandparents ran Beti's tea shop on the Isle of Wight and his parents opened their tea shop, Lane's, in Westcliff in 1934, when he was three. In 1958, he opened Peter's, continuing a very long family tradition. He rose at 4.30am six days a week to bake cakes and savouries, working 14-hour days. On Mondays, when the shop closed, he made chocolates and celebration cakes.

As a child, I held my birthday parties in the tearoom, where the table groaned under the weight of Dad's animal biscuits, jam tarts and sponge fingers. Friends left my parties with a slice of cake, a balloon and a smile. Whenever I walked into the bake-house, Dad asked me, 'Would you like something to eat?' I'd sit on a flour tin by his side and he'd place whatever was fresh out of the oven

in front of me – a bread roll or a chunk of sponge. I helped with little jobs, such as piping whipped cream between meringue shells, rolling doughnuts in sugar and sprinkling nutmeg over custard tarts. The small stock room was a child's paradise full of ingredients; boxes of Belgian chocolate vied for space among cake decorations. Dad smelled of cakes and bread and by the time I left for school, the bake-house scent lingered on my uniform.

When Dad retired in 2000, the shop closed and neither I nor my two brothers or sister carried on the pastry chef tradition. We all had our reasons; I wanted to be a writer, so I went to college and trained to be a journalist, going on to work on newspapers. I was too busy to bake. It was only when I had my own children, Lara (now 15) and Joe (11), and reached my forties that I felt it was high time I learned to bake. I decided to write a baking memoir and started baking with my father to record the traditional recipes. When I first asked him for the recipes he said, "They're all in my head!" I found some family books with ingredients but no methods, ancient recipe cards and, over several years, we baked all the classics: meringues, macaroons, custard tarts, Florentines and more. When I asked Dad for quantities and cooking times his stock answer was, "It's instinct."»

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As our baking progressed to more complex recipes, such as millefeuille, Dad's health problems began. But by then, my family had got the baking bug back. My brother, Johnny, stepped in to help make doughnuts and my mother switched roles and cooked Dad's sticky ginger cake. I made the coffee and walnut sponge he loved, while Lara crafted birthday cakes with delicate decorations and Joe made flapjacks.

A few months ago Dad died, but when I watch Lara hunched over a cake piping petals, or Joe confidently mixing ingredients, I know the baking gene lives.

Louise's son, Joe, spreads buttercream to fill the coffee cake - his grandfather Peter's favourite



Coffee and walnut cake

For more than 40 years, Dad made coffee and walnut cake every week and it was the cake he requested for his 80th birthday celebration. He always used Camp coffee essence and, while I love its sweet coffee flavour, sometimes I use single cream or whole milk heated with instant coffee instead.

Serves 10

Prepare 15 minutes

Cook 25 minutes

- 225g unsalted butter, softened, plus extra for greasing
- 225g caster sugar
- 4 eggs
- 4 tbsp Camp coffee essence (or 2 tbsp instant coffee dissolved in 4 tbsp warm single cream)
- 250g self-raising flour
- 115g walnuts, roughly chopped

COFFEE BUTTERCREAM

- 120g unsalted butter, softened
- 120g icing sugar
- ½ tbsp Camp coffee essence (or 1 tsp instant coffee dissolved in 1 tbsp warm single cream)
- 8-10 walnut halves, for decorating

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C, gas mark 4. Grease 2 x 20cm cake tins and line the bases with baking parchment. Using handheld electric beaters, or in a food mixer, cream the butter and sugar together for 2-3 minutes until pale and fluffy.

2 Using a fork, beat the eggs with the coffee essence in a jug. Gradually beat this into the creamed butter and sugar. Fold in the flour until you have a smooth batter, then gently fold the chopped walnuts through the mixture, making sure they are evenly distributed.

3 Divide the mixture between the tins and bake for 20-25 minutes, until a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean. Leave in the tins for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool.

4 For the buttercream, put the butter, icing sugar and coffee essence in a bowl and beat for 3-4 minutes until light and fluffy. Place one cake on a plate or cake stand and cover the top with buttercream, then put the other cake on top and cover with the remaining buttercream. Decorate with the walnuts.

Per serving 640kcal/7.5g protein/59.4g carbs/40.4g sugars/41.4g fat/20.2g saturated fat/1.3g fibre/0.4g salt >>



Florentines

Dad made Florentines regularly for the tea shop; they were especially popular at Christmas as gifts, presented in boxes tied with red ribbon. He also made tiny versions as petits fours. I like to make mine in a muffin tray – it gives them a smooth, rounded edge.

Makes about 20

Prepare 15 minutes

Cook 10 minutes

- 25g unsalted butter
- 75g caster sugar
- 15g plain flour
- 3 tbsps double cream
- 50g glacé cherries, roughly chopped
- 100g flaked almonds
- 50g mixed peel
- 100g dark chocolate (70% cocoa)

1 Preheat the oven to 190°C, gas mark 5. Line a baking sheet with baking parchment. Melt the butter and sugar in a saucepan, then stir in the flour and gradually add the cream. Bring to the boil, stirring, until it thickens slightly and comes away from the sides of the pan. Take off the heat and stir in the cherries, almonds and mixed peel.

2 Place spoonfuls of the mixture onto the baking sheets (or into the bases of a 12-hole muffin tray). Bake for 6–8 minutes until lightly golden. Allow to cool slightly, then remove from the baking sheets or muffin tray and transfer to a wire rack using a palette knife.

3 Melt the chocolate in a bowl set over a pan of gently simmering water. Carefully pick up a Florentine and dip the smooth underside in the chocolate (or spread over with a knife). Leave the Florentines chocolate-side up on a fresh sheet of baking parchment until set.

Per Florentine 119kcal/1.7g protein/9.9g carbs/8.8g sugars/8.1g fat/3.5g saturated fat/0.7g fibre/trace salt



'I would sit on a flour tin by Dad's side and he'd place whatever was fresh out of the oven in front of me – a hot bread roll or a chunk of sponge'

