

Let them eat cake!

Indulge in delicate sandwiches, delicious sponges and a generous helping of chocolate. Baker Claire Ptak invites you to the perfect Easter tea party

Styling Mary Norden **Recipes** Claire Ptak

Interview Lola Borg **Photographs** Penny Wincer



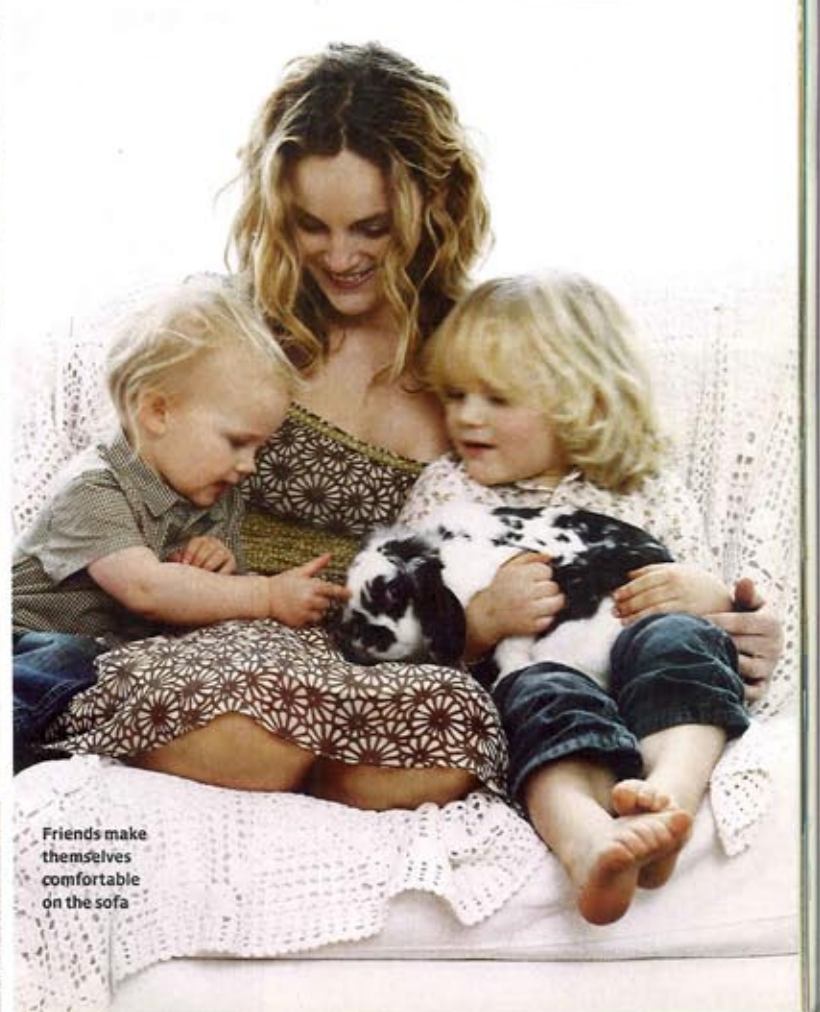
FROM LEFT:
Coconut cream
cake, fully iced –
see page 243 for
recipe; lemon
poppy seed cake
– see page 241
for recipe



Claire prepares the table for her guests' arrival



Serrano ham sandwiches with Manchego cheese and quince paste - see page 244 for recipe



Friends make themselves comfortable on the sofa



Mini iced cupcakes, from Violet, Claire's cake company



Coconut cream cake (not all iced) - see page 243 for recipe



Cream scones with raspberry jam - see page 244 for recipe



Flourless chocolate cake with gold leaf - see page 241 for recipe

started baking in my mother's kitchen, with my grandmother, when I was little.

Where I grew up, in Northern California, near San Francisco, was a really sweet little, rural town. We had an apple tree in the garden and there were wild blackberries everywhere, so we'd make apple and blackberry pies.

I'm on my stall, Violet Cakes, in Broadway Market in Hackney, every Saturday. My cupcakes are the most popular things I sell. Coconut was the original flavour, but now I do nine. I sell them in boxes, with one of each flavour (£6 per box). Is it hard work on the stall? Oh yes, especially when it's cold outside.

I'm not interested in making a strawberry tart in January. I only make cakes using ingredients that are seasonal and organic.

I got into cooking later in life, and baking only a few years ago. It wasn't until I was working at Chez Panisse (in Berkeley, California), when I was 27, that I started to get interested in all sorts of food. The owner, Alice Waters, has been credited with founding Californian Cuisine and was the first to talk about organic, seasonal, sustainable food. I didn't have any formal training before that – I just loved to bake.

I went to film school, because I thought that baking was anti-feminist! I have friends who are very successful female chefs and they say, 'I never wanted to do pastry, because that's always where people assumed I'd be.' But now I think, 'Relax and do it – or, if you don't want to do it, then buy it from my stall!'

Once you've worked at Chez Panisse, you don't want to work anywhere else. It's serene and calm, with classical music playing. It's all wood, brick and copper, so it's like working in a home kitchen. When I came back to the UK, I decided to do my own thing, and that's when I started my stall.

When I married my husband, Damian, we didn't have a wedding cake. We got married just before I moved here, two and a half years ago, and we had a quick city-hall job. He's English and he's wonderful. We met in California nine years ago, but we had three years apart, when he was studying in the UK and I was in California. We would have these really great weekends in New York.



I love to bake – my cupcakes are the most popular things I sell

With the cup cakes, the icing changes with the seasons. We always do caramel, chocolate and vanilla, but we'll do other fruits, as they're in season, like rhubarb. For Easter, we do strawberry and violet syrup and, in winter, it will be citrus – orange, lemon and clementine.

People are intimidated by cakes. They'll come up to me at parties or at my stall and say, 'My cakes fall', or 'I can't get the pastry flaky enough or the custard wobbly enough.' They get very shy about baking, because they

think it's a science, rather than with cooking, where, if you mess up, you can add a little more salt or lemon juice and fix it. But you can do a lot of that with baking, as well.

A lot of men ask me questions about baking. I have one customer who is obsessed with my ginger cake, and always asks me loads of questions. Do I tell him how to make it? Sure! Recipes are to be shared.

If there's one tip I'd give someone about baking, it's, 'Start with the best ingredients.' It's impossible to make something delicious out of poor ingredients. Using ingredients that are produced in an ethical way, of that season, of that moment, will make a huge difference. Visit violetcakes.com. Turn the page for Claire's afternoon-tea recipes.