



**WOMEN ARE
DOING IT FOR
THEMSELVES...**

**COOKIES,
BROWNIES &
FLAPJACKS**

{COOK UP A BETTER LIFE}

Tess Reidy *on the
bakery giving women
a chance to rise* »

Since *The Great British Bake Off* first hit our screens in 2010, watching contestants make extravagant and complicated cakes in the red-hot heat of a marquee has become a must do. The show has repopularised a skill once associated with housewives and the Women's Institute and made it appealing to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Far from the TV cameras and watchful eyes of Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry, another baking project is taking place in a warehouse in East London – but this one, The Luminary Bakery, is designed to help women affected by issues such as homelessness, poverty, prostitution and domestic violence to turn their lives around.

Alice Williams, 27, set up bakery in East London in 2012. She had previously worked at a cafe on Brick Lane, also in the



east end of London, where she had been encouraged by her boss to find ways that the cafe could help local women who were facing huge challenges – such as a lack of money, addiction and homelessness. This work gave her the idea for the Luminary Bakery. The definition of “luminary” is, “a person of brilliance”.

The bakery teaches women how to bake to a professional standard and sells the products they make to cafes across London. “We wanted to support women who had been disadvantaged,” Alice says. “There are lots of local women with these issues so we wanted to do something to help. We got to know some of the women to try to find out what their needs were and we realised that employment is so important in helping them to build a life for themselves and not to be reliant on benefits.”

With the aim of helping these women move forward with their lives, a formal curriculum was established in 2014. So far four groups of up to seven women have been through the training.

Agencies and charities refer women for the courses and then “we interview the women and see if they are right for the course and if it would be right for them,” says Alice.

Perhaps surprisingly, Alice isn’t much of a baker herself. “I can make some all right



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salted caramel brownies but usually I leave it to the experts,” she says.

Luminary trainees don't need any previous baking experience. The course starts with basic bakes such as cookies, brownies and flapjacks. Over the weeks, the women progress to cupcakes, bread and pastry. By the end of the programme they are confident in a range of skills.

Two years on, the scheme has been a huge success. In addition to baking, the women achieve food hygiene qualifications and are taught important business and personal development skills. Former

students are also given the opportunity to work as apprentices for six months in the bakery.

The owners are now opening up a new cafe where the women will also be able to work in front-of-house roles such as coffee baristas. The course always begins with

a brainstorming session about what an employable baker might be like. Becoming a good baker takes dedication. You can't just wing it with the measurements and you've got to be prepared to learn from your mistakes. “Characteristics like patience and teamwork are vital,” Alice says. “A lot of people who are good at cooking aren't >>



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CONSCIOUS OF SELLING
THE PRODUCT



necessarily good at baking; it's more of a science, and you have to be precise."

At first, she says, a lot of the women don't like these aspects. "They don't always get why we measure or why everything has to look so uniform. We coach the women to become more conscious of selling the product and what it should be like to please the customer. These are skills that can always be learned; you don't have to be a natural cook to get good at it."

So far, the drop-out rates have been low and the women who have been on the scheme have used the opportunity to gain experience, learn new skills and find employment or education prospects at the end of it.

"There have been a few things like childcare issues and people have started and then got offered a job elsewhere. Sometimes things get in the way or there are better options, so people have dropped out but usually not," says Alice.

"It's really significant for confidence and self-worth for the women to know that they can create something. We've seen a lot of women learning that they can produce something brilliant. That's uplifting – plus it makes you desirable in the work force if you have a skill such as baking to offer.

"Women can't believe they make such amazing stuff," she adds. "Creativity can be helpful for the soul."