



Sweet on sugar artistry

YTI pro turns fashion designer in competition tonight on the Food Network.

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Susan Notter uses a culinary torch to heat a blown-sugar e...


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Combining the imaginative, creative and passion-filled worlds of food and fashion, pastry chef Susan Notter designed an evening gown out of sugar, complete with hat and handbag.

She is one of four sugar artists competing for \$10,000 on the Food Network show "Sugar and Candy Fashion," which airs at 8 tonight.

Notter — pastry arts program director at The Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, a division of YTI Career Institute-Lancaster — will go up against three

other nationally known chefs.

(The winner's identity is kept secret until air time, and Notter remained mum about the victor during an interview last

week.)

In November, the New Freedom, York County, resident flew to Denver, Colo., for the contest, which gave the chefs eight hours to create an evening gown entirely out of sugar that could be packed, moved and displayed on a mannequin.

"I had no idea how to do this," Notter said. "I had never created an entire outfit out of sugar."

Notter choose a peacock as her design inspiration. She liked the idea of how blues, greens and yellows work together. Besides, "these tones translate well in sugar," she said.

First, Notter sketched out her design. She then began testing different samples of mesh to see which one sugar would adhere to best.

She ended up placing copper mesh on a mannequin and using a culinary torch to make the sugar warm and pliable as she applied it.

"I just made sure it stuck well, and prayed," Notter said, laughing.

The technique for making decorative designs out of sugar is casting, blowing and pulling.

The ingredients are sugar and water boiled at 300 degrees for 30 minutes. They turn into a taffylike substance that can be pulled and shaped.

Notter and her partner for the competition, Natasha Capper, pastry chef of Piedmont Driving Club in Atlanta, worked as quickly as possible because otherwise the sugar would set too fast.

"The last hour was the most intense time," Notter said. "It was really stressful trying to reassemble the outfit."

The contestants displayed their creations in a mall courtyard, where shoppers were allowed to watch as they put the gowns on mannequins.

"The most challenging part of the whole process was putting it together and moving the

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mannequin," Notter said, because it was 5 feet 9 inches tall and "extremely heavy."

The evening gown has a midlength skirt and creates a 1920s flapper-style silhouette.

The hat has sugar feathers; the handbag, a crystallized handle. For the shoes, Notter used pastillage, a sugar-based dough that sets firmly, like fondant, and is used to decorate pastries.

Just as in the fashion industry, the contest had precise guidelines and elicited critiques.

"The judges give both good and bad reviews," Notter said. "You can learn from what they say, and you see your design in a different way."

For Notter, the world has been her test kitchen.

Born in Birmingham, England, she graduated from culinary school and went to Germany, where she learned confectionery production. Then she was on to Switzerland to learn chocolate making.

"The training is very strong in Europe," Notter said. "There is a great history and appreciation of food and culture there."

Seeing opportunity in America, Notter found her niche in pastries and teaching.

She was named one of the Top 10 Pastry Chefs in the U.S. by Pastry Art & Design Magazine in 1999 and 2000. After joining YTI in 2009, Notter revamped and updated the pastry program.

"She has a great vision of where she wants to take this program," said Kevin Bright, director of education at YTI. "It's amazing to have one of the best talents in the world right here," Bright said.

While traveling and competing in shows is fun for her, Notter's heart is with her students.

"I love teaching students about taking what is, and making it stronger. It's also so important that we teach what is going on in the industry and we prepare them," Notter said.

"In this industry you don't stop. You are always learning. You have to love it."

Having a focus, passion and desire is essential if a student wants to succeed, Notter said. "We're not making bakers or cake decorators. We're turning out pastry chefs."

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