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# Lessons from the cookery queen

**I**HAVE never been very good at baking. While I'm quite capable of rustling up tasty dinners and satisfying lunches, the ability to produce a light, fluffy Victoria sponge or sumptuous rather than soggy biscuits seems to elude me.

My mother claims it is genetic as she has never been able to produce a cake that actually rises above the edges of the tin.

I once made brownies so dry that it became a challenge for my friend Steve and I to eat a whole one. We did manage it but we both had to drink a pint of water as we did so because the brownie sucked all the moisture from our mouths, making it almost impossible to swallow.

Although I accept I am useless at baking I've never quite given up trying, which has resulted in many innervated sponges being scraped into the bin. However, as I am getting married next month I feel I must step up to the mixing bowl and fulfil my wifely duties of being able to whip up a perfect cake at a moment's notice or at least create something edible so I can feed my in-laws when they visit.

So who better to turn to but Marguerite Patten OBE, the doyenne of baking who presented her first television cookery programme on the BBC back in 1947. Surely if she could make delicious cakes on war rations and help several generations to achieve success in the kitchen, she can teach me to bake?

At the age of 94 Marguerite is as dedicated to the art of cake making as ever. While her years prevent her from baking as much as she would like, she still provides her close family with birthday cakes.

"Everyone loves my chocolate and strawberry cake," she says, tucking the recipe into my hand. However, she says her favourite is actually a fruit cake.

"I like them rich and packed with fruit although my late husband Bob preferred just a few currants and lots of cake. We never agreed."

Marguerite, who has sold 17million copies of her 170 cookery books, believes the nation's rekindled love of afternoon tea has made baking popular again. "There are lots of lovely hotels that serve an afternoon tea and when people go and enjoy them they think 'I could do this' so they go home and bake."

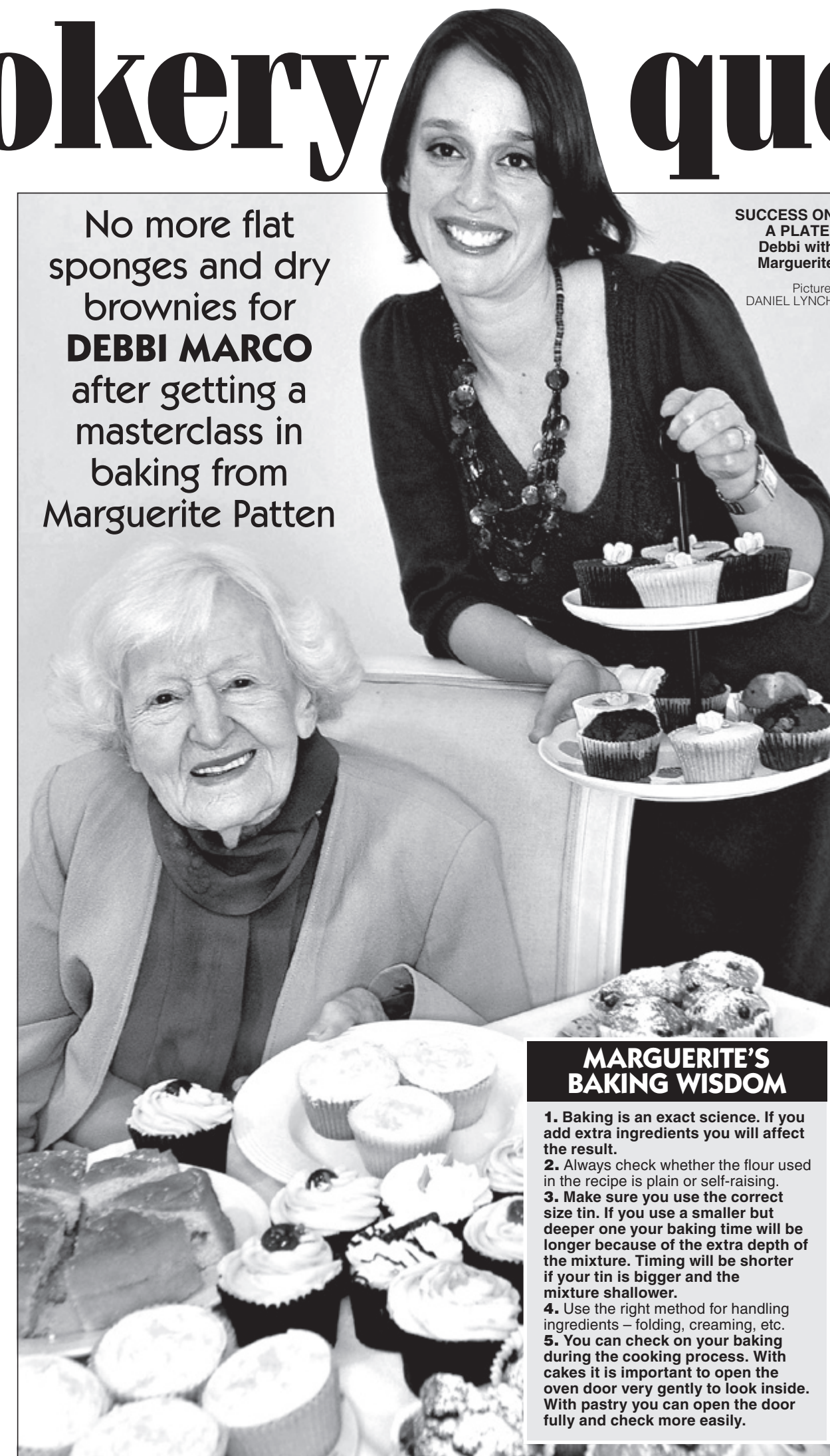
There are many benefits to hosting afternoon tea rather than a dinner party, Marguerite tells me. The main one is that all the preparation can be done beforehand so you can sit down with your guests and enjoy the fruits, or cakes, of your labour.

"If I were hosting afternoon tea I would serve delicate

No more flat sponges and dry brownies for **DEBBI MARCO** after getting a masterclass in baking from Marguerite Patten

**SUCCESS ON A PLATE:** Debbi with Marguerite

Picture: DANIEL LYNCH



little sandwiches filled with salmon paté or cream cheese, beautifully presented. Then I would make scones served with whipped cream and jam, along with a very good fruit cake cut into small pieces plus a selection of cupcakes," she explains.

Cupcakes have had a resurgence, with people even choosing them in place of a traditional wedding cake. "They have been around for decades," says Marguerite. "However, in the past we would never have dreamed of serving them to adults as they were cakes you would give children. Now they've stepped up and are very adult."

The secret to perfect cupcakes, says Marguerite, is to make them plain but top them with different flavoured icing. "They're easy and fast to make so you get to enjoy your results very quickly. It also makes them perfect for children to cook."

**S**O WHAT has been going wrong with all my attempts at baking? I list my various unpalatable results to Marguerite. She suggests I am over-beating my mixture when it comes to the flour-adding stage.

"Always fold in the flour with gentle movements and beat your eggs separately," she advises. "Also make sure your oven isn't at the wrong temperature. Too cool and your cake won't rise, too hot and the outside sets before the middle has cooked."

Altering ingredients also makes a difference. When I admit to sometimes using wholemeal flour instead of white or cutting down on sugar, Marguerite admonishes me.

"Baking is an exact science. It's not like a soup or a stew where you can add things as you go along. Wholemeal flour absorbs more liquid so you must adjust the amount, while sugar makes a cake nice and light. "Save sugar somewhere else, not in your cakes," she says. Under Marguerite's watchful eye I attempt to make some lemon cupcakes and she even gives me a round of applause when I make a special effort to fold my flour gently.

Amazingly, they rise in the oven and are light and fluffy, not the dry, hard discs I usually produce. Marguerite promises to send me a foolproof recipe for chocolate brownies and after today's success it's got me thinking, maybe I can bake a tasty batch after all.

● Marguerite Patten is helping Stork spread celebrate 90 years of home baking.

## MARGUERITE'S BAKING WISDOM

1. Baking is an exact science. If you add extra ingredients you will affect the result.
2. Always check whether the flour used in the recipe is plain or self-raising.
3. Make sure you use the correct size tin. If you use a smaller but deeper one your baking time will be longer because of the extra depth of the mixture. Timing will be shorter if your tin is bigger and the mixture shallower.
4. Use the right method for handling ingredients – folding, creaming, etc.
5. You can check on your baking during the cooking process. With cakes it is important to open the oven door very gently to look inside. With pastry you can open the door fully and check more easily.