

Cake bakers from across the globe are meeting in secret to share their favourite

Real Lives

THEY arrive through the downpour clutching cake tins and large plastic boxes. Brushing off raincoats, they pass through a shiny, white door into a secret meeting place in the centre of York. As the clock strikes six, more women and a couple of men arrive, carrying yet more containers. The York Cocoa House on Blake Street suddenly starts to buzz as the contents of the tins and boxes are surreptitiously revealed. There are gasps and cries and whoops. A large wooden table in a corner of the café quickly fills up with every type of chocolate cake imaginable. The first meeting of York's new Clandestine Cake Club is off to a flying start. "It's all about the cake," explains Lynn Hill, 61, from Leeds, who is leading this new underground movement of secret cake-lovers. Since its inception in Leeds less than a year and a half ago, the Clandestine Cake Club (CCC) has branched out to 96 clubs across the world, with new ones opening every week. It is a social trend that is well and truly on the rise.

"It is a social gathering and the link is the cake," explains Lynn. Members join their local CCC through a website but the location and theme for the event is kept secret until a few days beforehand. Similar to a supper club, the idea is to keep it exclusive and exciting. There are other clubs based around cupcakes but according to Lynn, this is the only one focusing purely on cake. "Everywhere you go there are cupcakes, muffins, brownies, pies and tarts, but very rarely do you just see cake. I thought well, I'll stick with cake and it's been cake ever since. I think that's why people have shown an interest in it because it is not competitive, it is all about cake and it's clandestine."

A keen baker, Lynn came up with the idea after taking early retirement from her job in banking. She started out with a supper club and a secret tea room before opening the CCC in an office space in Leeds in December 2010. "I wanted the branding to be part of the underground supper club movement," she says. "I do a tea room at home and I wanted the clandestine cake club to be part and parcel of that movement and it meant to have a secret. That's what people like about it." Now she has just secured a publishing contract for a cookbook which she hopes

THE FIRST RULE OF THE CLUB - IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CAKE



to bring out next year and is currently sifting through recipe suggestions from CCC members. Each event is run with a different theme. There are no prizes for guessing today's topic; the table almost groans under the weight of so much chocolate. There are ring-shaped chocolate cakes, square mocha cakes, plain chocolate-covered ones, milk chocolate-buttered ones and a lone white chocolate sponge. Some are covered in frosting or glazing, or a fancy ganache. A bit like a chocolate's fantasy tea, there is only chocolate cake, no sandwiches, tarts

or for that matter anything savoury whatsoever. The café falls silent as around 25 club members plan their line of attack on the assembled gâteau. Mouths water and eyes bulge. Then Lynn dives in with a thick, pink cake slice and the feast begins. In between mouthfuls of sponge, members swap baking tips, confess their recent flops and praise each other's exceedingly good efforts. The keen bakers have come from as far afield as Durham and Doncaster. Jane

Richardson has come along from Leeds with an impressive sacher torte. "When I lived in London people used to call me Janey Cakes because I baked so much," she confesses. "I do it as chill-out time after work." Depika Lakhaney, from York, has baked a chocolate orange sponge and says she has come along for the social side. "I love baking and it's a good way to meet people." Meanwhile Dee Hardwick, from Buttercrambe near York, has brought along a gluten-free cake. "It is French, flourless and it looks like a road



SECRET SOCIETY: Lynn Hill of the Clandestine Cake Club, main picture; Depika Lakhaney with her chocolate orange cake at a meeting, left. MAIN PICTURE: BRUCE ROLLINSON

accident," she declares. "It may be a little rustic for some of them here." But Lynn is adamant that this is not a competition. "There's no judging. If I heard a conversation that someone's cake wasn't good, or that one was better than another, I would nip that in the bud because it isn't about being competitive, I would hate to think that anyone brought a cake and then stopped coming because they thought that their cake wasn't good enough." She makes no profit from organising the clubs, though some events are held to

raise money for a couple of cancer charities. Cafés and tea rooms offer their space for free with club members buying their own refreshments. "It's just a hobby," says Lynn. "I don't charge anybody any money. We just do it because we love doing it. The coffee houses like it because we bring in business. I like to make sure that everybody speaks to each other." But even Lynn seems surprised by just how popular the Clandestine Cake Club has become. Clubs have been set up as far afield as France, Spain, New Zealand, Australia, and even the Cayman Islands. Nine have sprung up in the Yorkshire region alone. "They like the idea of baking and then coming out and meeting people and

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someone else can try their cakes as well. I don't think I have created a resurgence of baking. "People have always baked but they haven't always had an opportunity to go to an event where they haven't had to compete with somebody else. "People have always baked and many people have said 'oh I love baking, but it's not much fun eating a whole cake by yourself.' "At the end of the day whatever is left you can either take all your cake home if you want, or just cut into everyone else's cake."

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recipes, swap baking tips and have a good chat. Nicky Solloway meets the woman behind the Clandestine Cake Club.

HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT

BAKING, it seems, has never been so hot. Inspired by television shows such as the Great British Bake Off, Lorraine Pascale's Baking Made Easy and The Hairy Bakers, cake fans are shunning shop-bought and dusting off the beaters to whip up their own creations. Kitchenware firm Lakeland reported a huge rise in silicone baking equipment last year and John Lewis reported a boom in sales of mixing bowls and cupcake cases. Just like most clubs, the Clandestine Cake Club has



its own set of rules which members must abide by:
■ No cupcakes, muffins, brownies, pies or tart. It's all about the cake
■ Members are all allowed to take cake home
■ According to the club's mission statement, members should bake, eat and talk about cake
■ Each baker is allowed to bring along one guest
■ For more information and to find your nearest club, check out their website at <http://clandestinecakeclub.co.uk>.

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