

# My baking THERAPY



Julie Jones makes picture-perfect pies and tarts from her cottage in Carlisle. But her success, she says, is accidental – and it all started as a mission to help her mum

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Julie Jones is attached to her rolling pin. "It's just a plain old rolling pin, but it belonged to Mam," she says, running her finger along the wooden baton. Mam was the reason Julie joined Instagram, starting a feed that has led to book deals, supper clubs, classes and an appearance on Nadiya Hussain's baking series on Netflix. That feed now inspires 183,000 followers to bake – or dream about baking. Julie's ornate designs are drool-worthy. Jamie Oliver is one of her biggest fans.

Julie did not always want to work in food. She was a bookkeeper who loved feeding people. At 30, with a young child, she enrolled in Carlisle College, near where she lived, to retrain as a chef and did a stint with Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck. After graduating in 2010, she had no chance to find work – she was pregnant and her mum was diagnosed with dementia. "Working in a Michelin-star restaurant had been the dream," she says. "Now I couldn't do it. My focus had to be my family."

#### #BAKINGTHERAPY

Looking after her mum was hard. "She became super-agitated and would ask the same question again and again, pulling on my arm if I didn't answer," Julie says. On a whim, Julie said they were going to bake: "Her anxiety disappeared. I'd give her the sieve and some flour and she'd start sifting. She wouldn't have understood what to do if I'd asked her, but she knew what to do if things were in her hand. As long as she was baking, she was peaceful."

Julie stuck to simple recipes like Victoria sponge – one of the first cakes she'd baked with her mum as a child – and posted pictures on Instagram as a personal record. A friend suggested she use the

hashtags #dementia and #bakingtherapy to connect to others: "It became an instant support network. I was putting on a brave face, but really it was very, very difficult. I would never tell my family that losing Mam was breaking my heart, but I felt able to share that with thousands of people I had never met. It was therapeutic."

Dozens of people wrote to Julie saying she had inspired them to bake with relatives or friends with dementia. Her feed also caught the attention of a publisher, who suggested that she should write a book. *Souful Baker*, which came out in 2017, includes a particularly ornate white peach and nectarine tart, still a summer favourite, and her mum's carrot cake.

Between baking, writing and Instagramming, Julie had her third child. Her mum's condition had also got worse and she was taken into care. "You lose them through dementia, but then having them taken from you is awful," Julie says. She took cakes and tarts to her mum in the nursing home – she loved Julie's custard tart – and baked for her stepdad, Gerry, who was now on his own. "That got me through a really sad time," she says.

#### THE PASTRY PATH

With her husband often away for work, Julie would put her three sons to bed and head for the kitchen for her own baking therapy. Over time, she found her pie lids were becoming increasingly decorative with lattices or flowers. "It wasn't deliberate – I just ▶

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE  
After putting her career on hold to look after her mother, Julie now inspires home bakers

to tap into their creative side and turn their baking into an art form. She finds inventive pastrywork most soothing



*"I found the longer I spent baking, the more relaxed I'd become. It became my release"*

## Julie's top tips FOR PASTRY

**1 WORKING WITH PASTRY IS QUICKER** and easier than you might think. You can make it in seconds and decorating speeds up with practise. I use a KitchenAid with a paddle.

**2 YOU DON'T NEED FANCY EQUIPMENT.** A basic pasta machine is useful for slicing sheet pastry into strips. Then be inventive. I use piping nozzles as stamps for circles and a pizza wheel for wavy patterns.

**3 COLD HANDS DO MAKE BETTER PASTRY.** Dip your hands in cold water before you work and throughout if you need to. Or move to Carlisle. It rarely gets too hot here. We have natural pastry conditions.

**4 THE TASTIEST PASTRY IS OFTEN DARK.** You might be tempted to underbake it because you don't want to burn it. Be confident. Hot water crust pastry, for example, should be crisp. It shouldn't chew.

**5 THINK ABOUT TASTE AND TEXTURE.** Looks are important, but food is about eating. I love crisp pastry on a beef shin ragout. The difference between the textures is wonderful.



enjoyed it. And I found the longer I spent doing it, the more relaxed I'd become. It became my release."

While Julie cut slivers of pastry with the spaghetti cutter on her pasta machine or wove together tagliatelle strands, she felt calmer. Her decorative designs led to book two, *The Pastry School*, out last year. *The Pastry School* includes recipes for ten types of pastry, as well as "tatty pot pie", based on the Lancashire hotpot her mum would make for her as a child when she felt ill.

Julie never plans designs, starting with a mere idea. "When I did a recent butterfly design, I just thought, 'Let's do a butterfly,' but I didn't know what it would look like or how I was going to do it. I just went with it. It's all instinct." Yet she has become expert at explaining how she works since she's been teaching. Julie's feathers consist of spaghetti strands of sweet shortcrust pastry, which she places on a feather-shaped piece of dough, angling the ends to make it look "realistic". She then transfers the whole feather to the pastry lid.

If something doesn't look right, Julie tweaks it until it does: "I don't get in a fuff. I just take a minute and go, 'Okay, I'll change that.'" Burnt edges or sunken middles rarely happen under her watch. "I know my pastry and I know how it bakes," she says. "You have to be as attentive in the baking as you are in the making. Once a pie is in the oven, I'm in and out of the oven all the time. It always comes out well."

Inspiration comes from "everywhere". Designs might incorporate elements of mandala art, a geometric pattern common in Buddhist and Hindu art, or chakra symbols (Julie is into reiki). Others have a loose nature theme. Julie's feather designs came from the idea that finding a feather after someone dies suggests an angel is near. Julie found four after her mum died in October 2019: "It was bizarre: it was like Mam was guiding me." Her wisteria design was inspired not by gardening exploits - "I'm not green-fingered" - but by a skirt made by Zimmermann, an Australian fashion house. She does, however, love flowers.

Designs take 20 minutes to two hours. By two hours, even Julie, who admits she has "real patience for this kind of thing", has had enough: "I can remember plaiting the tops of these tiny little pies, thinking, 'Why am I doing this?' I do it because it's relaxing; I don't do it because I'm in a rush to eat. It's my artistic outlet, so I give myself time." Spending more time on a design doesn't necessarily lead to more Instagram attention. A lemon tart decorated with blueberries, which garnered 14,000 likes, took Julie under 20 minutes. Her wisteria design, which took an hour and a half, was liked "just" 6,000 times.

But Julie doesn't mind: while she values the numbers for business, she gets her enjoyment from someone eating what she has made. Contacts in a Facebook Messenger group get alerts when a pie or tart needs a home. Popularity is "nice", but she just wants to feed people. "It's not all about the design," says Julie, highlighting her more unusual recipes such as lychee and violet stuffed choux buns. "I think about what will go well together. At the end of the day, what's the point of a decorative pie if it doesn't taste nice?"

### ZOOM ON

In the early days, Julie ran supper clubs from her home. They were often sold out nine months in advance. She hopes to start them up again next year. Meanwhile, her focus is on Zoom classes,



which she began last September. The classes helped her cope with her stepdad's death the previous spring. "That interaction with people took my mind off everything," she says. Bakers dial into Julie's classes from across the world, from Delhi to Mexico City. One man was online, baking, at 5am. He had never made a pie before, but sent Julie updates after the class.

Julie has recently been signed up for book three, out next summer. "Full-on recipe testing" is in the diary for September. Before that, she will be baking with her two younger sons, Oscar, now ten, and Myles, eight. The eldest, Evan, 20, has left home. The boys love icing biscuits. Look out for their designs on Instagram.

**FOLLOW** Julie on Instagram @julie\_jonesuk. For more about her recipes and classes, see [juliejones.online](http://juliejones.online).

**OPPOSITE** Julie always ensures her tarts taste as good as they look **THIS PAGE**, **RIGHT** Oscar and Myles have picked up the baking bug

