

INTERVIEW

ICING ON THE CAKE

Royal-wedding-cake maker Claire Ptak talks newfound fame, seasonality and baking trends

BY Amy Broomfield

“The other day, someone asked if they could have a selfie with me. That’s so rad!” laughs baker and food writer Claire Ptak. Commissioned by Meghan Markle to make the royal wedding cake earlier this year, Ptak suddenly found herself and her east London bakery, Violet Cakes, in the limelight. “I remember where I was when I got the email,” she says. “I was like, I need to read that again.”

Her creation for the Duke and Duchess of Sussex – a layered Amalfi lemon and Sandringham Estate elderflower sponge cake coated in Swiss meringue buttercream – was made in a style Ptak calls “perfectly imperfect”. “I want to see the texture and flow of the icing; it should make you want to run a finger through it to taste it.” The commission was one of her most rewarding experiences to date. “When you’ve been working so hard for so long and someone likes what you’re doing, it’s gratifying,” she says.

Ptak grew up in California under the baking influences of her mother and grandmother. They would use the bounty of fruit, such as apples and blackberries, that grew in their back garden as their principal ingredients, providing Ptak with her first lesson in seasonality. “My mother gave me free rein to mix anything from the cupboards and fridge into cakes. They were my experiments and they were disgusting! But it taught me how to figure out what worked.” After a brief stint in the film industry in LA, she decided to make her love of baking her vocation and went to work at California’s long-standing fine-dining spot Chez Panisse, founded by Alice Waters, where she received the bulk of her training. In 2005, she moved to London to seek experience at influential restaurants, before setting up her own stall on Broadway Market in Hackney. Violet Cakes opened in 2010.

Ptak has seen many nostalgic foods from the US become commonplace on the British baking scene: think oversized cookies and cupcakes heavily iced with buttercream. That said, with seasonality at the core of her baking, Ptak feels that our palates are evolving from wanting artificially oversweetened foods to favouring more natural



TRENDING: BAKING



Sweet or savoury? Traditional or with a twist? The Food Halls sells it all. Babka, triple-baked croissants and mini patisserie are freshly baked every day.

flavours created with ingredients like essences of flowers or leaves: “You can steep them in cream – it’s delicious.” Also on the rise is a balance of sweet and salty, which she credits to Yotam Ottolenghi and restaurants such as Honey & Co. “I’ve seen a lot of Israeli and Jewish baking with sesame and tahini. Babka is a great example.” Ptak notes a trend for miniatures too. “There’s a strong French influence there. And classic pastries are continually being reinvented. Pierre Hermé made them more decadent by adding fresh raspberries and chocolate.”

So just what kind of cake would it take to surprise a royal-wedding baker? “Oh my God, if anyone made me a cake I would be so delighted! I’ve been asking for a cake for the past 15 years and no one will make me one. Anyone could make me a scone and I’d be so grateful.” ■

FROM TOP Claire Ptak; Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s wedding cake – three layered lemon and elderflower sponges with a “perfectly imperfect” covering of buttercream; freshly baked goods at Harrods Roast & Bake. Food Halls, Ground Floor