

'On your marks. Get set. Bake!'

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On Tuesday the 26th of November, the final of the Great British Bake Off 2024 finally arrived and, after around 40 minutes of tense baking, we finally have a winner! This season of Bake Off was a particularly lively one. Firstly, Alison Hammond proved herself to be an excellent host, providing lots of laughs, a shoulder to cry on, and some questionable acrobatics (no, really!). As she's slightly less strange than her co-host Noel Fielding (just look at his jumpers), they end up going quite well together. In particular, Alison was great at encouraging and comforting contestants throughout all their culinary woes (collapsed cakes, broken biscuits, caramel) in a very sincere way, which was lovely to see.

This season was jam packed full of new things. We had the creation of a new symbol of recognition the bakers can aspire towards, the so-called 'Paul Pat'. Whether this is now an official award in the same way a 'Hollywood Handshake' is, remains to be seen, but it is very convenient when you have a baker who did really well, but just wasn't quite up to handshake standards. After all, we can't have Paul giving out too many handshakes (their scarcity is what gives them their value), although it felt like he gave out quite a lot this season, which isn't surprising given how high the standard was this year.

The other minor change we saw this year was the way the technical challenge was conducted. This second challenge of each week is designed to test the baker's general knowledge and baking instincts by presenting them with a very limited recipe (sometimes the instruction is literally just 'make the cake'). This year, it wasn't just recipes, though. During a challenge in which the bakers had to make Battenburg cake, the bakers were each given a perfectly made cake which they had a few minutes to examine before they began the challenge – this was particularly helpful for getting each of the little squares the right size and shape. On the other hand, during the bread week technical, the bakers got to watch Paul Hollywood himself demonstrate how to plait bread (most of them got it wrong anyway). Although most of the technical challenges remained largely the same, it was exciting to see them adapted slightly so they were no longer just about knowledge, but also about the baker's raw abilities.

Speaking of abilities, the standard this year was excellent, making it a very tense and tight competition. Just one bad week could get even the most proficient bakers sent home, as we saw on numerous occasions. This made the final all the more exciting, as many of the finalists (like Georgi, for example) were not necessarily the flashiest, fanciest bakers - the kind you often think will make it to the end when you begin the season – but were very

consistent and just got better as the weeks went on. The final looked like it was going to be very tight.

The favourite, of course, was Dylan. Dubbed the 'Pastry Pirate', Dylan was one of the more ambitious finalists (in terms of his flavours), who, when he does well, is absolutely incredible. He can be very emotional, though, and when he gets stuck in a bad place (like during 'Autumn week'), he gets discouraged, and his baking goes downhill very quickly.

On the other side, we had Christiaan, who, like Dylan, often went for ambitious (although perhaps somewhat strange) flavours. When he gets it right, he does really well; otherwise, you end up with far more 'hmm, interesting' than 'mm, delicious'. Unlike Dylan, though, Christiaan seems to be perpetually cheerful so, flavours aside, he is a fairly consistent baker.

Finally, we have the 'dark horse' in Georgie. Although she seemed quite inconsistent and uncertain to begin with, she has proven herself to be an excellent baker. What she lacks in confidence, she makes up for in quality baking: her classic flavours combined with beautiful decoration are always very well done. She may not take as many risks as the other finalists, but classic flavours are classic for a reason, and she usually pulls them off really well.

All that's to say is that this year of Bake Off, and the final especially, were an absolute thrill to watch. There were protestations, tears, a few fainting episodes, and a lot of (probably pretty decent) cakes chucked in the bin. So, if you need a fun, cosy, relatively thrilling show to get you through until the next season of *the Traitors* comes out, this one's for you.