



Baking Tips to Help You Win Prizes

Follow these blue-ribbon baking tips to take the top prize at your county fair.

By Lisa Kivirist

© jeanmfogle.com When I entered my first culinary competition at the Wisconsin State Fair last summer, I confess I walked in with a dash of inflated attitude about my carrot cake entry.

This cake rocked, at least according to my family of taste testers.

I've made it so many times, I assembled the batter on autopilot. I started mulling over where I would hang my blue ribbon as I pulled out of the driveway heading to the fair, my cake jiggling in the trunk.

What happened at the fair? Get Lisa's 10 tips to prepare for a win at the fair

Get Baking! Blue-ribbon Winning Raspberry Streusel Squares Do you remember that toddler game, "one of these things is not like the other," where you pick out the item that clearly doesn't belong with the rest of the group?

That was my carrot cake; sitting amongst the table of beautiful, show-stopping, perfect-cake masterpieces.

At first, I felt like the ugly stepsister who tagged along to the ball, hiding in the crowd of onlookers as the judges started tasting and commenting on the cakes.

But something funny happened on the way to the awarding of the blue ribbon. No, my cake didn't win, but I had a ball.

I learned so much from the judges' comments, drew inspiration from the other entrants and felt part of a homespun community of cooking enthusiasts like I had never felt before.

Am I going to enter again this year? You bet. But this time, I'll be well-seasoned with a toolbox of experiences and tips.

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Agricultural Fairs in America

The first American agricultural fair dates back to the early 1800s with the Berkshire County Fair in Massachusetts, with a goal of creating a venue for farmers to come together, share information and educate each other.

This revolutionary idea fully sparked during the mid-1800s with fairs flourishing on both the state and county levels.

While the emphasis remained on celebrating and improving American agriculture, these fairs also quickly became a valuable social outlet and anticipated annual event for farmers in isolated rural areas.

The culinary divisions during these early fairs focused on the practical aspects of home farm life, such as preserving food and making butter and cheese.

As modern times evolved in the 1900s, "table luxury" categories such as cakes started appearing at fairs, indicating how rural life no longer needed to focus on just the basic necessities.

Today, more than 3,000 state and regional fairs take place annually, but the culinary competitions have taken on new roles and perspectives.

With the growth of fast food and convenience outlets, most folks today cook as a hobby and for personal interests rather than out of necessity.

This growing group of people who are passionate about cooking—perhaps fueled by popular cooking competitions on the Food Network—adds a healthy dose of renewed enthusiasm to these culinary competitions.

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Top 10 Entry Tips

Tempted to enter your best recipe? Here are 10 tips to help make your experience a success.

While these tips and my experience at the Wisconsin State Fair focus on the baked-goods categories in the culinary competitions, remember there's a wide range of other categories to enter, from jams and preserved foods to appetizers and casseroles.

1) Start With Research

The culinary arena at the Wisconsin State Fair was not only my first baking competition, it was my first state fair. Bad idea.

Try to visit and check out your county or state fairs the year before you plan to enter, and study the food items on display.

What makes the winning entries special? See if you can identify a "hidden gem" category—one that maybe doesn't receive that many entries and therefore will be a good entry point for you.

Study cookbooks dedicated to blue-ribbon winners, as they'll showcase a range of winning recipes across the country. While perspectives and interests vary geographically, study the recipes for commonalities and ideas that you can use in your entry.

2) Register Early and Read the Rules

Most culinary competitions require you to register several weeks or even months before the competition date, with many now offering easy-to-use online registration applications.

Each competition will provide detailed entry instructions, often posted online.

Bottom line: Read the rules carefully and follow them to the inch, ounce, minute. While there's plenty of opportunity for creativity (see tip 4), interpretation of the rules and regulations is not one of them.

For example, the rules might specifically state that the item must be presented on a certain-sized white paper plate.

"Don't be concerned if this seems very plain because the plate is not taken into consideration during the judging," explains Linda Amendt, winner of more than 600 first-place ribbons and currently a competition judge and cookbook author. "In this case, the judges will be focused on the taste and appearance of the item."

Professional chefs are ineligible to enter. While Amendt amassed her blue-ribbon collection during her culinary competition years, once her Blue Ribbon Preserves cookbook came out, she no longer qualified as an "amateur" and shifted instead to judging competitions.

Some culinary competitions are sponsored by specific companies and require you to use certain brand ingredients in your recipe. King Arthur Flour sponsored the cake competition I entered, and I was required to bring in the empty flour bag to prove I used their flour.

Once you officially enter, the fair organizers will provide you with detailed instructions on the exact time and location to bring your entry, right down to convenient parking recommendations.

With many fairs lasting a week or more, the judging schedule is quite detailed with different categories being judged on different days.

Make sure you read all of this ahead of time and call the fair organizers if you have any questions.

Organizational mistakes can be made, so double check the judging time you're given with the master schedule that's usually posted on the fair's website. During my cake competition day at the fair, a woman walked in with a beautiful appetizer tray. Unfortunately, the appetizer judging took place the day before.

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3) Choose Categories Carefully

There are many baked-goods category options for you to contemplate, from the classics like chocolate chip cookies to newer categories based on modern trends, like gluten-free baking.



Pick your category carefully, sticking to something that you feel comfortable and are experienced in making.

“Remember, the simpler a recipe, the more perfect the end product needs to be,” advises Jeanie Jung, a seasoned home economist who has judged Wisconsin state and county fairs for more than 40 years. “Baking-powder biscuits are a good example, as the ingredients don’t really vary; therefore, they need to be made absolutely perfect.”

4) Season With Creativity

What personal, unique touch can you add to the recipe to give it that special something the judges glow over?

Here are some ideas: Add an unexpected ingredient to a classic recipe, like dried cranberries to chocolate chip cookies. Use common ingredients in new ways, like adding puréed beets to muffin batter. Create a healthier version of recipe favorites by cutting back on fats or increasing fiber.

5) Write a Perfect Recipe

Make sure your recipe is perfectly written. Add extra description and spell out abbreviations for words such as “teaspoon” just to be perfectly clear. Give detailed measurements for pan size. Describe how the item should look when it’s done, such as: “Golden brown on top with a lighter brown along the edges.”

Your recipe title should be both engaging and descriptive, pulling the judges in to take a closer look at your entry.

Consider using a rhyme or alliteration for the title, still focused on communicating the entry, such as “Crunchy Cranberry Cobbler.”

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6) Add Organization

Entering a culinary competition is different than everyday home cooking.

Take extra care getting organized. Test your oven temperature beforehand with an oven thermometer to make sure it’s accurate. Don’t clean your oven the day before you make something for the competition because the cleaning odors may still be lingering. Use the absolute best-quality ingredients you can find. Open a fresh box of baking staples such as baking soda or powder to ensure freshness. Use room temperature eggs and flour.

7) Attend to Details

If you take your usual home cooking up a notch when company comes over, think of baking your fair entry as if the president of the United States was stopping by. Practice baking your entry several times first, adding notes to your recipe text on subtle details. Don’t rush when creating your final entry. Block out more time than you typically need to prepare the item so you can make it more mindfully. Measure accurately, and never measure the salt over the mixing bowl to ensure extra granules don’t taint your recipe. Crack the eggs in a small cup before adding to your batter to make sure no eggshells fall in. As fate would have it, the one bite the judge takes would be the one with that tiny shell chip.

“Remember that people—judges included—eat with their eyes, so take particular care that everything looks just right,” advises Jung. “If you’re making multiples of something, such as cookies or rolls, aim to form them as uniform in shape and size as possible.”

8) Transport With Care

Remember how I confessed that my cake was “jiggling in the trunk”?

Avoid that and craft a perfect arrival of your entry with a dash of strategic preparation.

“Stop by a cake-supply store [party-supply store] and pick up a cake box,” Amendt recommends. “These inexpensive cardboard boxes work well to transport your item, and then you can simply carry the box into the judging area. Add twisted towels as needed in your trunk to hold the box in place so it doesn’t slide around.”

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9) Learn from the Judges

“Remember that every judge brings their own personal preferences and biases to the judging session, such as some like crunchy cookies while others prefer chewy varieties,” Amendt explains.



“The key for you as an entrant is to not focus on the winning, but to simply relax, have a good time and learn from the process.”

From my experience, the judging session, which is typically open to the public, proved to be the most interesting part of the process.

When I first saw Jung on stage “eating with her eyes” and staring at my entry, I felt self-conscious, but this quickly melted away as she started talking to the audience about successful baking, cake tips and savvy insight based on her years as a trained home economist.

Judges, like Jung, aim to be constructive and positive. Judging is anonymous, so no one, including the judges, knows which entry belongs to whom until after the awarding of the ribbons. Even though I came out of that session sans blue ribbon, I took home a bushel of tips and left itching to get back in the kitchen.

If your entry wins a ribbon, it typically will be held for display throughout the rest of the fair, at which point it will be thrown out for food safety issues.

Remember to bring some Tupperware or other containers to bring your item back home if you don’t win. Non-winning items usually need to be picked up immediately after the judging session.

10) Have Fun and Return

Bottom line: Culinary competitions at fairs create reasons to gather together as a community to celebrate the joys and pleasures of home cooking.

“But be forewarned: Entering county- and state-fair culinary competitions can be addictive,” Amendt says with a smile. “Folks may enter one item their first year and come back the following with entries in multiple categories.”

Amendt accurately recaped my experience: I started plotting what I would enter next year as I sat in the audience watching the judging.

Think about involving friends and family and coming to the fair together, each entering items in the same category.

I’m planning to recruit my mother, another enthusiastic cook, to come next year and we’ll both take on another favorite category of ours—appetizers—and share a fun day together at the fair.

“The spirit of these competitions remains enjoyable and encouraging to everyone to further develop their love of cooking,” sums up Jung. “I remember I once had two loaves of bread in one category that were totally different bread recipes but were identical in shape and size and must have come out of the same pan. Turns out the entries were from a husband and wife who each entered their own bread version.”

In addition to all the personal benefits of entering culinary competitions, such as fun and learning, you’re also helping to keep this agriculture-rooted fair tradition alive and vibrant.

While the exhibits might have changed over the years, the fair’s roots remain true to celebrating and enhancing American agriculture. Who knows—you or I may someday claim the title of “Queen of the Fair,” an honorary distinction many fairs give to the person winning the most ribbons each year.

About the Author: Lisa Kivirist is the co-author of *ECOpreneur* and *Rural Renaissance* and is a W.K. Kellogg Food and Society Policy Fellow. You can find her dreaming about her blue-ribbon winner for next year’s Wisconsin State Fair on her Wisconsin farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity.

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