



Country homes

Sister act

At Narborough Hall in Norfolk, two young girls are enchanting visitors with tea and homemade cakes. Their wonderful café offers a certain cure for any cynic who thinks some things are just too good to be true

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Produce in Narborough Hall's Victorian kitchen garden, above right, is inspected and gathered by Mermaid, opposite, before being put to use in her baking, top

A

line of faded, spotty bunting flickers in the breeze. Sandy, a shaggy white retriever, lolls in the shade, ignoring the bumblebees bobbing and buzzing half-heartedly above his head. There are few other signs of life outside the little café on this hazy August morning; a glass of Moroccan mint tea and an inviting slice of cream sponge sit on a small wooden table waiting to be consumed, but there is no one around yet. Welcome to The Perfect Spot.

This idyllic tearoom can be found in the grounds of Narborough Hall, a private country home and art gallery in Norfolk surrounded by woods, lakes and parkland. Narborough's café is run not, as you might expect, by rosy-cheeked tea ladies or one of those City-high-fliers turned country-yummy-mummy so beloved of the

Sunday supplements, but by a talented, dedicated 12-year-old girl and her seven-year-old sister. Meet Fen Sandelson, chef-patron of The Perfect Spot. Fen, the elder sister, is in Narborough's huge, sunny jumble of a kitchen, icing a batch of fairy cakes. On top of each dainty cake, she confidently places a sprig of her namesake fennel. "I really love cooking and baking – I want to be a chef when I'm older," she beams. "It was my idea to open the café and I made up the name, The Perfect Spot, because it is." Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Fen's idea is that the café's customers don't pay: the food and drinks are free. Instead visitors are encouraged to leave a donation for Fen and Mermaid's chosen charity, the Fairyland Trust. This organisation aims to inspire and engage children and families in wildlife conservation through workshops and fairs, some of which are held at

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Narborough. The girls also share the proceeds with local charities, including the nearby church.

Mermaid is standing on a chair on the other side of the kitchen island, taking charge of her signature dish – the baby teas. Served on dolls' china, these are for Narborough's junior visitors. Mermaid pokes out her tongue in concentration as she adds pink rosebuds to the chocolate icing.

"I like serving in the café, but my favourite bit is making the cakes," she says shyly.

Fen is clearly in charge of proceedings, but she is ably assisted and supervised by proud mum Joanne, who is currently slathering a sponge in dark chocolate sauce. It's clear where the girls get their precocious cooking talents. Joanne, an artist and the wife of gallery-owner Robert Sandelson, is an accomplished baker and many of the recipes she's taught her daughters have been passed down from her side of the family. The counter is already lined with an array of mouthwatering confections: carrot cakes, blackberry crumble muffins, double chocolate brownies, and a stunning fruit sponge made by Fen and filled with juicy strawberries and blueberries. Joanne feels strongly about using the best organic ingredients – the dark chocolate is Green & Black's; the eggs are mostly from the hens kept by Bob, Narborough's head gardener.

Indeed, it is from the house's restored Victorian kitchen garden that the trio source many of their ingredients, and their baking inspiration.

"This morning I was inspired by hollyhocks, so I've made this dark chocolate and hollyhock cake," says Joanne. "We don't always know what we're going to make in advance; it depends what's in season and what looks beautiful." It's not just the plush, velvety hollyhocks that caught the bakers' eyes today: the carrots in the cake, the fennel and rosebuds on top of Fen's fairy cakes have all been picked this morning. The large, walled garden is home to almost every fruit, vegetable and herb you can care to think of – apples, artichokes and angelica; courgettes, cauliflowers and carrots. In the autumn there will be milky almonds and hazelnuts, but right now it's berry season and what little counter space there is that's not occupied by cakes is taken up by baskets

groaning with ripe strawberries, blackberries, raspberries and jewel-like redcurrants.

It's nearly time for The Perfect Spot to open for the afternoon, so Fen and Mermaid start to take this morning's creations through to the café.

"Of course, we have to try the cakes beforehand, just to make sure they're OK," says Fen, with a grin. Once the cakes safely reach the café's small kitchen, it's time to start brewing the tea.

When the family moved to Narborough in 2003, these low-lying stone buildings were dusty, disused agricultural offices and, before that, cobblers' cottages. The buildings were converted in 2006 and now it's hard to imagine The Perfect Spot as anything other than a tearoom. Joanne pours a pot of mint tea as the first visitors arrive and Fen runs into the parlour to welcome them and take their order. The two old ladies are regulars and ask for Fen's perennially popular fruit sponge. Back in the kitchen, Joanne cuts two generous portions and hands them to Mermaid to be taken out.

The girls, who always wear spotty clothes and trademark pinnies for service, like everything at The Perfect Spot to be either spotty, to reflect the café's name, or floral, as Joanne is a collector flower-patterned crockery. "It's now got to the point where some of our customers bring me pieces of flowery china," she says, "so we add them to the collection, too."

The café, deserted and sleepy less than an hour ago, is now full and buzzing. Fen is pleased – her fruit sponge is proving the hit of the day, followed closely by the sinful dark chocolate and hollyhock cake. None of the elegant cakes taken into the parlour would look out of place in a posh London patisserie, so it's all the more remarkable that they were made largely by two children.

"We just like making cakes and we want to make people happy," says Fen simply, as though running a not-for-profit café at the age of 12 were the most natural thing in the world. Which, for this girl and her little sister at least, it is.

During August, Narborough Hall is open between 11am and 5pm, Sundays to Wednesdays. For more information, visit narborough-hall.co.uk.



Fen, above, sets to work on her fairy cakes, which she finishes with flowers from her namesake plant, above right, it's empty plates all round, right, at the end of another busy service at The Perfect Spot



Fen's sweet fennel flower cakes

The proprietress of The Perfect Spot makes these pretty little cakes in mid-to-late summer, when fennel is in flower. The blooms lend them a lovely aniseed aroma and subtle flavour.

- **MAKES 30**
- **PREPARATION: 15 MINUTES**
- **COOKING: 10 MINUTES**

125g Unsalted butter, softened
125g Golden caster sugar
2 Eggs
125g Self-raising flour
2 tsp Fresh fennel flowers (about 2 heads)
or 1½ tsp fennel seeds, lightly crushed, plus extra flowers for decoration
1 tbs Milk
100g Icing sugar

Arrange 30 mini fairy-cake cases on a baking tray and heat the oven to 180°C/gas 4. Cream the butter and caster sugar together in a bowl until light and fluffy. Add 1 egg, then 1 tsp of flour, followed by the second egg, beating well. Sieve the remaining flour gently into the mixture and fold it through with the fennel flowers or seeds, and the milk. Divide the mixture between the cases, filling them about two-thirds full; work quickly to keep the mixture airy. Bake for 10 minutes, until risen and pale golden. Cool on wire racks. Crush a few fennel flowers to make a soft paste and mix with the icing sugar and enough water to make it thick and smooth. Drizzle onto the cakes and decorate with flower sprigs.

PER CAKE 80 KCAL/4G FAT/2.5G SATURATED FAT/TRACE SALT/7.5G SUGARS