

Mary Berry with husband Paul enjoying the sunshine at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show

“You never know what’s round the corner”

Fame may have come late for the *Bake Off* star, but she’s determined to make the most of it

SHE MAY have published her first cookbook in 1970, and been on and off our television screens ever since, but Mary Berry had to wait until the age of 75 to be well and truly taken to the nation’s hearts.

This kindly, grandmotherly figure, who betrays the merest hint of steel behind those piercing blue eyes, has been a recipe tester, cookery editor, TV presenter and recipe book writer – more than 70 at the last count – but is, of course, now most celebrated for her double-act with Paul Hollywood on *The Great British Bake Off*, the seventh series of which begins later this month.

There has, perhaps, never been a better example of a show being perfectly fitted for the times. Launched amidst the new austerity, it appealed to something deep in the British psyche – a willingness to ‘make do’ in hard times, to celebrate the willing if inept amateur, and, perhaps most importantly to draw the viewer in and

would enjoy eating it even if you couldn’t sell it in your shop.’ The taste is the most important thing.”

Although TV stardom came late for Mary, for decades she had been regarded as a champion of simple home cooking. “People nowadays know me for baking, but really I am about all round family meals,” she told the *Yorkshire Post*. “I want to get people sitting around a table eating good, honest food.”

When she was a child, growing up in Bath, Mary contracted polio and spent three months in hospital, resulting in her having a twisted spine, a weaker left hand and thinner left arm.

The experience left its mark, giving Mary resilience and a determination to make the most of whatever opportunities life should offer her.

By her own admission Mary did not shine at school, Bath High, but early on discovered a love for cookery, an interest engendered by her teacher, the

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make them feel ‘I could do that’. As Mary explained to *The Guardian*: “*Bake off* is not a teaching programme, but people learn from it. Viewers can watch the contestants doing challenges and see how people like themselves – amateurs – cope.

“The aim is not to make people unhappy, or cry. It’s all very peaceful and we want them to do well, and if they’re doing it incorrectly then we can have a chat to them, perhaps at the end, after they’ve finished filming, and say: ‘If you do it like this...’”

Mary’s judging double-act with Paul Hollywood is an important part of the show’s appeal, with Hollywood sometimes playing the role of an errant son-in-law. They frequently disagree, with Mary often appearing to be more sympathetic to the amateur bakers, and during one show it took them five hours to reach a decision.

“The aim is to get the right decision in the end,” Mary insists. “I’ll say to Paul: ‘Those tasted wonderful, the 12th one was a bit lopsided but it is home baking and I

appropriately named Miss Date. When Mary left school, she was full of dreams of moving to London (something her parents would not permit until she turned 21 – this was the early Fifties after all).

Instead, she enrolled at the Bath College of Domestic Science before, at the age of 22, taking a job at the Dutch Dairy Bureau while taking City & Guilds courses in the evenings. A period in Paris studying at the renowned Le Cordon Bleu school was then followed by a number of different jobs, including a spell as a recipe tester.

“I worked in a fishmongers, in a butchers, I worked at London Airport making canapés... I know what I’m doing,” she recalled. This single-minded focus on her career left little time for anything else in Mary’s life, but she eventually married at the age of 31. “It was very late at the time,” she says, “but now people do that, don’t they?”

Mary was cookery editor at *Ideal Home* magazine when she had the first of her

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Mary pictured with her children, from left, William, Annabel and Thomas, in 1975



unfazed by her new-found celebrity. “People are immensely nice. They’ll tap me on the shoulder and say, ‘Oh, I make your pear frangipane,’ or, ‘I always do your lemon drizzle cake.’ I don’t think they’ve got anything nasty to say about me because I’m not made that way.

“I’ve stayed with my family, I’ve lived in the same (Buckinghamshire) village for 40 years and I’ve always had the same work attitude. Once you find a track that you want to follow, you really work at it. I love teaching, whether it’s through books, TV or demonstrations. If you can enthuse other people to do what you enjoy, it’s hugely rewarding.”

She’s also become something of a fashion icon for her generation, and in 2014 was listed as one of the 50 best-dressed over 50s by a national newspaper. “People are very nice, they seem to like what I wear,” she says. “I like to wear things that suit me for my age. I don’t want to wear anything too short or low cut. I do think people tend to dress a bit too young sometimes.”

So what’s the secret of her seemingly boundless energy and drive?

“I am very fortunate to be fit and healthy at my age. A lot of my peers aren’t and so I do feel lucky. I put it down to good genes (her mother, Marjorie, lived to the age of 105), a healthy diet and a little bit of exercise. I don’t go to the gym, but I do play tennis.”

And if you think Mary must be packing on the pounds tasting all those cakes for *Bake Off* then think again.

“I eat a good portion all the way through the *Bake Off*, because they’ve taken the trouble to make something and they want to see me have a proper slice. The next day I’m pretty careful though. I try to eat lots of salads and healthy foods, but cakes are healthy, too, you just eat a thin slice. There’s a lot of cheer in a cake.”

Mary’s preference, though, is for savoury rather than sweet. “I like warming and snacky things — toasted

sandwiches, pizzas with very little bottom and an awful lot of top, watercress and celery soup. I could easily eat more than I do, but I don’t really like the consequences. If you keep yourself fit and trim, you can enjoy life much more.”

And there’s a lot to enjoy in Mary’s life right now.

“I think I have taken every opportunity that’s come my way, even if it wasn’t always the exact thing I wanted to do. You never know what’s round the corner.”



Right: Mary with *Bake Off* co-star Paul Hollywood and, below, testing crisps in 1977



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when the couple should be thinking of taking life easy, he seems to have adapted remarkably well to the demands of Mary’s late-blossoming television career.

“I’m exceedingly busy right now and my husband totally understands.

“You’ve got to have trust and understanding. And when we’re together, we enjoy it even more,” Mary said.

For all her recent success Mary’s life has not always been plain sailing. Her son, William, died in a car crash in 1989, aged just 19, but with the passing years Mary came to accept his death, as much as any parent ever can.

“There are tragedies in many families and, sadly, we lost William,” she told *The Guardian*. “It makes the rest of the family closer, but he’s missed enormously. I dote on all my children, my dogs and everything else. He’s not coming back, so

you’ve got to get on with it.” She has two other children, Thomas and Annabel, and a clutch of grandchildren, who she dotes on. “We make all sorts of different things together. They get to choose what we make. Often it’s something like homemade jam. They just love it.”

Family get-togethers are a particular joy for Mary. “I’m very keen on the family getting together around the table because you learn so much of what’s going on.

“With a full tummy, they begin to talk to you. People now have busy lives, but once or twice a week it’s lovely to sit all around together. I’ve kept that going throughout my family life.”

That precious family time has been necessarily reduced by Mary’s commitments to *Bake Off* and her latest series, *Absolute Favourites*, but at the age of 81 she shows no signs of retiring just yet, and she completely

three children, and went back to work five weeks after giving birth.

“They didn’t have maternity leave then. Your job wasn’t kept open for you: you were expected to have a nice little leaving party and go,” she said.

“I never thought I’d get back if I took time off. As soon as I had a day off I’d have other people’s children round, and I’d make pizzas with them, giving them little bowls to make their own toppings. In those days you didn’t take children off to Legoland; you made your entertainment at home.”

When the children were growing up Mary also had to balance the demands of motherhood with her first television series, *Afternoon Plus*, with Judith Chalmers.

“I was freelance, which was a bit more flexible, but the children had to be taken to school and fetched. You permanently felt guilty. But I would always make sure I was there at school events and home to cook supper in the evenings.”

She and husband Paul, a retired antiquarian bookseller, celebrated their golden wedding this year and, at a time