

Sweet & CHIC

Forget mass-produced Victoria sponge and lemon drizzle, there's a quiet revolution brewing in the cake industry and it's all about glitz, glamour and above all else, quality.

Nicola Mallett investigates

You only have to type the word 'cupcake' into Google and it is easy to discover the background to this new, 'modern cake' phenomena – the wedding trade. Since would-be brides dropped the three-tiered monstrosity in favour of cuter, prettier American-style cupcakes and fairy cakes – with their theme-matching cases – the industry has been changed forever. Couple that with the 'Nigella-effect' promoting whimsical baking that unites kids and adults alike and the result? An abundance of bakers offering bespoke designs and pretty packaging, who not only follow the fashions in colour, style and design, but are also making afternoon tea even more of a treat.

"Our customers are drawn to our products because of their artistic appearance and quality," reveals Mike Thomaides, managing director at Candy Cakes, a company producing the brightest, most colourful and wackily designed range of cakes and retailing them through its own cafes. "We launched Candy Cakes in 2006," continues Mr Thomaides. "We wanted to offer a different concept and bring something innovative, fun and creative to the café and cake world. So we developed Candy Cakes, a cake shop with the look of a sweet shop!"

Expanding market

Candy Cakes has carved a unique niche. Setting itself apart from the competition with exceptionally colourful products that appeal to all generations, it has proved that cakes can form the fundamental basis for a very successful business. But, it's not the only one. On the internet there are a plethora of companies offering bespoke designs and innovative creations, all handmade with next-day delivery credentials. Clams Cakes is one such producer, also riding the wave for high quality creations. With a raft of awards under its belt, consumers have quickly caught on to its range of handmade goodies and modern approaches in packaging and design. "Even during this recession the sales of our cakes are up on last year and I think that's because people see them as an affordable treat," comments Lewis Phillips at Clam's. He admits that cupcakes and muffins are particularly popular and that people are seeking the most adventurous toppings they can find. He believes that for delis, stocking a strong range of quality goods is key. "Deli customers tend to be very clued up on food and will appreciate a deli going out of its way to offer high quality cakes, just as it would stock high quality meat and vegetables."

Eric Watkins at luxury cake producer, Fresh Eric's Cakes, agrees.

"They are an affordable indulgence in difficult times and people like to know that even though it's a treat it's 'good' in the sense of being made with quality ingredients. They want free-range eggs, non-hydro fats and no artificial colours or flavours." He also reveals that carrot cake is his most popular flavour, despite the raft of new combinations on the market. Clam's agrees that traditional lines like carrot cake and chocolate brownies are good sellers, but it has also seen a rise in demand for its new muffin range including Almond, Banana and Ginger and Pumpkin Seed.

Aside from offering cakes and muffins for those wanting a morning or afternoon treat, the revival in the cake industry has also borne a brand new outlet for retailers to exploit – the gift market. Whereas once a cake was presented on a special occasion with candles atop, now they are being pitched as the perfect gesture of thanks for a dinner party host, gift for teacher or present for a work mate. "We have worked hard on our packaging to ensure our cakes can be enjoyed as both an indulgence, or given as a present," reveals Mike Thomaides at Candy Cakes. He also believes that tapping into the potential of cakes as a gift will help shop owners weather the recession. "People will still buy presents for birthdays and celebrations and there

is a huge demand for bespoke cakes for times such as Valentines or Mother's Day," continues Mr Thomaides. "Our customers are looking for personalised products which are often a really good way to show affection."

Finding a niche

"I've got two distinct markets: weddings and gifts," reveals Kate Shirazi, founder of Cakeadoodledo, a cupcake specialist based in Devon. "Whereas once people may have bought flowers or chocolates as a present, they are now sending boxes of pretty cupcakes," she reveals.

Cakeadoodledo produces wonderfully bright and pretty cupcakes using fondant icing – as opposed to the American cupcakes that are topped with lashings of rich butter cream. Although Ms Shirazi admits that cupcakes have become big business, she says she has been in it since the beginning.

"About four years ago when I started, the interest in cupcakes was just burbling on in the background. I noticed the trend happening in America, fancied a career change and the opportunity to work from home," she explains. "It really was perfect timing and the business has taken off. Now I have a small team working alongside me and we courier the cakes all over the country."

One of the most noticeable features of the current trend in cakes – and worth noting if you're considering stocking up – is how fashion's linking its way into baking. As Ms Shirazi explains, sprinkles just aren't enough now. To really succeed, manufacturers are having to think big. "Interiors are a huge influence on my designs," she reveals. "Sometimes I'll see a piece of wall paper, or a small swatch of fabric and I'll just get an idea. I've made cakes before off the back of a Paul Smith or Cath Kidson design, or from seeing a tiny bit of liberty print. I'm constantly inspired."

As a trend that is so clearly fashion-led and appealing to a decidedly fussy audience, what are the hopes for the future? "As far as the consumer is concerned the very high end of our range is holding up really well," says Eric Watkins at Fresh Eric Cakes. "These products are an impulse buy which help to increase the total spend in store."

Ms Shirazi also agrees that despite the financial crisis, sales are about as bright as the toppings on her cakes! "I'm in my fourth year and I'm still getting so many orders, I expected the wedding fever to die down, but it keeps on growing," she explains. "People are becoming more open to giving food as a gift and I am very confident of the staying power of cupcakes," she concludes.

