



DARJEELING'S CAKE LADY

WHEN NEW ZEALANDER HELLY KING MOVED TO INDIA AND COMBINED HER FAVOURITE CAKE RECIPES FROM HOME WITH LOCAL FRUITS AND SPICES, SHE BECAME AN UNEXPECTED LOCAL SENSATION. MEET THE DARJEELING CAKE LADY.

High among the Himalayan foothills in the legendary Indian tea area of Darjeeling, seven-year-old Prabin skips across the street, chasing the scent of chocolate. "Cake lady, cake lady," he calls out, as he knocks wildly on a peeling green door.

Helly King, 35, answers, welcoming inside her young visitor who is keen to see and sample the morning's exotic delights. "Cake as we know it is a very odd concept in this part of the world, let alone the flavour of real cocoa," says Helly, explaining his enthusiasm.

To Prabin's delight, Helly has been busy icing a special order – a deluxe chocolate birthday cake for the Governor of West Bengal, now ready for delivery to the palace. It sits elevated among a dozen other Cake Lady treats, all generously laced with glorious Himalayan fruits, nuts, and spices.

The setting may be a world away from Helly's previous life in New Zealand, but the freshly baked aroma certainly isn't. Originally a cafe owner in Wellington, Helly then moved on to manage high-end events in Sydney before she jumped on a plane in late 2008, intending to take a few months off to backpack around Asia.

Arriving in Darjeeling proved a revelation though, leaving her "instantly intoxicated by the peace of the place" and determined to find a way to stay. "It took me a while to convince Mum that I didn't just have altitude sickness," she says laughing.

Renting a small house with jaw-dropping views and two temperamental ovens, Helly began baking obsessively with the local

organic produce, while pondering her options. Word got out about the 'cake lady' and her now-thriving business was born (and named) almost by accident. "I started supplying a few local cafes by request, and from that, I had locals and travellers dropping by at all hours, begging for cake," she says. "Then, once I was able to source real cocoa, things went crazy."

Before long, Helly had employed a kitchen assistant and a delivery runner. "Now we bake around 20 to 30 full-sized cakes a day, as well as a few dozen muffins and cookies," she says, "but orders can double during festival time."

The quirks of life in such a culturally diverse, remote location guarantee that business rarely runs smoothly, but true disasters are few thanks to Helly's creative approach. "When the power goes off, which is regularly, we go into rum-ball mode," she says. "They're made from half-baked deluxe chocolate cake... luckily our customers love them!"

While cocoa creations are Cake Lady's number-one seller, Helly's organic lemon syrup sponge, cashew toffee muffins and carrot chai cake (with Darjeeling tea leaves and black pepper) are just a few of her other menu items that have everyone from the locals to travel website Trip Advisor talking.

With her cakey goodness continuing to sweep Darjeeling and beyond, Helly admits that a Cake Lady Cafe looks wonderfully inevitable – and she has promised Prabin that if and when it opens, he'll be the first one through the door. *Cake Lady*, +91 9 547 457 734.