

HOMES & GARDENS

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SIMPLY THE BEST

From small beginnings, these five London food companies have created a niche market for their products, all made by traditional methods and using the best ingredients



THE JEWISH DELI

Barry Rogg must be one of the only people in London who still pickles cucumbers and herring in the traditional Jewish way. His shop, a delicatessen near Aldgate, was started by his grandfather in about 1911, then run by his mother and uncle. He joined the business in 1945, meaning to stay only for a couple of years (“My ambition was to be a layabout,” he says) but today, more than 50 years later, he’s the only one left.

“My uncle said to me when I first started: ‘You can either sell good stuff or rubbish. You’ll make a fortune if you sell rubbish, but you can’t do both.’ Unfortunately, I stuck to the former.” While he speaks, Barry brings freshly fried pieces of halibut and cod from the kitchen and adds them to the other traditional Jewish food on display. Chopped chicken liver, egg and onion, gefilte fish, salt beef, fried fishballs, pickled herring in lemon, mammoth olives, giant Spanish onions, vine tomatoes, old-fashioned cakes and pastries, and fat King Solomon dates all jostle for space with buckets of cucumbers in brine layered with garlic and bay. There’s also a really salty dried brown herring – “If you haven’t got blood pressure, it’ll give you blood pressure,” Barry says – as well as hot salt beef on Sundays from 9 am. This shop is from another era: “It’s the personal type of business that will gradually become extinct,” admits Barry. Visit now, before it does.

Rogg’s Jewish Deli, 137 Cannon Street Road, E1 2LX, (0171) 488 3368. ▶



THE FISH SMOKER

◀Cliff Collis started smoking fish 30 years ago at the back of his fish shop in Bermondsey. “I used to smoke anything from haddock to bloaters,” he says. “It was a different world back then.” Tastes having changed, however, he now concentrates on curing salmon to order, selling wholesale to caterers and restaurants, and also to individuals via the post.

The smokery, bought by Cliff’s grandmother in the 1930s, has been in existence since the late 1800s. What makes Cliff’s salmon (only the very best, sent down from Scotland) unique is that it’s smoked in the vintage smoke holes in the courtyard at the back of the building. This old-fashioned, three-day process has been superseded almost everywhere else by electric kilns, which take just a few hours to finish the job. Two or three nights a week, Cliff stokes up the fire with hardwood sawdust – oak, beech and sometimes mahogany (which helps bring out the colour, he says) – from a furniture factory in Hackney, and sets to work. “The smoke holes are laced with years and years of smoke and cure and tar; when they warm up, that’s when the flavour’s released,” he explains. “My salmon might be a bit more expensive, but the taste is completely different. It’s chalk and cheese.”

A side of Cliff’s smoked salmon costs from around £15 to £35, depending on weight; call (0171) 739 9017 for mail-order details.



THE CHOCOLATE MAKER

Only a true chocaholic could create truffles as delectable as those made by Sara Jayne at her home in south-west London. Yet it all began by accident: in 1983, two friends who were about to open a food shop asked her to supply some truffles for their launch party. They were so well received it resulted in a regular order (though, modestly, Sara describes her first efforts as “very amateurish”). The eight varieties of truffles have subtle and unusual flavours, including tequila, chilli, ginger, saffron, pistachio and cardamom. Only the very best French and English *converture* bitter chocolate is used, with absolutely no powdered flavourings.

Sara is completing a book for publication this autumn on 3,500 years of chocolate from pod to palate, plus a selection of recipes. Her passion has become a mission to convert people to the glories of chocolate. You could start with one of her truffles.

Sara Jayne’s Truffles, (0181) 874 8500. Prices £12.50 ½ lb, £21 lb, plus £4 p & p (no credit cards).

THE BAKER

Margaret Islin began by selling to her friends; 18 months on she’s baking around 100 cakes a week in her small but spotless kitchen in Highgate. Her three varieties – banana and walnut, carrot and chocolate – are straightforward and un-iced, but have the fullest of flavours and the lightest and moistest of textures, with a deliciously crusty edge that says everything about their home-made provenance. Margaret trained and worked as a chef before having her two children, and at dinner parties her friends kept telling her she should go back to cooking for a living. Eventually she succumbed, and began to test trial cakes at coffee mornings. Ginger was rejected while chocolate became a firm favourite, and the ingredients (there’s coconut and pineapple in the carrot cake, for example) were tinkered with until they were just right. Margaret’s first professional sale was to a children’s play area ▶



◀ in Colney Hatch. A couple of delis followed, and she has recently started a delivery service for boys at Harrow School. She'll also deliver free to individuals locally. It's not just about business, however. "My children asked for sweets all the time, and I wanted to give them something without rubbish in it," Margaret explains. "I came up with these cakes, which have natural ingredients. You can have one on the go all the time."

Just Cakes, (0181) 348 2789. £4 for a 1 lb chocolate or banana and walnut cake; £7 for 2 lb cakes. £4 for a 8-in round carrot cake. Also sold through L & D Foods, 15/17 Lyttelton Road, N2 0DW, (0181) 455 0141; and Panzer's Delicatessen, 13/19 Circus Road, NW8 6PB, (0171) 722 8596.



THE PICKLE PEOPLE

With products given names such as Kama Sutra, Naughty, Sizzling Hot and Wicked, you could be forgiven for thinking that Muriel and Michael Wallis were in a completely different line of business – in fact, they make mouthwatering mustards, pickles, sauces, preserves and chutneys.

The business started as a hobby 12 years ago when Michael, then a haulage contractor, bought 20 lb of cheap plums, on a whim, from a roadside stall. Plum pies and jam led to experiments with mustards and pickled onions, and soon, armed with jars of whatever was in season, they started selling at craft fairs and their local pub in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. Now their range includes, among others, 10 mustards (one's called Victoria Spicy, after their eldest granddaughter), seven chutneys, four marmalades and a dangerously hot chilli sauce that they've named Wild Thing.

The pair devise their own recipes and like to draw on local tradition: they recently created a mustard using McMullen's Ale from nearby Hertford, and they also make a delicious Hertfordshire sweet pickle. Using ingredients that are as natural as possible, they grind their own spices and mustard seed (in a giant coffee grinder), and reduce their recipes naturally, without adding flour, meaning that all but one of their products is gluten-free. "We think of our grandchildren eating them and we make all of our products as pure as possible, like our mums used to," says Michael.

Muriel's Home Made mustards are available by mail order: two 100 g jars for £3, including p & p; other products can be found in shops in Hertfordshire and London; call (01992) 429382 for details. ■