

Lancaster chef earns runner-up finish on 'Cake Wars'

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Creating behind the lens turns out sweetly stressful for local woman



Local chef Susan Notter smiles on the set of Food Network'...

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Victory can be sweet, even if it's second place.

Chef Susan Notter, program director of pastry arts at The Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts and owner of Susan Notter Pastries, and her team brought home second place on Food Network's "Cake Wars," which united cake makers, sweet specialists and special effect artists Sunday night.

On the show, three teams of three competed for a \$10,000 prize. Team Sugar Bomb was deemed the winner by the judging panel

of Sugar & Plumm's Pichet Ong, pastry chef Paulette Goto and Shanda Sawyer, creative director of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Throughout the six-hour competition, teams were presented with various challenges so it was very stressful, Notter says. The host of the show would stop the teams and announce new challenges while they still were busy working on their creations.

"You don't have time to stop and think too much. You have to just adapt to what they throw at you," Notter says. "You had to be able to think quickly to meet the requirements they wanted."

A camera crew was assigned to each team to capture the intensity of the day. Any errors — verbal or physical — were caught on tape.

"They hear and see everything you do," Notter says. "You have to stay focused on what you are doing and forget they are there."

The production crew was right there when Notter's team experienced technical difficulties during their construction process — a battery that was being used in the design shorted out, leaving the team with only one to use, and some chain being used in the cake design was not cut to the proper length.

Adding to the stress, the teams were created by the show's producers. None of them had ever worked together before, and Notter says that she "didn't know how hard she could push her teammates.

"We all had the same vision, drive and determination, so that helped," Notter says.

The challenges required teams to include a sideshow character and balancing element in the design of the cake, and to use two circus food items to make a treat for the judges. Sugar Explosion, the team comprised of Notter, cake artist Bronwen Weber and special effects artist Casey Noel, created a big-top cake with a calliope, a half-lizard strongman balancing a sea lion, a lion jumping through a ring of fire and miniature trapeze artists swinging in the background.

Notter's sugar expertise was used to create the circus animals out of blown sugar and she also created the dessert of blown-sugar apples filled with popcorn mousse, caramel and peanuts for the judges.

"The circus judge liked it a lot and the pastry judges admired the flavors and presentation,"

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Notter says.

Notter, who was named one of the top 10 pastry chefs in the U.S. by Pastry Art & Design magazine, has appeared on "Food Network Challenge" and won "Halloween Wars" in 2011. The producers of the show had approached Notter for the "Cake Wars" show because she had competed in "Halloween Wars" last year. She recently completed taping an episode of "Sugar Dome" for the Food Network and says that she has become more comfortable with the TV process and has built a good relationship with the producers and her competitors.

"Once you do one of these shows, you bring what you learned back with you and it's a little easier," Notter says. "You also make a lot of connections that could help you in the future."

Notter also participates in professional chef competitions — winning overall third place and winning dessert at the 2011 Pastry Queen competition in Italy in January — but finds the competitive shows rewarding.

"TV pushes you to react quickly and think outside of the box," says Notter.

She does have more television competitions on the horizon, but continues to run her business and teach at the culinary institute, where she shares her newly gained TV skills with her classes.

"I learn so much from the other chefs. And it gives my job some variety.

"Some people take vacations, I go to competitions," says Notter.

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