

‘I would NEVER make puff pastry’

Wholesome, fair and sensible – why did we have to wait so long for a celeb like Bake-Off star Mary Berry?

Interview by KAYE McINTOSH | Photography LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

She's been a WI favourite for nearly six decades. From zipping around village halls showing people how to use electric cookers in the 1950s to demonstrating at Denman in 2013, Mary Berry was a hit with WI members long before everyone else discovered her.

Ratings for her TV show, the *Great British Bake-Off*, topped 9 million for the final of the most recent series, in October, when clothes designer Frances Quinn was the surprise winner, despite a Twitter gaffe by chef Raymond Blanc supposedly leaking the name of another contestant.

The contest between amateur bakers is BBC 2's most-watched programme in a decade. Perhaps it's a yearning for simple pleasures and cosiness that lies at the heart of the show's success. 'It's kind, it's gentle, it's educational and it's fun,' Mary points out. Unlike other reality TV shows, the contestants aren't at each other's throats. They are happy to swap piping bags or food colouring, she says. 'Although individually they want to win, they are very happy to share.'

There's no TV trickery involved, nor pressure on the judges, Mary and bread expert Paul Hollywood, to find the 'right' winner. 'It's totally honest. Nobody ever says to me, well, it would be nice if we had three men in the final, or we can't have all girls. Nothing is ever put in our way.'

I doubt anyone would dare – Mary's clearly used to taking charge. While we talk, she's having her hair and make-up done for a full day of back-to-back interviews, but she interrupts to insist on

doing her hair the way she likes it: 'I do know what suits me'. There's none of the prima donna though – when she notices the make-up artist is stretching on tiptoes she insists on adjusting her seat to help.

Being asked to judge the *Bake-Off* was an unexpected twist after a long career, with more than 70 books to her name, as well as presenting TV series and running cookery workshops and a company making sauces and dressings.

Perhaps people are fed up with shouty, attention-grabbing celebrities and were yearning for someone... well, sensible and wholesome. Mary's recipes don't use too many exotic ingredients, for instance. 'They are things you are likely to have in your store cupboard,' she points out. 'I'm pretty good on lasagnes and easy dishes for busy people. I do take short-cuts – I would never make puff pastry. Obviously you see it [being made] on the *Bake-Off* because they are there to prove

themselves, but I always use ready-made – I don't have time to do lots of processes.'

She certainly doesn't. If she's not filming *Bake-Off*, or *Junior Bake-Off* on CBBC, she's demonstrating at Denman, or the Good Food Show, appearing at a host of other events,

writing cookbooks and running her own company. By the age of 78, most people would be thinking about slowing down, or at least taking a break now and again, but Mary scoffs at the idea of retirement.

'How boring! I don't play bridge, I don't play golf, I play tennis very badly... I do garden but that's a lonely occupation. I'd rather come and see you today than clean the bath!'

But she does still carry the guilt of the working mother, even as a grandmother.

'My one regret is that I'm not being the best granny, which I would love to be. I do have my grandchildren next weekend, but I wish I had them more and was more available.'

There's one topic that is not available for debate. 'I'm not discussing feminism – I have got into so much trouble.' Last year Mary was quoted by the *Daily Mail* saying 'feminism is a dirty word' and criticising maternity leave as 'difficult' for small employers. Critics, including TV presenter and campaigner Baroness Joan Bakewell and writer Yasmin Alibhai-Brown lined up to vent their disapproval. Now she simply won't talk about it. She adds, though, that Joan Bakewell rang her at home after the row and 'was enchanting'.

In her autobiography, Mary insists she's supportive of women, but stands by the comments on maternity leave. She says she took just five weeks off from her role as cookery editor on *Ideal Home* magazine when her first child, Thomas, was born, 'because in those days you were supposed to leave and someone would be very happy to take your job. I was rather enjoying it so I wasn't going to let that happen!'

It's clear she is also rather enjoying her new role as the nation's favourite TV expert. And amused at being lauded as a style icon for the older woman. A floral bomber jacket she wore on the *Bake-Off* sold out within hours of the broadcast. 'Because you are old, people expect you to dress in dull colours. I try to dress for my age. I don't wear things too tight, I don't wear things too short, and I wear lots of warm colours.' Sensible, straightforward and knowing exactly what is right for her – typical Mary Berry. **WI** *Mary's autobiography, Recipe for Life, is published by Michael Joseph. The paperback edition is out 27 February, price £7.99.*

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