



THE FABULOUS BAKER BOY

Rosie Birkett meets Tom Baker, the culinary Robin Hood who is championing good, homemade grub in Birmingham

FROM THE OUTSIDE, Tom Baker's house – a mid-Victorian terrace in the Cotteridge suburb of Birmingham – is not particularly remarkable. Step a little closer, however, and you might just notice some rather delicious smells emanating from its vicinity. Because 7 Dell Road isn't just any old house – it's an artisan bakery and cookery school with a hand-built, four-inch-thick, clay wood-fired oven in the garden and an owner with some serious ideas about bringing wholesome food back into the community.

'I think people thought I was a bit mad at first,' says Baker, a trained nutritionist who abandoned his steady career with the NHS to create social enterprise Loaf in the midst of the recession. 'My job wasn't satisfying the cook inside me. I wanted to be more hands-on with cooking, because I've got a passion for it from a health point of view, but also because I love sharing skills with people, and I wanted to make a living out of food.' A wholly self-taught chef, Baker (whose name seems somewhat prophetic) is now doing exactly that. Loaf's two main activities are the community bakery, which Baker runs every Friday (getting up at 4.30am to bake loaves of artisan sourdough and rye bread for 20 local subscribers) and the cookery school. Covering everything from the art of

making real bread – 'I haven't bought a loaf of bread for four years' – to how to butcher a carcass, make fresh pasta or create handmade chocolates, the classes run on weekday evenings and for whole days at the weekend.

'We're losing all our traditional kitchen skills,' says Baker. 'Fifty years ago every cook could make a loaf of bread, take a chicken apart and skin a rabbit, but no one can do that these days and it's a great shame.' Loaf differs from most commercial cookery schools in that it's aimed at reaching the wider community. As Baker explains, profits are ploughed into social food projects and subsidised cookery classes.

'There are loads of people out there who need to eat better, but who don't have the skills and can't afford to come on the cookery schools I offer. So I want to get them involved. Food can be one of the most powerful agents for change because of its communal aspect. If you know how to cook and use ingredients then you can save yourself a lot of money too.' So if you fancy attending a cookery school that will both sate your appetite for good food and salve your social conscience, get stuck into Loaf.

Baker's day courses cost £75, and evening courses range from £30 to £50
loafonline.co.uk

• EAT WELL
Our First Class meals use only free-range eggs and poultry, and we are committed to using outdoor-reared meat for the best flavour and quality