

COUNTRY VIEW



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Combining a farming pedigree, a passion for baking and artistic creativity has brought success for Katie Watts of Couture Cakes. **Maxie Bradshaw** reports.

Baking a business with real passion and class

Anyone who has ordered a wedding cake knows they can come with a hefty price tag running into hundreds – or even thousands – of pounds.

At first glance, it can seem a lot to pay for a decorated fruit cake, albeit a fairly big one, so the chance to hear (and taste) firsthand what goes into a premium wedding cake was irresistible.

Couture Cakes, set up by Lincolnshire farmer's daughter Katie Watts in 2007, is perched in a little studio above the farmyard.

The farm itself, Vine House, is an arable business on the outskirts of Spalding. It is renowned for its bird food products and award-winning conservation work – the driving passion of Katie's father, Nicholas. Katie's two sisters help run the bird food business and a free-range chicken unit.

"It's ironic really. I was the last of three daughters and I'm sure my dad was secretly hoping for a son to have someone come into the farm business. He couldn't have imagined we would all have ended up working here on the farm in some way," says Katie, who initially worked as a food technologist for Jordan's Cereals.

"I'd always been into food, and particularly loved decorating cakes as I was always very artistic, but like a lot of young people was told I had to get a 'proper job'! I did a degree in food science and nutrition before going to Jordan's, but the work was just not creative enough for me.

"I started working in the evenings as a pastry chef and that really was the start of me finding the courage to set up Couture

Cakes. I'd always had Mum's words ringing in my ears, that cake decorating was a time-consuming hobby that didn't pay, but I decided I would take a drop in income and do something I knew would make me happy," she says.

Setting up

There were no guarantees and Katie says she was very fortunate to be able to come back to the farm and set up there. The link to the farm has proved good for the business in more ways than one.

"We use eggs from the free-range chickens and organic stone ground flour from the mill, which we also supply. I source as much local and organic produce as possible for the cakes, a lot of which is sold via our farm shop.

"There's no doubt it makes a very real difference to the way the cakes taste. It wasn't until I had been away from the farm and come home that I truly understood the difference – something my dad has always believed in and promoted," says Katie.

The cakes, baked in the farmhouse Aga, have been developed by Katie and her full-time assistant, Ivana, to find a balance of taste, texture and a modern twist to appeal to her customers.

Alongside the usual options of fruit, vanilla, lemon, coffee, chocolate and carrot cake are a chocolate fruit cake much lighter in texture than the traditional fruit cake, and a couple of limited edition flavours proving so popular they may well stay – raspberry and amaretto, and toffee and pecan.

"I was amazed to hear some people at a wedding fayre try my cake and say how unexpectedly

It can be very stressful, more so than I imagined when I started, but I love what I'm doing
KATIE WATTS

delicious it was, as they'd always thought wedding cake looked nice, but tasted awful! It's really important to me the cakes taste as good as they look, especially as many brides now use the cake for the wedding breakfast dessert."

Her background as a food technologist proved a real asset, allowing Katie to develop new flavours. "We make the raspberry and amaretto cake using raspberries grown in the garden and make it into jam, which is then layered into the cake. When you bite into the cake, you get this vibrant fruity taste," she says.

Giving people the opportunity to taste and see the cakes via wedding fayres is essential. She visits four in spring, and four in autumn, covering a customer base encompassing Rutland, Cambridgeshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire.

"I hand deliver my cakes, so it's not viable to go much beyond those areas, although I have sold cakes to Yorkshire, Scotland and Dorset," says Katie. "I've even got one going to Italy this summer – it will have its own seat alongside me

on the plane to ensure it gets there in perfect condition!

"When I started up, it was immediately clear there was a gap in the market for what I was doing – people had been going to London for these types of cakes and I had one customer who had been quoted £500 just to deliver the cake from London."

The average price of a Couture Cakes wedding cake is £560, including delivery, and Katie produces two to three every week, on average.

"I'm busy enough to employ someone full-time and have a couple of part-time helpers, but I do all the decorating myself. I am a perfectionist, and haven't been able to find anyone who can match my standards," admits Katie, who trained with Royal cake maker, Dawn Blunden, of Sophisticake.

High standards

Just how high those standards are is immediately apparent on entry to the studio. One wall is lined with display cakes, all breathtaking in the beauty and intricacy of their designs. On one, snowdrops nod delicately from the tiers; another is studded with pale cream and pink orchids so lifelike I had to check they were made from sugar paste. It is here you understand why cakes cost what they do.

Katie's tips for baking success

- Bake the cake as late as feasibly possible so it is nice and fresh when you eat it
- Use the best, freshest ingredients; don't be tempted by cheap supermarket price reductions. You really can taste the difference
- free-range eggs make



Nicholas and Katie Watts

"There's a huge amount of work in producing a perfect cake every time. It's not just about the cake, although that has to be right and if it is a sponge cake it has to be freshly made. The design process starts with meeting the bride and getting a sense of what she is looking for," says Katie.

This consultation meeting gives Katie the chance to show brides pictures of past cakes, outline how her own ideas might be developed from those and get an idea of the theme for the wedding.

"I work a lot with other suppliers, for example florists, to make sure the decorations on the cake complement the real flowers. That is what a bespoke cake is all about."

Ordering is anything from three to 18 months in advance, the latter

important if a particular type of ribbon, brooch or other ornament is needed for the cake.

"One of the cakes had a lace design which matched the lace on the bride's dress, for which we needed a sample to copy. Details like that take time," says Katie.

While the sugar flowers can be done in advance, they are so delicate and brittle that great care must be taken with storage. The whole operation is as much about planning as the baking.

"It can be very stressful; more so than I imagined when I started, but I love what I'm doing."

Because of the limitations imposed by design and delivery, Couture Cakes is virtually at capacity now, says Katie, so she is diversifying into hand-made chocolates.

"When I started the business and it began to flourish, my dad shook his head and said 'I don't know why you didn't do it ages ago,'" laughs Katie. "In truth, though, I'm glad I did the things I did before setting up the business.

"It prepared me for running a business, not just baking and decorating cakes to satisfy my own passion for it," says Katie. She smiles, pauses, then says, "but that is still very much what it is about for me".



Novelty chicken cake reflects the intricacy of each handmade cake.



The Millhouse cake.



Vintage miniature cakes.



John Deere tractor cake.