



Owners Sophia and Jesse Sutton-Jones pose for a photograph at the Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London. — AFP photos



Sophia Sutton-Jones (left) pours out the dough for shaping after bulk fermentation at Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London.

London woman turns lockdown loaves into bakery success

When Britain first entered lockdown in March last year, Sophia Sutton-Jones decided to try making sourdough bread. A year later, she is running her own popular bakery. "I'd always thought about it, but I never had the courage to do it," she told AFP. Now Sutton-Jones, 29, and her husband

London neighborhood. Producing the loaves from home soon became impractical as everything got coated in flour, Sutton-Jones recalls. "Our dining room was the bakery and our guestroom the storage space. So you could come as a guest and sleep on flour bags." Fired by their initial success, the couple turned to



Staff deliver orders at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.

Jesse, 28, work alongside half a dozen staff members pulling hot loaves out of the oven, putting out flaky pastries and cutting slices of cakes topped with cream.

It all started when Sutton-Jones, whose father was also a baker, made a loaf of bread for a neighbor who was sheltering during the first national lockdown in March 2020. "He talked to his friends about it," she says. "Very quickly, we had 12 people waiting in front of our house." The couple, who sold kitchenware online before the pandemic, began to deliver orders by bicycle in their north

crowd funding to launch their business. They were hoping for £25,000 (\$35,000, 30,000 euros) but ended up raising £33,000.

Sourdough success

The distinctive pink-painted bakery—'Sourdough Sophia'—opened in January. Their pains au chocolat, croissants and cruffins—a cross between croissant and muffin—sell like hotcakes. But their biggest hit is sourdough bread, which the British have embraced enthusiastically. Home-baked bread became a major trend of lockdown, with enthusias-



Sophia Sutton-Jones (right) shapes the dough after bulk fermentation at Sourdough Sophia bakery in north London.

tic amateurs posting pictures of their efforts in pursuit of the perfect golden crust.

The surge of interest led to shortages of yeast and people "understood that actually, there is another way to make bread and it's actually much better, much healthier", says Sutton-Jones. Sourdough bread is made using a fermented starter instead of yeast and its enthusiasts believe it is more beneficial than ordinary bread, causing blood sugar to rise more gradually and helping gut health. It takes longer to rise but thanks to stay-at-home protocols—people were finally not in a rush. "It's the oldest way of making bread," says Sutton-Jones.

'A real kick'

"Sourdough Sophia" attracts a long line of customers as soon as it opens even though it sits a short distance from the local shopping street with many other bakeries. "I've been to all of them.

The bread is much better here," says 43-year-old Ben Claypole, waiting outside with his small dog. He adds that he is keen to support small businesses. The bakery opened while "non-essential" shops remain shuttered until April 12 and financial pressures mean some will never reopen. Sutton-Jones, who has a baby daughter, says she realized the risk of opening during the current situation and put in long 14-hour days. But she has no regrets.

Baking something and seeing a customer come in to enjoy it "gives me a real kick", she says. "Lockdown made people think about their priorities," she says, with the life-and-death situation prompting some big questions. "What if something else happens to us? Shouldn't we follow our dreams now? Because anything could happen." — AFP



Freshly baked sourdough loaves on sale at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.



Staff remove freshly baked loaves at the Sourdough Sophia bakery.



Sophia Sutton-Jones shapes the dough after bulk fermentation.

Tourists in Mexico party like there's no COVID

Tourists writhe their bodies to pumping techno beats on dance floors along Mexico's Caribbean coast—a magnet for people from around the world who want to party during a pandemic. The Latin American country is among those worst hit by COVID-19 with a death toll fast approaching 200,000. But such worries seem a world away in tourist resorts like Tulum and Cancun, where visitors can dance late into the night at discos, electronic music festivals and invitation-only parties. Once a sleepy fishing village, Tulum now attracts international tourists lured by its turquoise waters, Mayan ruins and the chance to party next to lush jungle, freshwater sinkholes and golden beaches.

"The coronavirus thing is nonsense. Life must go on," said Greta from Spain who described the rave she attended in December as "amazing." "The party in Tulum was magical—a combination of the jungle, rituals, the sea breeze," she said. But what is a dream for Greta is a nightmare for many others, leaving the town facing accusations that it is putting lives at risk by allowing mass gatherings with lax sanitary measures.

Mexico is one of the few major tourist destinations not to have closed its borders or demanded a negative coronavirus test result on arrival. That has ensured that the plane-loads of visitors keep coming, making Mexico the third-most visited country in the world last year. In destinations like Cancun, hotels offer incentives such as free COVID-19 tests and discounts for guests if they are infected and forced to extend their stay in order to quarantine.

'Super-spreader event'

Tulum made international headlines in November when 50 attendees were infected at Art With Me, Mexico's version of the Burning Man festival that was quickly dubbed a super spreader event. As a result, organizers of the Zamna electronic music festival were forced to pull the plug on the 16-day series of events that was supposed to start in December. Ticket holders who paid up to \$300 for a night dancing to

international DJs and techno music acts will now have to wait until April—and bring a mask.

"Sadly, the image of Tulum is being affected, in the eyes of the world, by the negligence of some entrepreneurs to organize events without respecting health and safety protocols," the organizers said. Lower-key events continue to go ahead, with more than 20 private parties organized in the past two weeks, according to messages in WhatsApp groups promoting them.

Quintana Roo, the southeastern state home to Tulum, Cancun and the Riviera Maya, is now at yellow status—the second highest of four under the country's traffic-light system. Bars, discos and mass events are—in theory—prohibited from operating in the area, where hundreds of thousands of visitors are expected during the Easter period. The hotel industry is unhappy that parties continue to be held in secret. Such events are a "stain" on the area's image, said David Ortiz, president of the Tulum Hotel Association. An agreement has been signed with the municipal council and a "citizens' initiative" will be presented to the local Congress to toughen punishments for anyone flouting the rules.

'Real battle'

That does not seem to worry the members of the WhatsApp group

Eddy's Tulum Party Squad where people can keep up to date with the nightlife events calendar. Social media users share videos and photos of parties, with little sign of social distancing or face masks. In Cancun's nightlife district, the music from the discos is deafening even during a pandemic, although there are fewer customers than before. Venues have found a way around the restrictions by reinventing themselves as "restaurant-bars."

Ecuadorian tourist Alexandra Freire was astonished when the restaurant where she was dining one night suddenly turned up the music and customers began dancing without masks. "It is the most shocking thing I've seen in the pandemic. It's as if COVID never reached Cancun," said the 35-year-old engineer. Stopping big parties is a "real battle" that sometimes ends in defeat, said Dario Flota, a representative of Quintana Roo's tourism promotion board.

Some visitors even fly home unaware they have the coronavirus. This month 44 Argentine high school students tested positive for COVID-19 after returning from Cancun. They had boarded the plane to Buenos Aires with negative test results from a clinic that turned out to be unlicensed and has since been shut down. — AFP

How Finland embraced being 'world's happiest nation'

Once notorious for its bland food and long, harsh winters, Finland's repeated success in the annual happiness rankings has helped transform the country's global reputation, boosting tourism and business. The UN-sponsored World Happiness Report elicited some raised eyebrows when it first placed Finland at the top of its listings in 2018: many of the Nordic country's 5.5 million people freely describe themselves as taciturn and prone to melancholy, and admit to eyeing public displays of joyfulness with suspicion.

"When I first heard—and I'm not alone, I would say—I had a big laugh," television producer Tony Ilmoni told AFP on the still-snowy streets of the capital Helsinki on Friday, when Finland was crowned the happiest nation on earth for the fourth year running. But the worldwide survey in fact seeks to quantify individuals' personal freedom and satisfaction with their lives, using survey data from 149 countries alongside measures such as GDP, social support and perceptions of corruption. Finland excels with its quietly world-class public services, low levels of crime and inequality, and high levels of trust in authority.

"The basics are really good here: we don't have anyone living in the streets, we do have unemployment but the health service works, the big things like that," flower seller Riitta Matilainen told AFP. "But we could be a bit more outgoing and joyful!" The northern country's long dark winters were once reputed to be behind high levels of alcoholism and suicide, but a decade-long public health drive has helped cut rates by more than half.

'Who wouldn't want to live here?'

For tourism and country-branding chiefs, the "world's happiest" title has been a blessing they were quick to capitalize on. "It's a really powerful, emotional, evocative thing to say you're the happiest country in the world. Why would anyone not want to live in the happiest country in the world?" said Joel Willans, a British digital marketer and creator of the "Very Finnish Problems" social media page, who has lived in Finland since the early 2000s. "Awareness of Finland has grown during the past few years," Paavo Virkkunen, head of Finland Promotion Services at Business Finland, told AFP. After four years, the happiness trope has been used by countless Finnish businesses to market lifestyle products and to try to attract workers to relocate and join the country's tech sector. Finland's unflashy cuisine was once derided as something to "endure" by Italian then-president Silvio Berlusconi, and slammed by his French counterpart Jacques Chirac. But restaurateurs and product manufacturers now tout the simplicity and natural ingredients of Finnish cooking, claiming it as key to the country's no-nonsense approach to wellbeing.

The happiness marketing drive has been led, however, by the travel industry, with Finland's tourist office appointing Finnish 'happiness ambassadors' tasked with introducing visitors to the secrets of Finnish wellbeing. "People are curious about (our happiness) and they want to learn about it," Virkkunen said. Key to the Finnish brand of happiness is going outdoors to enjoy the country's vast forests and thousands of lakes, as well as the traditional Finnish steam bath, the sauna.

By the start of 2020, tourism to Lapland in northern Finland had reached record levels and the country was attracting more foreign direct investment projects than anywhere else in the Nordics. While pausing international visitors, the pandemic has, if anything, increased overseas interest in Finland's clean, sparsely populated nature, leading tourist providers to offer virtual tours. "Even though people are not able to travel now, you are able to dream about Finland and the happiness of a true connection with nature, where you can really unwind," said Virkkunen.

Finland's four-year dominance in the happiness stakes leaves one problem, however—where to go from here? When this year's results were announced, "it would've been more news if Finland had been knocked off the top spot," Joel Willans joked. — AFP