

It made it fun to fight. The Boy's Own Bake-Off February 2026

An event that captured the imagination of Sydney was certainly the Boys Own Bake-Off held at the Oxford Hotel Dining Room last Sunday. It was organized with the T-Cell Group by Terry (Dolly) Divola. He must surely be one of the most amazing, dynamic I've ever had the privilege of meeting. He has to be seen to be believed, and that's just how the Bake-Off ran. There's hardly an adjective that could describe its success. It is probably best illustrated by the fact that the fund-raising target of \$3,000 was blown sky high and the amazing amount of \$ 8,000 was raised. It quite honestly brought tears to my eyes to be there and to be a part of it. A stunningly magnificent effort by everyone.
Sydney Star Observer July 1985.

One of the early fund-raising events for the HIV/AIDS charity Bobby Goldsmith Foundation was the Boys Own Bake-Off. This article draws on interviews with Bake Off competitors, attendees and hotel managers, to capture the event and its place as a community response to AIDS. Those cited are: Tim Alderman (TA), John Toby Hackett (JTH), Jeff Lumb (JL), Hugh Patrick O'Keefe (HPO), Terry Turnoff (TT) Manager Oxford Hotel, Peter Whittle (PW) Manager Oxford Hotel, and Ethel Yarwood (EY)

The beginning



Terry Divola approached us about doing it (at the Oxford Hotel). I think he was just looking for a space, a safe space it being a gay hotel. It suited what his vision was for the Bake-Off. PW

I was staying with Terry at that time and he berated all his friends, including me, to bake something and enter. I got the shock of my life when I won a division. I can still see the cake, triple layer sponge with cinnamon butter icing and chocolate lace wedges on the top. JTH

It seemed as though he found a cause through which to fight AIDS and get others also to be involved. JTH

Subverting 'prodigious masculinity'

Terry died early in the epidemic and with him went his reason for the form of the Bake Off. But the event had its predecessor in women's cake making competitions.

Cookery competitions allowed women to receive recognition for their often-overlooked hard work and skill. Contestants were encouraged to break out of their comfort zones, to be creative, innovate and impress.¹

The feminine nature of cake, acknowledged by many scholars, can also be seen as a symbol of civilisation in a time and place of prodigious masculinity. Imported customs such as afternoon tea, another colonial 'civilising' practice, where women gathered to gossip and eat cakes also reinforced the femininity of baking.²

Arguably the Bake Off was a subversion of this 'prodigious masculinity' by gay male contestants performing the 'feminine nature of cake'.

It also subverted the 'prodigious masculinity' of the genre of Boy's Own books. These were intended to make younger boys and adolescents into heterosexual men by instructing them in 'manly' pursuits like camping, hunting and home carpentry.

The venue

The Oxford Hotel had a particular place in the gay community of that time. It was the bar at which leathermen congregated. This was an aesthetic or style or hyper masculine butch clothing involving leather, denim, etc often associated with sado masochism.

BGF tried to do the Bake-Off independently and I don't think it was very successful. They then came back to me about doing the bake off (at the Oxford). That's when myself and Dot and Fanny³ did the actual Bake Off at the Oxford.⁴ We then basically took over everything. It was no cost to BGF. All they had to do was supply muscle on the day. We did all the advertising all the set-up, arranged everything. PW

The Oxford contributed quite heavily to the event. All the Oxford got out of it was the bar takings. TT

It was one of the hardest hit venues during the epidemic. It became, I hate to use the word, but kind of AIDS central really. I mean, in the really bad years that was one of the places I think where the scene got very badly hit. Lots of customers got ill and died. I recall at the time we lost one staff member a week to AIDS for about 5 or 6 weeks. It was like a war.⁵ PW

The Oxford itself was changed by the Bake Off.

The Albury always had the drag shows. Midnight Shift was a disco forever. It was a big change for the Oxford. The Oxford never had drag shows. But then they started doing shows to celebrate the Oxford's birthday every year. TT

¹ Samuelsson, Lauren, 'More than just MasterChef: a brief history of Australian cookery competitions', The Conversation, April 14, 2022

² Samuelsson, Lauren, Chapter Three: From 'the golden age of baking' to the Children's Birthday Cake Book: femininity and the Americanisation of Australian baking culture, 1940-1980, p. 126-127

³ The most well-known drag artiste partnerships of the time.

⁴ One of Sydney's best known gay hotels favoured by 'leather queens'.

⁵ Don Baxter, Executive Officer of the AIDS Council of New South Wales famously once said in a speech: Every town in Australia has its War Memorial. Where are the memorials to people who died of AIDS?

The cakes

There were cakes, scones, pies, tarts, biscuits – they covered the whole spectrum. There were categories like Best Tasting, Best Fruit Cake, Best Sponge. These replicated the categories in cooking competitions in magazines⁶ and the Easter Show.⁷

I got a cake mix from Coles or Woollies. I didn't know how to bake to save myself. It was all wobbly and it had dropped in the oven when I turned the heat off. I got a booby prize for Worst in Show. TT

Some of the cakes were amazingly decorated. Cakes which had farmyards and gardens and parks. Glen who was Miss 3D from Sweetarts was the winner on a couple of years putting in some fantastic entries. One I remember was a shingle-backed lizard. PW

Half the time the awards were given out on the appearance and not on the cake! TT

The artist Peter Tully won one year with a four-tiered cake hung round with his urban tribal jewelry.

Some entries were camp.⁸ The Sydney Harbour Bridge made of lamingtons. Hundreds of chocolate profiteroles on a chicken wire cone studded with fairy lights as a new hat for Mardi gras. 'The Lion Queen', a heavily lip-sticked puckered pre-Botox mouth, equally heavily eye-lashed lion's face topped by a fake diamond crown and fake diamond drop earrings won once.



The Lional 'Queen' Made by Jony Mok and Geoff Pringle. Oxford Street's version of the Lion King – The Lion "Drag" Queen

One time I made the Leaning Tower of Sponge Cakes. There were six sponges with cream between each stuck on a spike, which I bent to an angle. JH



John Toby Hackett. The Leaning Tower of Sponge Cake

⁶ The *Australian Women's Weekly* had a weekly competition as well as the occasional major competition.

⁷ The Royal Agricultural Show held every Easter which has a baking competition.

⁸ Camp is an aesthetic and sensibility that regards something as appealing or amusing because of its heightened level of artifice, affectation and exaggeration, especially when there is also a playful or ironic element. Camp is historically associated with LGBTQ culture and especially gay men.

The Bake Off, AIDS and sex positivity

Perhaps the most confronting aspect of the Bake Offs was its sex positivity in an environment where the messages coming from outside the gay community all emphasised sex negativity, sex as the vector of disease and death.

I remember one year making a giant chocolate dick surrounded by little dicks made of white and milk chocolate. JL

One time there was this really cute boy that I lusted over. Claire and Veruschka. were the hostesses and one of the fundraising activities was they iced this boy's butt. You could pay \$5 to go and lick the icing. So I walked up and I gave \$50. The boy was sort of standing, arms on a table or a chair with his butt to the audience, all covered in chocolate icing. And I just put my face straight into his butt. I got my \$50 worth. I walked away with this icing just like dripping off my face. EY

One of the most sexually explicit cakes was entered by a habitue of The Stronghold a leather men⁹ venue. Two leather men are having sex on a bed, one tied to the bedposts legs up raised in an outfit that looked like striped prison garb, the other standing in full leather regalia apparently anally penetrating the bedded one. The two pillows on the bed have pink triangle pillow cases.¹⁰ It was titled Bill and Ben the Action Men referring to British children's television programme Bill and Ben the Flower Pot Men. This was a subversive act both of cakemaking-using a decorative medium to make an explicit statement about transgressive sex-and also prodigious masculinity.



Bill & Ben the 'Action Men' – The Stronghold Cake by Grant Bramich, dolls dressed by Peter Novak of Novaskin Leather, Boys Own Bake Off, 1966, photo by Cayte Latta. Courtesy Australian Queer Archives

The judging

All the cakes would come in on Sunday morning and be displayed up at Gilligan's (one of the two bars in the Oxford at that time). The judging was done up there. Participants couldn't watch the judging. Then people attending the auction would come in and look at the cakes. Then they would go downstairs and have a drink and stay on. TT

Leo Scofield, food critic and social commentator of the time, was the first judge. He subsequently wrote up the event in his weekly column for the Sydney Morning Herald. HPO

⁹ This was an aesthetic or style of hypermasculine clothing, involving leather, denim etc. often associated with S&M – sado masochism.

¹⁰ The Pink Triangle was the insignia gay men had sewn onto their shirts in the German concentration camps in the Second World War. It was appropriated by the gay communities in the seventies as a symbol of defiance and survival before the rainbow flag emerged.

Margaret Fulton, the most famous Australian cook book writer, was a judge once. I remember everyone feeling quite tense about how severe she would be. She turned out to be just this really easy going really quite lovely woman. She seemed to enjoy herself talking with Dot and Fanny. TA

Maggie Kirkpatrick who played Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson a warden at Wentworth women's prison in the hugely popular soap 'Prisoner', a great ally of the gay community, was a judge once.

I was a judge for this too, can't remember which year but it could be 1995 or 1996. Very stressful as the entries were amazing but we made heaps of money. TJH

The auction

It was extraordinary. The buzz of the atmosphere was tangible during the bidding. Looking around you could see hurried head-to-head nods of agreement. Up would go a hand. Up would go the bid. Witnessing people's generosity so up-close and personal was both humbling and exhilarating. JD

There was always a big crowd. We would pack the place out, standing room only. TT



The crowd attending a Bake Off. Photo Cayte Latta 1996. Courtesy Australia Queer Archives.

We'd always start off with something insignificant. At one point I handed Dot a cake and he turned round to me and he turned round to me and said 'What's this worth?' and I said, 'Dot look at it – nothing – get it going for \$85 and take whatever bid you get'. PW

Sometimes someone would buy something and then give it back. It would be cut up and handed around and people would eat a piece.

We had five or six, really good prizes - cakes to offer on top of what's coming from the community. Those cakes were out of competition; they were just there to get more interest. A date tart went for \$1,200. So that was the big money side of it. There were prizes in from The Rockpool, Belmondos, Claudes. David Thompson, who at that time had Darley Street Thai put up not one but two dinners for 12 people. There were people in the audience who we knew were after one of those. Tony Cooper would act as a runner, he'd go around and go 'I know you've got your eye on this but so has so-and-so over there'.PW

We had this thing like a giant thermometer – 6-8 feet tall – with marks going up it that was mounted on the wall and as money came in the group managing collecting it or whatever would say 'we're up to \$5000 or we're up to \$6,000', and Dot and Fanny had this texta and they would just keep colouring it in. I think sometimes it encouraged people to give more. It

worked really well, especially when what we were hoping to raise had already been raised and we were only halfway through the auction. I think the best year we had we raised about \$23,000. It was always up in double figures.TT

We had shot girls going around selling vodka shots. I used to sell what we called 'Space Cookies', made with shall I say a particular butter. PW

The amounts of money that the Oxford raised for HIV causes in general was quite phenomenal. Straight people I knew were absolutely staggered at the amount of money at these events.TA

Despite the nature of the event, there was no end to the levity of the proceedings, plenty of black humour ... "I'm not sure about this next prize," I said, at one point, with much mock concern, "Two tickets to What If You Died Tomorrow?"¹¹ HPO

The commercialization of the Bake Off

Did we ever have a category Best Commercial Cake? I don't think we did because what we didn't want to do was intimidate people. We didn't want people saying 'Oh we are going up against all these commercial entries, we don't stand a look-in'. We drew the line that it basically had to be an individual, or a group of individuals who made the cake. People like Claire de Lune and Cindy Pastel had to enter as individuals. TT

Times changed.

The last one I went in was the first one at the Midnight Shift. I stopped entering at that stage because too many professional business and chefs were putting entries in. So, it became competing with the pros instead of the home bakers. Sort of took the fun out of it. TA

Why did the Bake Off work

A lot of people wanted to contribute in some way. It didn't matter whether they were positive or whether they were negative. A lot of the other fundraising that went on was very formal. And [the Bake-Off] was very informal. I think it was a good way for people to feel that they were doing something to help things along. TA

People wanted to help. And [the Bake Off] was a good way to go about it. It was a fun atmosphere. People could get involved without feeling that HIV was this overwhelming thing in their life. It was something that let you get away from it for at least a couple of hours. It was a dreadful period. I think it was doing whatever we could to make the best of a bad situation. TA

Anybody of whatever style or persuasion or whatever came together, I think because the whole thing focused around a charity. That's why it became as big as it did.TT

The Bake Off as resilience

The Bake Off was an expression of resilience by the gay community. Like the Mardi Gras it refused to kowtow to the forces of repression and take on the form of a justly diseased community which had nothing joyous to celebrate. Comments in the material above show this. The Bake Off began as a fund raiser and transformed into something larger, an annual celebration of gayness in its several forms.

¹¹ This was a play from prolific Australian playwright David Williamson first performed in 1973

The end of the Bake-Off

After 32 years the last Boy's Own Bake-Off was held on 10 September 2017.

We fought for everything. And that was part of it, you know. It made it fun to fight. Fighting what we fought through all our lives and we're still fighting. EY

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