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## "I'm interested in how food connects people. It's not just about cooking or eating; it's about health, family, seasons & generations"

*Emma J Page meets baker and doula Amber Rose*

**F**ew food lovers could fail to notice the not-so-quiet revolution going on in the baking world. A plethora of TV shows, new bakery stores, cookery books and a national obsession with homemade cakes has made it clear that baking is firmly back on the agenda. Treasured family recipes have been unearthed, dusted down and given pride of place in the kitchen, as the ritual, considered deeply old-fashioned only 20 years ago, undergoes a renaissance. And amid the fanfare, one New Zealand-born baker has been quietly garnering praise for her fresh approach.

Amber Rose is a self-taught cook whose wholesome, rustic cakes eschew refined sugar and processed flour in favour of ancient grains such as buckwheat, spelt and chestnut, while fruit and honey provide natural sweetness. It's a formula that's already caught the eye of London's health-aware celebrity circle, including Sadie Frost, Kate Moss and Gwyneth Paltrow. But Amber, 33, is somewhat underwhelmed by the fuss. "To me, it's not really about finding a new way to »





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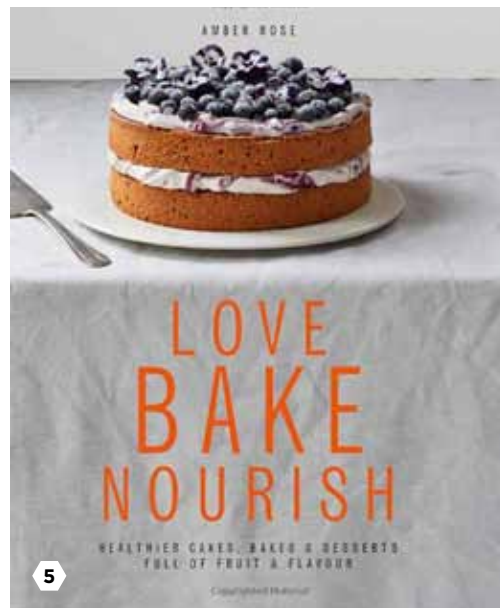
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6 A cake Amber made when she was just eight years old! Decorated with flowers from their garden and candles made by her mother and Amber from beeswax from their own beehives.  
 7 Digging beetroot.  
 8 Amber has also worked as a personal chef for Jude Law and Sadie Frost.



*“As a FAMILY, we were eating organically long before it was FASHIONABLE. We tried to be as SELF-SUFFICIENT as possible”*



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9 “I used to harvest calendula flowers to make ointment, and tincture from echinacea. So when I left school I studied natural medicine and Swedish massage,” says Amber.



**AMBER'S CAREER PATH**  
 From teacher to baker: the Rose CV

1998-1999 - Studied natural medicine and Swedish massage.  
 2000 - Moved to Melbourne and took up post at Babka bakery.  
 2002 - Taught English in China and pursued a brief career in acting.  
 2003 - Moved to London to work as a personal chef to Sadie Frost and Jude Law.  
 2006 - Trained as a doula.  
 2010 - Began food styling for TV, editorial and books, including [www.goop.com](http://www.goop.com) and *The Telegraph*.  
 2013 - Published first cookery book.  
 Currently - Freelance food stylist and baker.

bake – instead it's going back to long-held traditions and reminding people that pre-industrialisation these were the ingredients we cooked with," she says of her new collection of recipes, aptly titled *Love Bake Nourish*. "I prefer to bake in a way that allows the natural flavours to come through, rather than relying on refined sugar, which is really just an enhancer."

A rural upbringing in Northland, an hour north of Auckland, is responsible for Amber's passion for food. Her mother, Kay Baxter, was a pioneer of organic, sustainable agriculture and taught Amber and her three brothers the value of eating seasonally. "She's a great role model," reflects Amber. "She took it upon herself to save the country's entire heritage seed base, which includes about 800 flower, vegetable and fruit seeds. It's a lifetime's work." Amber's parents separated when she was a baby; her father is a chef and her stepfather is a soil scientist. "As a family, we were eating organically long before it was fashionable," she says. "We tried to be as self-sufficient as possible."

#### BORN FREE

Growing up among 400 acres of land gave Amber free rein to experiment and plenty of opportunity to plunder the orchard. "Most of my memories relate to food," she concedes. "As a child, I had this desire to pluck the fruit just before it was ripe. If we were hungry, we didn't open the fridge – we walked into the garden and picked an orange, or paired a Genovese basil leaf with a fresh yellow heirloom cherry tomato."

From a young age, Amber was making large batches of drop scones courtesy of her mother's old cookbooks. "My mother made bread, but she wasn't really into baking. That was something I picked up by myself," she says. "I do remember that she would burn things quite a bit. The Maori have a native way of cooking, called *hangi*, which involves digging deep pits and building a fire at the bottom, before letting the flames die down so that the food can be placed on the embers. More than once I remember us joking that it was another night of eating *hangi*-style, because her offering was rather charred!" But despite her growing love of baking, Amber knew early on that cheffing wasn't her style. "I definitely didn't want to follow in my father's footsteps. The hours are terrible and it's a stressful job."

Instead, Amber experimented with the spoils of the land. "I used to harvest calendula flowers to make ointment, and tincture from echinacea. So when I left school I studied natural medicine and Swedish massage." With such a non-conformist childhood, did she ever feel the pressure to simply blend in? "I knew our family was different, but I didn't mind that. I did the usual teenage wayward stuff, but I've always

been interested in the lessons my mum had to pass down. Now, I look at my own eight-year-old son, Oli, and see that he's very good at doing his own thing, just as I was."

#### RISING STAR

But it's a long way from a small village near Auckland to the smart dining tables of London's Primrose Hill, so how did Amber make a serious dent on the baking scene? Her first professional foray was making bread and pastries at Melbourne's renowned Babka bakery, which provided a two-year training ground and allowed her, she says, to refine her skills while retaining her rustic approach. But wanderlust called and her next trip was to China, where she taught English and took up small acting roles on screen. "If you were tall and blonde and looked a certain way, you stood out," she says of her brief stint on TV, where she was dubbed in Chinese. "It was a moment in my life which was great fun, but I never wanted to make a career out of playing someone else."

It wasn't until she received a call from a friend asking her if she was interested in being a personal chef to Sadie Frost and Jude Law that Amber's career started to gain pace. It was a bold move to jump on a plane and head for a new life overseas, never having met her prospective employers. "I'm one of those people who throws themselves in at the deep end,"

*"I'm one of those PEOPLE who throws THEMSELVES in at the deep end. It's a case of act now, THINK later"*

says Amber. "It's a case of act now, think later." Soon she was organising parties for the couple's three children and gathering their friends around the dining table. "I love bringing people together and feeding them. It was a very busy household and Sadie totally got my ethos," says Amber. "I'm interested in how food connects people. It's not just about cooking or eating; it's about health, family, seasons and generations. I try to have a holistic approach."

Before she knew it, celebrity friends were asking for her recipes, especially for her nutritious cakes, puddings and compotes. But as we chat over an early evening glass of wine, it's clear that Amber doesn't subscribe to the national preoccupation with celebrity status. "I don't care who you are, I care *how* you are," she emphasises. "Working for Sadie and Jude was a wonderful introduction to London, and I've made some great friends while living here. But my mother



1 Amber's strawberry pavlova from her book *Love Bake Nourish* perfectly illustrates her natural baking ethos. 2 The photos in the book are by Ali Allen, with Amber using her food styling talents to create inspiring images.



is fairly well known for her work back home, so I'm used to seeing someone being put in a public context."

#### THE NEED TO NOURISH

Life hasn't all been plain sailing, though. At 25, Amber became a single mother to Oli. "I wasn't in the best situation when I had him, and there were times when it was quite tough, especially postnatally," she reflects. "It was still a wonderful experience, but it could have been smoother. It made me realise that you have to have the right support around you." So Amber trained as a doula, providing pre- and postnatal support to expectant and new mothers. "So much emphasis is placed on birth, but what happens afterwards and how you feed yourself is just as important," she says. Though she concentrates largely on food writing and styling now, Amber sees these disparate strands of her career as part of a bigger picture. "Being trained as a masseuse and a doula and being a self-taught cook each contributes to that sense of nurturing the whole, which is very much what I stand for."

But with her family thousands of miles away, who nurtures her? "My girlfriends act as mum, sibling and

best friend rolled into one," she says. Home, in West London, is a favourite place to be inspired and relax. Filled with treasures from her travels, including Indian tapestries, Moroccan bowls and Chinese art, it's here that she refines her recipes, bakes for Oli and experiments into the early hours. "I don't even have a TV. I quite often start baking bread at 10pm, forgetting that it needs an hour to rise, and end up not getting into bed until 1am." On her rare days off, she'll often hunt for treasures on nearby Portobello Road. "I love nothing more than rummaging in flea markets and unearthing old plates and bowls."

Now that baking is back in the ascendant, Amber is making it her business to emphasise the importance of good-quality ingredients. "Baking has a significant part to play in these economically challenging times," she says. "People want to find inexpensive ways of treating themselves. Using age-old, nourishing ingredients is a way of reintroducing family values."

With plans to write a second book and projects in the pipeline that will enable her to return to her beloved homeland more regularly, it's clear that this is one cook who has found a way to have her cake and eat it too. S