



Recipe for success

Take seven women, mix thoroughly, add equal quantities of talent and passion and allow to prove. For one year. Finally, turn out a top-notch food and giftware store. Louise Cummings meets the inspiring co-operative behind Country Kitchen in Haslingfield.

Pictures by Warren Gunn



Left to right: Heather Scally, Shirley Sanghera, Jill Broadbent, Tessa Pleasants, Liz Galpin and Julie Robinson

The first thing that hits me isn't the delightful Farrow & Ball slate blue shop frontage (though it's really rather lovely). Nor is it the vast array of hand-crafted delights from local artists making the shelves positively groan beneath their collective weight.

No, it's the utterly intoxicating aroma of straight-from-the-oven traybakes that waft towards me as I step over the threshold of Country Kitchen. Like a homing pigeon, I take flight to the deli counter – punch drunk on the irresistible smell of rich feta cheese and spinach encased in light-as-a-feather filo pastry (that'll be the spanakopita), hearty beef and root vegetable casserole and freshly-baked sausage rolls.

"Our sausage rolls are famous," says Liz Galpin, jolting me out of my foodie haze. "We make them using wholegrain mustard from a Shepreth lady who goes under the name Mustard Mary." So, how come they're famous? "Well, the actor Neil Morrissey was filming nearby and we provided the catering. After having our sausage rolls, he declared they were the best he had ever tasted!" she smiles.

Liz is one of the 'magnificent seven' – a co-operative of like-minded ladies who a year ago decided to embark on running their own deli, jam-packed with locally-sourced produce, home-cooked dishes using tried and tested family recipes, and gorgeous giftware. Cutting down 'food miles' and providing a great community resource were top of the agenda.

The premises sit in the shadow of Haslingfield's imposing church, and are owned by Liz, an IT specialist by trade, who had previously run them as a deli but found it too challenging a task on her own. Knibbs Butchers moved in around

seven years ago and rented the store, but when they gave notice, Liz called on some friends with shared interests who, in turn, spoke to their friends and the seven shareholders were soon on board.

"We didn't just want a mediocre shop," says co-op colleague Shirley Sanghera, a former social worker and counsellor from Orwell. "We wanted something fabulous and so we discussed it for six months before we opened. We all had different ideas so we had to try to compromise. People said that seven women together would be a recipe for disaster but actually it's been our strength!"

tasty temptation

Launching Country Kitchen was a team effort with the owners, who all live a stone's throw from Haslingfield, rolling up their sleeves and getting stuck in with painting (Farrow & Ball Cook's Blue if you're wondering), floor scrubbing and generally zjooshing.

Throwing open the doors on April 6, Shirley recalls the team being understandably 'green'. "Oh God, we were hopeless," she laughs. "We could hardly operate the flipping till at the start we were so useless. But we've learnt so much and we're far more slick these days," she says proudly.

As my nose (and stomach; well, I had to TRY the food to write this piece, obviously) will attest, the home-cooking element of the business is where Country Kitchen excels. Regular specials include cottage pie, frittatas, seasonal soups, salads, pies, quiches, and a variety of picnic essentials, such as cured meats, fresh olives, sun-dried tomatoes and scrumptious cheeses.

Seeing my eyes almost popping out of my head (never a good look), two of today's chefs – fellow co-op members Tessa Pleasants and Heather Scally – are extracted from behind the delectable deli to talk me through the mouth-watering contents.

Being a vegetarian, Tessa, who lives in Horningssea, is a dab hand with an aubergine and what she can't do with a butternut squash! Well. "I've made a lovely fresh aubergine, roasted tomato and feta salad, which is nice and colourful," she tells me, as we peer through the glass, "and there's a macaroni cheese made with broccoli and leeks, a vegetarian lasagne and roasted vegetable pesto pasta. I enjoy being able to make what I feel like and I get such enjoyment from cooking. We had this lovely old guy come in the other day and I'd made a veggie moussaka with puy lentils. He was so thrilled with it, he came back again the next day for another portion!" she smiles.

With a holiday home in Kefalonia, Tessa brings a definite Greek influence to Country Kitchen; her spanakopita is in demand, and when she flies home from Greece she fills her suitcase with oranges, which she then uses to make a zesty marmalade, sold in the shop. "It's divine; just like tasting sunshine," she enthuses.

Fellow cook Heather, from Harlton, conjures up wonderful meat dishes; on the menu today is a hearty cottage pie and a beef and root vegetable casserole, sure to go down a treat looking at the moody sky and driving rain. "I think people much prefer to eat home-cooked food but don't always have the time to do it themselves. Sometimes we get customers in for lunch, then they call back in again on their way home from work to pick up dinner too!"





The shop's other vegetarian chef Jill Broadbent is equally passionate about creating new recipes, though admits they can't always be palate-pleasers. "I do like finding new and adventurous dishes. But sometimes they bomb!" she laughs. "Like I once did a courgette and bread soup. It was 'to die for', but the customers looked at me like I had four heads when I told them about it," says Jill, who is a hairdresser and beauty therapist from Foxton.

"We bought it because we knew it was full of good stuff!" Shirley adds, pledging solidarity.

Tearing me away from the deli counter, Liz takes me on a tour of the shop, and the commitment to local produce is immediately apparent. The crisps are courtesy of Corkers, Little Downham; award-winning meat pies come from Huntingdon's The Brampton Pie Company; chocolatey treats from Barrington's Chocolicious Cakes; samosas from Cambridge-based Inder's Kitchen; simply divine biscotti (yes, I tried those too) from Tom's Cakes of Somersham; bottled beers from Harston's Black Bar Brewery; fruits, ciders and juice from Cam Valley Orchards of Meldreth; a range of pantry staples from Shire Foods in Downham Market and daily vegetable deliveries from Fieldgate Nurseries of Meldreth. You get the idea.

"Our cakes come from an amazing lady called Corinne who runs a French patisserie in Cambridge called Gourmandises," Liz enthuses. "She makes the most stunning cakes and



passion fruit curd. We always look forward to her visits each week!"

As with the edible treats, much of the giftware, including jewellery, cards and wrapping paper, comes from craftspeople that live in and around Cambridgeshire. Brightly-coloured beads from Tom Foolery Costume Jewellery in Huntingdon immediately spark my magpie-reflex, as do some vibrant hand-blown glass heart pendants by Foxton jeweller Caroline Smith. Illustrations by Cambridge-based Rachel Thompson grace beautiful greetings cards, and there are mugs and notepads bearing the lively collages of fellow city artist Emma Bennett.

Jennie says:

"I love the atmosphere in the shop. I think that's due to working with the other ladies, who are great fun, and the wonderful customers that come in. It's amazing to think that CK will be a year old at the beginning of April."

Living just around the corner, it's no surprise to see artist Ophelia Redpath's wonderfully whimsical designs on sale in Country Kitchen, alongside quirky accessories made from recycled bags and inner tubes by Cambridge-based Qhere. "We're really passionate about finding local suppliers," Jill says. "That part of the job is a lot of fun."

Fun is certainly the word I'd use for the atmosphere within the shop; during my visit on a Friday afternoon there's a feeling of a happy ship with staff and customers interacting like old friends. "You do build up such a rapport with customers," Jill adds. "And because between us we only do two shifts a week, it keeps us all

feeling fresh about the business."

The other two members of the co-operative are interior designer Jennie Ward, who lives in the village, and Morven Mitchell, from Foxton, a publicity manager in London, who devises branding and publicity for Country Kitchen. There are also a couple of extra staff who work in the store including Julie Robinson, who tells me that next on the agenda is transforming a room downstairs into a showroom for more gifts and fairtrade goodies.

"We're definitely looking to grow the business and increase footfall," Liz adds, explaining that a click and collect service will be available soon, so customers can go online to save a portion of the dish of the day, then pick it up at a convenient time. "We feel happy with the way the business is evolving. It's our first birthday on April 6 and I continue to be absolutely amazed at how well it's going and how much of a team we've become," she smiles.

"We are a bit of a dream-team," Heather agrees. "We've been together a year and we haven't fallen out yet! That's pretty impressive."

The magnificent seven pack me off home with one of their 'famous' sausage rolls. And as I devour it (as soon as I get in my car, so it doesn't go cold, you understand), I can't help thinking that Neil Morrissey's eulogising was spot on.



• Country Kitchen is at 21 Church Street, Haslingfield, and is open 9am-6pm Monday to Friday, and 9am-4pm on Saturdays. Call 07954 669874, visit ckhaslingfield.com and find on Twitter at [@ckhaslingfield](https://twitter.com/ckhaslingfield).