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Let's do it together

by Jill Foster

THE undisputed Queen of Cakes is in the kitchen of her magnificent Buckinghamshire home scrutinising a Victoria sponge I've baked in a desperate bid to impress her.

Having used the finest organic flour, free-range eggs, unsalted butter and caster sugar and followed a trusted recipe passed down from my great-grandmother, I was — until two minutes ago — pretty confident that it not only looked good, but would taste divine.

Now, as Mary Berry casts a gimlet eye over the middle layer, which seems to be haemorrhaging raspberry jam, and questions whether my sugar dusting is, in fact, only there to disguise the cracks, my ego is feeling as fragile as a meringue nest.

'Don't start with the excuses now,' she scolds, as I mutter something about the cake being bashed about on the two-hour journey to her house in the Home Counties (where else?).

Of course, the 76-year-old author of more than 70 cookery books is smiling as she reprimands me. But this is exactly the kind of gentle but no-nonsense approach that unnerves contestants and delights viewers on *The Great British Bake Off*.

The show, which pits 12 amateur cooks against each other in a 'bake off' to find the nation's best baker, has been an unlikely hit for BBC2.

Whether it was the candy-coloured kitchens, the stately home setting or simply the scrummy confections rustled up every week, everyone seemed to have a view on whether Holly's croquembouche would crumble or if Mary-Anne's syllabub was too syrupy.

More than five million viewers tuned in for the final this week to see 41-year-old Jo Wheatley from Essex crowned the winner.

But a large part of the show's success is down to Mary Berry, whose name has been synonymous with delicious traditional cooking for decades.

Alongside fellow baking expert Paul Hollywood, she is a reality TV judge with a difference. Never as caustic as the dreaded Cowell nor as harsh as Craig Revel Horwood, her standards may be exacting but her comments are always considerate. One TV reviewer has hailed her and Hollywood the greatest reality TV judges of all time.

'I don't want to tell contestants they haven't done well,' says Mary. 'I think some competitions on television are too noisy, too harsh and there's too much drama. I won't name them [we all know the one she's talking about] but I don't like swearing in the kitchen either. It's not good for the profession.'

'If you're harsh and people are upset, they'll feel inadequate and then they won't have a go. I always want to be constructive because that way the viewer can also learn from the mistakes. My aim really is to get everyone to love baking.'

If that's the case, it's worked a treat. The GBBO effect has seen Britain go baking bonkers. Marks & Spencer has reported sales increases of up to 20 per cent in baking ingredients, while at John Lewis there's been a 15 per cent increase in sales of muffin trays and cake tins.

ONLY this week, Lakeland reported sales of icing bags, piping equipment and muffin cases have increased by a third in the past year, while those for vintage-style tins and stands have more than doubled.

In fact, the only one who doesn't seem surprised by this domestic revolution is Mary. After all, she has been at the ovenface for more than half a century so understands only too well the secret of baking's allure.

'It's a bit of joy in the middle of this recession,' she says. 'You watch a programme like this and begin to feel warm again. It's what life is all about.'

'Even if money is short, it doesn't cost much to bake a scone. If you're feeling a little bit down, a little bit of kneading really helps.'

Having baked thousands of cakes, is there anything she has learned from the show?

'Absolutely,' she says. 'I've never rolled out my pastry hot between two pieces of clingfilm like Mary-Anne did and I've never put edible glitter on things, which is very pretty. So I'm learning new tricks all the time.'

The show has also spawned an unlikely internet star in the shape of a rather obviously male squirrel who appears to be flashing to the camera. Mary looks shocked when I tell her.

'Ooh, those little monkeys get everywhere,' she says. 'We have to be very careful to put everything in containers otherwise they have a nibble.'

Enviably petite, pretty and at least a decade younger-looking than she is, Mary was brought up in Bath. Her father Allen was a surveyor and mayor of the city. Her mother Marjorie — who died recently, aged 105 — worked part-time for her husband, helping with the accounts.

'My mother wasn't a cook by trade, but we

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