

People



Lexie Morris, a young graduate from the United Kingdom, enjoys life in Beijing with her cupcake business.

MARK GRAHAM / FOR CHINA DAILY

LET THEM EAT CAKE

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE DEVELOPS THRIVING BUSINESS SELLING CUPCAKES

By MARK GRAHAM

When studying in China a few years ago, Lexie Morris searched in vain for the quality cakes and buns that were so readily available at home in Britain. Entrepreneurially-minded Morris realized that the gap presented a business opportunity — a bakery that made tasty, English-style cupcakes would appeal to expatriates and newly affluent Chinese alike. That seed of an idea ultimately became the Lollipop Bakery, a Beijing-based operation making cupcakes that are being snapped up by individuals, stores and restaurants.

Morris, a graduate of the University of Cambridge, is possibly the most impressively-qualified baker in the city. She says: “I am really engaged with what I am doing, I find it really satisfying when compared to the corporate world and I really feel I am creating something.”

It is her second spell living in China’s

capital. On her first trip, as a student studying Chinese, Morris was not at all impressed, arriving in the middle of the harsh winter, where the temperature can stay below minus 10 C for weeks on end.

“I didn’t bring a jacket and I was not expecting a concrete jungle. It was so gray and so cold,” she recalls with an

ironic smile. “I was on a plane back to London, but my parents were not happy to find me on the doorstep. They persuaded me to go back and by then it was all right, the weather was better. It was spring. I promised myself that I would not be coming back when I finished my course.”

After graduation, Morris joined a management consulting firm in London, a well-paid but dreary job that involved cold-calling potential clients. It took only three months for the independent-spirited management trainee to decide the job was not for her; within a year, she had quit.

“I decided I absolutely hated it,” recalls Morris, 25. “That wasn’t why I worked so hard at university. I decided to look for other opportunities. The idea for the cupcake business came from going for high tea in London, to the Ritz, or Fortnum and Masons. Also, I knew how successful the Peninsula in Hong Kong was with its afternoon tea.

“I knew from my time in Beijing

that it did not have anything like that — and one thing I hated about the city when I was there that there was no cake, I have a very sweet tooth and missed cake a lot. All of those things combined and the real catalyst was the general trend for cupcakes; it had taken off in London and other places.

“I thought, ‘Right, China doesn’t have it yet, Beijing in particular.’ I went to Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. I decided Beijing was the best place to start the business and I knew the city relatively well.”

The neophyte entrepreneur spent time perfecting recipes in Britain before deciding the time was right to head back to Beijing. To limit outgoings, Morris opted for an older, walk-up style apartment, located in the Central Business District.

The biggest expense when starting up was rewiring the 80-square-meter apartment so it could cope with an electric oven in constant use and placing a minimum order of 10,000 for

packaging boxes. Since moving into commercial premises, she has hired three full-time staff.

“At first it was just an order a day and then it really began to snowball,” says Morris. “Since late last year it has been insane — I get orders from individuals and also supply coffee shops. I have never done any advertising or marketing. It is all word of mouth.”

A standard order of 24 mixed cupcakes costs about 200 yuan (22.9 euros), with a flavor choice of chocolate, vanilla, Earl Grey, spiced carrot, red bean, cookies and cream, black sesame or red velvet. The bakery can custom-make cupcakes with inscriptions for birthday parties or other special occasions. Among the stores that stock Lollipop products are several in the trendy zone of Sanlitun, along with an increasing number of coffee shops across the city.

When she began, Morris baked cakes, took orders and personally delivered them. A career as a baker-cum-delivery girl was clearly not what her parents had in mind when they funded their daughter’s education at private schools in Hong Kong, independent schools in England and at the University of Cambridge — but they know full well that Morris is a single-minded, spirited individual.

Her multicultural lineage — a Chinese mother and British father — also gives her a cosmopolitan perspective. Her mom, Fifi Chan Lai Thiong, grew up in Madagascar, speaking French and Chinese, later meeting dad Martin, a British civil engineer, when both were living and working in Hong Kong.

Later, the family moved to Britain, where Morris completed high school and college before bouncing back to Beijing.

“If you want a good simple cake then it is hard to get. When I started it was an order or so every other day, it was very gradual. I wasn’t entirely sure it would work, which is why I did it out of my house at first. I am meticulous about every last detail, from the hand-made sugar flower atop each cupcake to our beautiful iconic boxes.

“The most popular cupcake, by a long way, is red velvet and surprisingly vanilla, even though it is plain and basic. Business is thriving and now I have to decide where to go from here, whether to hand over day-to-day control, or do a coffee shop or franchise it.”

Morris is also enjoying contemporary Beijing way more than during that first underwhelming encounter as a student. Like most residents she is amazed by the constant change in the capital.

“I love the sheer variety of friends and acquaintances that I meet in the city,” she says. “Everyone is buzzing with the opportunities to be found here, and they are also always happy and open to meeting new people. I find this dynamism very stimulating, as I’m constantly exposed to a fascinating stream of insights and opinions on doing business not just in Beijing, but also in China from people who know what they’re talking about.

“Beijing provides me with a source of inspiration somehow lacking elsewhere. It’s a real boiling pot of ideas, and combined with its nothing-is-impossible atmosphere, it’s an intoxicating mix. Where else could I have thought up chocolate and Sichuan peppercorn cupcakes?”