

# Bloomin' beautiful

Pencil in Bloom Café at the top of your places-to-try list for this weekend. Delicious cupcakes, cookies, coffee and caring service are just the cherries on top of this not-for-profit proverbial cake

Jemma Galvin

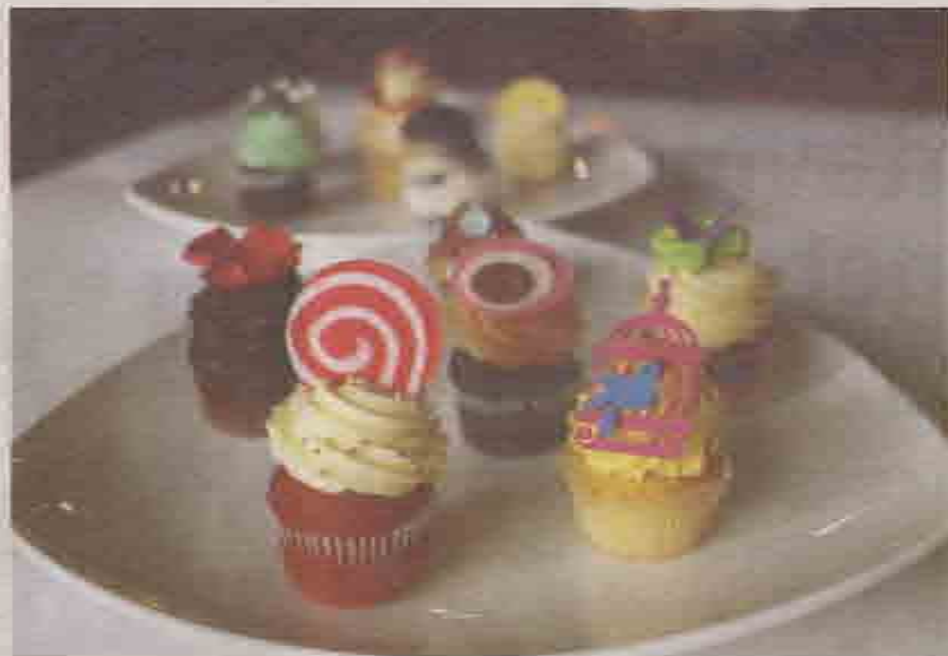
**S**OMETIMES, nothing will do but cake. And as most would probably agree, the level of quality when it comes to cake in the Kingdom is generally pretty dire; all artificial-tasting sponge covered in eye-wateringly sweet, foamy icing.

However, there is a light at the end of the sugar-coated tunnel, and that light is Bloom Café. Having opened in February of last year, the breezy yet cosy spot on Street 222 seems to have maintained a pretty low-profile among the city's expats to date, but that's not to say the initiative hasn't flourished.

Combining vocational training with social enterprise, Bloom Café and Training Centre is the brainchild of Australian-born Murray and Ruth Larwill. It is not an overstatement to say that Ruth Larwill is one of the friendliest, most welcoming and enthusiastic people you could hope to meet in Cambodia. Her obvious passion for baking comes second only to her



Ruth Larwill, the director of Bloom Café and Training Centre.



Too beautiful to eat, too delicious to resist: Cupcakes at Bloom come in flavours like baked cheesecake with chocolate ganache and red velvet cake with vanilla cream cheese. WILL BAKER



passion for baking comes second only to her dedication to her staff. Khmer women who have been offered the opportunity to leave behind situations which saw them at risk.

"I love the fact that these incredibly talented girls are getting a chance they never imagined they would get. They are smart. *Really smart.*" she enthuses. "It's such a privilege to show the world how extraordinarily clever Cambodian women are," Larwill says.

Four classes of girls have graduated from Bloom's 12-week training course so far, resulting in the 26 staff currently employed by the café. This Friday will see yet another six complete their training, which includes a specialty cake decorating component, and all of them will be offered employment by the enterprise.

"Many of our girls have little or no schooling, but that doesn't stop them from achieving incredible results in their final, international-standard exams," says Larwill. "We have developed a course that relies on games, role play and dramas to teach some challenging scientific cookery concepts."

In addition to the complex technical skills required to create Bloom's intricate recipes, the students are also taught a hospitality and food and beverage-focused English literacy module. Before arriving at Bloom, a number of its employees were illiterate. Now, however, it's clear that many have excelled in their studies, something not least evident in the warm and efficient service in the Bloom café where you can enjoy a range of organic, fair-trade teas and coffees and well as fast and free Wi-Fi.

Although the process of establishing the project has been an all-encompassing and challenging one for Larwill, she says she "can't remember life before Bloom" as a huge smile spreads across her face and her bursts of infectious giggles fill the air.

We chat while taking a tour of the huge space which includes an air-conditioned kitchen, teaching and meeting rooms and a decorating

Ruth Larwill, the director of Bloom Café and Training Centre, with a bright and cheerful cake her team created. **WILL BAXTER**

space. Here, on our visit, artists are fashioning cakes into the shape of an iPod and a make-up case filled with lipsticks and blusher brushes. Larwill tells how Bloom made history last November.

"We were commissioned by the Cambodian Restaurant Association for Cambodia's first big annual food exhibition," she says. And the cake her team created was the biggest in the country's history. "It was all fruitcake, two point two metres high and one point one metres wide. It was covered in handmade sugar lotuses that took 15 girls 10 days to make." Larwill says she managed to slice 1000 pieces of the cake before she had to hand over the knife and let her blisters breathe.

Despite the hard work involved in Bloom's mission, it's clearly all worth it for Larwill, who says baking has been a hobby since she was just nine years old. It's obvious she'd be happy slicing thousands more pieces of cake for years to come, if only to observe the continued growth in her staff and students.

"It's unbelievably exciting to see a girl blossom into a designer; to watch someone reach inside and find the artist within themselves. The girls go from thinking 'Will I be able to eat tonight? Will I have enough money to pay rent?' to thinking about colour palettes and design and beauty."

The bubbly blonde gets excited and animated in her explanation of what makes cakes so special to her, too.

"I love how cake is symbolic of good times in our lives," she says. "One of the best things in life is celebrating important milestones together. When you look back through someone's photo album there's always photos of friends and family crowding around the cake, singing, laughing and blowing out candles."

Speaking of celebrations, Bloom has recently



The team at Bloom can fashion any object from sugar that you choose - shoes, suitcases, iPods, you name it, they can do it. **WILL BAXTER**

expanded its catalogue to include handmade birthday and greeting cards as well as invitations which can be made to match the design of your cake. The proceeds from these sales, as well as from the 100-plus cupcakes and scores of specialty cakes sold each week, all go back into the training of more Cambodian women at risk.

"Every 100 additional cards we sell each month means we can employ another girl, which is what it's all about," says Larwill.

From every angle, Bloom Café and Training Centre draws you in. The staff are lovely, the café itself is stylish and inviting and then, of course, come the cupcakes. With 43 flavours on the books including chocolate chip crème cake with peanut butter cream cheese, blueberry and apple crumble yoghurt cake and Oreo cookies and cream cheesecake, no sweet tooth will be

left unsatisfied. Plus, the beginning of each month sees the flavour selection change so you've always got a good excuse to go back for more.

And according to Larwill, that's exactly the case as customers frequently compliment the outstanding quality of Bloom's cakes.

"Every week we have visitors come to the café that say Bloom cupcakes and cakes are better than any they have seen anywhere around the world. Just last week an American cupcake store owner told us that Bloom is better than any cupcake store in the whole of America. Go Cambodia!"

Bloom Café is located at #40 Street 222, Phnom Penh and is open Monday to Saturday, 10am until 5pm. Call 077 757 500 or log on to [www.bloomcreations.org](http://www.bloomcreations.org) for more information.