



Flour Power

For those outside the North East, the humble stottie may be an unknown phenomenon – but for many, it has become a lifeline for a number of reasons. We caught up with local baker and campaigner Andy Haddon from Big River Bakery to find out more about The Power of the Stottie campaign

Around a decade ago when Andy was working as a senior researcher at Newcastle University's Sustainability Institute he felt food should not merely be seen as a commodity, but that it could offer real value to our community. So he set up Big River Bakery, now based in Shieldfield, which specialises in slow fermented, handmade breads and baked goods made with locally-sourced ingredients.

But Big River Bakery does more than create delicious hand-baked goods. They also offer employment to local people furthest from the job market. The vital work Andy and his team do allows some of the most disadvantaged and hard-to-reach individuals in the community, such as refugees, ex-offenders and people on the autistic spectrum, to gain access to training, education and work opportunities. In his latest campaign, The Power of the Stottie, which has been launched in response to the current cost of living crisis, Andy is hoping to use the local delicacy to bring about further social good.



'We have to be creative because trying to do social good as a bakery and knocking out bread and other products, plus making the numbers work, is hard enough,' Andy says. 'We get a little bit of money from donations, but to pull enough money in to do good in the community requires more creativity – we're not like [large chain bakeries] with great big foundations with large pots of money, we're a small business. So, that's where the stottie comes in,' he adds.

Andy and his team have created The Power of the Stottie campaign with a range of activities and projects to raise money for positive social change. One of those projects has been to create a character, Scotty the Stottie, who is the face of the campaign. 'There is an immediate issue, certainly with local schools where there are some kids who don't have breakfast for various reasons,' Andy says. As a response to this issue Big River Bakery have created Scotty the Stottie soft toys to raise funds to support these children. 'Schools came and spoke to us [about the issue] and we started delivering breakfast bags for kids. We didn't get a grant to do that or money from the council, we did it off our own backs and we're trying to continue that through a crowd funder which is live until January,' he explains.

Big River Bakery have been able to put back into the community by selling the Scotty soft toys and raising funds through their story book, *The Adventures of Scotty the Stottie*, written by Andy's partner Gail Lawler. But there is still a lot of work to be done. 'We have sold about 100 Scotty toys, but we've got 900 left that we have to get sold,' Andy says. 'Scotty seems to have resonated with people far and wide and brought people in the community together.'

Many people have been supporting the campaign by paying it forward; purchasing a soft toy and instead of keeping Scotty, asking for the toy to be given to a local child as a gift. 'That's come from people themselves, it's not something we've decided to do,' Andy explains. 'So many visitors at Living North's Christmas Fair said they didn't need the soft Scotty, they just wanted to buy one and for us to give it to the kids living near the bakery who might not be able to afford one,' he adds. 'There has been a real ripple of kindness and it doesn't take a lot to generate something which can grow like that.'

Aiming to create sustainable positive change in food supply chains working at a community level, Andy and his team want to reconnect people to growing food and making healthier meals through food-based activities – and part of The Power of the Stottie campaign also includes offering free baking courses to local adults. 'People have been travelling from far and wide for our stottie baking sessions on a Saturday morning,' Andy says. 'They're booked out all the time and it's a really interesting thing because we believe local food needs to be accessible and be a bit more inclusive – that's what we're trying to do,' he adds.

Andy believes that part of the reason people have been able to get behind the campaign is because they can resonate

with the North East delicacy. 'The stottie is a magical thing which is part of North East food culture and goes back a long time,' he explains. When people come into the bakery, Andy says they often remark on how familiar the bread is. 'Everyone says "these stotties are like the ones my granny used to make," and there is something comforting about a stottie. It's been around for such a long time and it connects us locals,' he adds.

Despite the rising costs of living affecting every local business, Big River Bakery are working hard to ensure their prices remain affordable for everyone. 'We make sure the price of the stotties hasn't changed – despite the increases. It's a challenge to keep prices affordable to everyone but that's one of our key aims,' Andy explains. He has also found that stotties are not just a tool to feed hungry locals, they've also been able to open conversations too.

'It's a great way to communicate instead of using words. At a very local level it's a very powerful thing as it's a symbol of when times are hard. Back in the day, everyone used to make their own bread at home and they put the scraps together, stotted it off the floor, flipped it on the hearth and a stottie was made. Unlike sourdough which has to prove fully, a stottie bakes very quickly and it was a way to get something quick and filling for any large family.'



Andy Haddon

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'I think stotties are a symbol of North East people and their resilience and ability to come together and solve problems,' Andy continues. 'For some, just coming through the door can be quite challenging, but they have an affinity for [the stottie] and they recognise it. It can therefore be a great way to initiate a conversation.'

Big River Bakery have also created a song which accompanies the crowd funder, written by father and son duo Tony and Jacob Gowland, drawing on the history of the Jarrow Crusade and the resilience of the people of the North East. 'It's a call to social action that song, it mentions the Jarrow March and how it was a time where you couldn't look to central government to help and the region had to step up and help themselves,' Andy says. 'I think we're in that time again now, and through the stottie we're trying to inspire others to try and develop solutions in the North East through collaboration and community, rather than purely waiting for a pot of money from the government to solve it all. We have to use our spirit, resilience and innovation and all those things which are embedded in the people of the North East to try and solve the problem ourselves.'

The Power of the Stottie crowd funder is due to end in January, so please help if you can. However there are plenty of other ways you can continue to help and support the fantastic work Big River Bakery do. 'As individuals you can buy a stottie-making kit online, you can make donations, you can come in and buy sandwiches and other things we produce, as well as booking onto stottie making courses,' Andy says. 'The campaign has worked locally and we're still getting queues down the street of people wanting to get a stottie. We also sell more expensive breads like sourdoughs, but we've got to make sure we have an affordable offer for people and the stottie is definitely a symbol for that,' he adds. 'I think we've created something quite powerful which I hope we can grow.'

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