

# Sweet Spot

Confections created by Tom Hovey for *The Great British Bake Off* require no baking—but they're delectably rich in illustrative vision.

by Allison Malafronte

In 2010, right around the time America's Food Network and other media were busily churning out celebrity chefs, England launched the television show *The Great British Bake Off* (GBBO) that would go on to become the most watched program in Great Britain for two years in a row and eventually attain an equally enthusiastic international viewership.

Producer Anna Beattie conceived the idea for the show—a competition inspired by traditional American bake-offs and the classic English village fête baking contests, in which the contestants' sole objective is to bake the best cake possible. Every season, 12 bakers compete for the title of Great Britain's best baker through a 10-week series of progressively harder skill-testing

challenges. Pies, breads, biscuits, pastries and cakes of all shapes and sizes are among the delicious desserts these bakers whip up in the show's signature outdoor tented kitchen.

## Presenter of Pastries

The elaborate confections produced by GBBO bakers display colorful artistry and often involve innovative twists on old-fashioned favorites. While the bakers deserve the lion's share of the creative credit, there's an additional important ingredient in the show's visual appeal: the bold, beautiful illustrations created by English artist Tom Hovey, which are featured at the

Benjamina's  
Floral Tea  
Cake



Selasi's  
Three Tiered  
Ombre  
Floral Cake





beginning of each episode. Hovey has worked for the GBBO since its inception in 2010, producing approximately 300 illustrations per year for the show and its affiliate programs.

“The illustrated graphics appear at the start of the baking process when the bakers are throwing eggs and flour in bowls, when it’s difficult for the viewer to conceptualize what is actually being created,” says Hovey. “My illustrations suggest that the bakers have sketched out their intentions in a kitchen notebook before starting. The illustrations represent what the baker intended to create, not what actually gets baked in the tent.” If the bakers fail in their intentions, Hovey’s illustrations “correct” the shortcomings by presenting the ideal cakes as originally imagined.

### An Acquired Taste

Hovey received a university degree in illustration and, upon graduation, became steeped in London’s street-art and mural scene. He never intended to become a food illustrator. “I had no interest in it as a student or even when I was starting out as an illustrator,” Hovey admits. “I actually wanted to be anything but a food illustrator. I was always looking for a style, always

looking for inspiration in reference to other creatives that I thought spoke to what I wanted to produce. It took a while, but I finally realized that the style had found me. Illustrating for *Bake Off* has allowed me to develop and refine my approach by repeating the same process day in and day out, week after week for years. Being a massive foodie, I realized that I was actually incredibly passionate about food—cooking it and especially eating it! I decided I could and should make food illustration my main focus. In my time off from GBBO, I started drawing food that I wanted to draw, and it’s really helped me. Since I flipped that switch in my brain, I’ve become much happier.”

### Multilayered Digital Cakes

Hovey’s process for illustrating the “bakes,” as they’re called on the show, has essentially remained the same since the first episode. The producers send him photos of the finished bakes from various angles so he can understand the creations as a whole before he begins drawing them. “My job is to illustrate what they planned to create, not what they actually baked in the tent,” he emphasizes. “So if the bake doesn’t go as planned, I have to work out with the producers and the bakers how to

fix the issues by adding missing elements, extra layers and that sort of thing.”

Hovey works in stages to build up the image, first the composition and design with line and then the addition of dynamic dimension with color. “I first sketch the bakes in pencil,” Hovey says. “For many years I worked traditionally, hand-drawing with graphite, but now that I work solely on a Wacom Cintiq tablet, I use an HB pencil tool in Photoshop. I used to ink the drawings with Posca pens—by taking the pencil sketch to a light board and tracing—but now I draw them digitally. It’s the same process, only with layers instead of a light board. I then add the color digitally in Photoshop.”

The graphics in the show often appear animated and sometimes contain special elements that allow the viewer to understand the bake from the inside out. To achieve this effect, Hovey supplies a flat file—or digital layer—for each new element added to the actual bake. The editors then drop these files in sequence into the show timeline and add a voice-over. If there’s a particular dessert that has important or interesting contents, Hovey and the producers often add an internal slice as well as ingredient arrows synchronized with the voice-over.

The time required for each illustration varies. “A three-tiered celebration cake takes a lot longer to illustrate than

a ginger biscuit,” says Hovey, “so some can take a few hours and some can take a full day. But on average it takes two to three weeks to illustrate and deliver an episode.”

### Steady Diet of Work

Because Hovey’s full-time work for Love Productions now includes creating illustrations for *The Great American Baking Show* as well as GBBO, he’s selective about other projects he takes on. When he has the time, he enjoys experimenting and exploring ideas as he works on personal illustration projects or assignments in the food genre. These enrich and further inform the imagery he produces for TV.

Hovey’s busy schedule and the demand for his work prove that an artist’s ability to illustrate a concept or depict a creation never go out of style.

*Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York area.*

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