

The Leeds entrepreneur who is a rising star in the kitchen



Caroline Pearman pictured with her cakes at her home at Chapel Allerton. PIC: Simon Hulme

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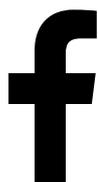
Inspired by Great British Bake Off, Caroline Pearman tells Catherine Scott how she found a new career.

"I always loved baking, but never really thought of it than anything more than a hobby, baking cakes for family and friends," says Caroline Pearman from her kitchen in Chapel Allerton.

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"But then I started watching the Great British Bake Off and saw the success that a lot of the competitors afterwards, and I thought if they can do it why can't I?"

But Caroline admits she is no risk taker and so the idea to start her own cake baking business took a time to prove. Having worked for more than two decades as a project manager, including time at the University of Leeds it was turning 40 that really made her take the plunge

"I'd been a project manager in the commercial sector for 20 years, but reaching 40 made me rethink career," explains Caroline. "I wanted a better work life balance, My father has Alzheimers and I want to spend more time with him and also I wanted to follow my other passion, travel. I'd actually use baking to relieve stress after a difficult day at work. There is something so therapeutic about creating something from a few ingredients."

She eventually plucked up the courage to approach the university about her idea.

"The university was amazing and offered me a sabbatical from my demanding role just in case it didn't work out as I was well aware that it was already a pretty flooded market."

But Caroline's idea was to bake cakes, brownies and biscuits for local business and also the corporate market.

"I spent a lot of time visiting local cafés to see what they needed. A lot were just too busy to make the cakes and soon I realised that there was a new business to be done."

As she had two ovens in her Chapel Allerton home she started baking from home and soon Caroline was launched. With customers including Crust & Crumb in Chapel Allerton, The Bowery in Headingley, The Mill@Scotthall, her baked goods were in huge demand. She also saw a gap in the market for corporate bakes.

"I hadn't really planned to do individual customers but people who tasted my cakes in the cafes asked where they could get them and soon I started to get lots of commissions for celebration cakes," says Caroline. "It's not the biggest part of my business but I do enjoy it."

But as her business grew Caroline found herself working 12 hour days, seven days a week and she was in danger of making herself ill.

"I was not getting the work/life balance that I had left my secure job for.

"But I really didn't want to go down the route of getting a unit somewhere and employing people. I just ended up project managing again and all the stresses that come with."

At a networking event she met Leeds and North Yorkshire Business Doctor Simon Monaghan and sought his advice.

He suggested she create a network of fellow bakers who shared a passion for profiteroles.

"We hit on the idea of appointing associates who could deliver the quality I insist on, but work from their own homes."

Caroline's reputation and business relies on the quality of her products and her customer service.

So how could she ensure that her bakers would be able to reproduce her recipes, inspired all those years before by her gran.

"I set them a Bake Off style challenge I suppose," explains Caroline.

"I gave them a list of ingredients and recipe and asked them to make something. Some were great and some not so good. But it isn't just the baking, I wanted people that would share my ethos for great service, passion for natural ingredients and passion for baking."

She has since appointed four bakers and in the last two years Caroline's Cakes has grown by 77 per cent.

Now, Caroline and her team supply cakes to a wide range of corporate clients and six cafés across Leeds, including her old colleagues at the university.

"The university is one of my biggest clients," says Caroline. "We make cakes for their cafes and are talking about two more of their outlets in the autumn."

And, although she enjoys seeing her old colleagues when she goes back to deliver cakes to the university, Caroline's certain that she won't go back to the 9 to 5 routine.

Although Caroline says she does have plans in mind for her business, she has no desire to expand much further.

"I do sell my brownies on line, but I don't really want to start an internet business and all the complications that come with it.

"I don't want to see Caroline's Cakes on the supermarket shelves either.

"I've loved baking since my grandmother taught me to make cakes when I was a little girl.

"But I always thought I had to go out and get a 'proper' job but now I realise you can do something you love for a living."

"Being able to do this for a living while still having the time to care for my father, who has Alzheimer's, and also fulfill my passion for travel really is a dream come true.

"It doesn't feel like a job, I feel very lucky to be able to do something I love and get paid for it – that is what I call success."