

What's special about pastry chefs

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Had the mothers of Scarlett Johansson, Nicole Kidman or Cate Blanchett followed the advice of Noel Coward's song and not put their daughters on the stage then they would have forfeited not only international careers but also small fortunes.

The same opportunity now confronts the mothers of a particular group of chefs known as pastry chefs – or, more elegantly in French, as *pâtisseries* - whose career prospects, and therefore their ability to earn and to travel the world, have improved enormously over the past five years.

Pastry chefs have always been different from other chefs. Although a vital part of the kitchen brigade, they have invariably been seen as rather like a goalkeeper in a football team: while the whole team depends on them, a degree of eccentricity is often anticipated with occasionally unforeseen consequences.

This relationship has evolved for two reasons. Firstly, pastry chefs tend to work different, often longer, hours than their colleagues. They like to be in early, before the kitchen gets too hot, and they have to be the last to leave to ensure the desserts are served correctly. Secondly, it has become increasingly recognised that the final stages of any meal leave the most telling impressions. The main courses may be the most expensive on the menu, the wine the single most costly item on the bill, but it is the taste and memory of the desserts and the array of petits fours on offer which will often dictate how the customer remembers the meal.

Talented pastry chefs also have the opportunity to bypass restaurants to start their own businesses, one reason why there are now so many excellent pâtisseries across Europe: Les Cakes de Bertrand in Paris; Ladurée in Paris and London; Demel in Vienna; Bubo in Barcelona and Le Pain Quotidien, which has spread from Belgium to California.

Demand has been further fuelled by the huge growth in popularity not just of neglected national dishes but in particular of comfort food, so much of which is desserts. Nobody could have predicted, for example, that 'le crumble' would have proved as popular in France as it is today, albeit served with crème anglaise rather than custard.

Afternoon tea has now become not just chic but extremely popular although it is rather difficult to say which of these phenomena came first. Certainly the influence of chefs such as Pierre Gagnaire, whose cooking has won his restaurants three Michelin stars in France, on the pâtisserie on offer at London's Sketch generated huge publicity. But as our working lives have changed and the interest in eating out has grown, so too has the demand for the more traditional afternoon tea at The Ritz, Claridge's and Fortnum & Mason, a meal that for many continues to be synonymous with a visit to London. Even Soho's tiny, atmospheric teashop Maison Bertaux has doubled in size to accommodate those in the media meeting for tea and cakes.

The career of Claire Clark, a member of BA's Culinary Council and the author of the recently published book *Indulge – 100 Perfect Desserts* (Absolute Press £20), exemplifies the fact that the world is now the talented pastry chef's oyster.

Clark grew up in a vicarage, where her mother baked everything and this induction into the sweet life was followed by studying under two renowned Swiss pâtisseries. There followed a swift ascent from commis chef at The Inter-Continental Hotel scooping sorbets and plating petits- fours for banquets of 900 to head of the pastry section at The Wolseley. Then an advert whisked her off to California's Napa Valley.

For the past 18 months Clark has been in charge of preparing all the desserts, petits fours as well as the bag of shortbread each guest takes away with them at The French Laundry, whose renowned chef/ proprietor, Thomas Keller, provided one of the voices for the film *Ratatouille*. Clark's book is impressive because it combines classic and modern cakes and pastries and because Keller endorses it with a foreword, a photo and a quote on the back cover. Even the best chefs have come to realise that life alongside a top pastry chef can now be very sweet.