

Judging of food entries is a 'fair' process

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People come from miles around to have their baking chewed up and spit out by Marian Wells and her associates.

Sounds rather unsavory, but actually it's quite an honor. Wells is one of many judges who have the pleasure of taste-testing the food entries at the Markham Fair this year - and for seven years before this one.

Said Wells: "To do this kind of job, you have to really enjoy food preparation," and she does.

Her interest in food apparently is an inherited thing. For many years, her grandmother ventured north from Finch Ave. and Hwy. 48 to enter her butter at the Markham Fair - and she won often!

"For me, judging is a really personal thing," said Wells. "Personally, I don't like a lot of spice in my apple pie, but other judges might be looking for that." Which is why the judges are annually rotated through the various food categories at the Markham Fair. Smaller fairs restrict their judges to two year

terms, then new ones are selected.

Of course, there are some things that are absolute, and have nothing to do with personal taste - namely, following instructions.

The prize book, which outlines the various categories of competition at the fair, gives explicit instructions for each item - instructions that are sometimes ignored.

"You have to go by the rules. That's the most important thing," said Wells. Violation results in immediate disqualification of the errant entries.

DON'T BE DISQUALIFIED

"The rules are there for a specific reason, generally to enhance the entries," Wells explained. If the prize book states three cookies must be displayed on a small, white, bread-and-butter-sized paper plate; anything deviating from that - like a large plate, or five cookies on a small plate - is automatically disqualified. Likewise, if the category states "baked plain cheesecake with cherry topping", this is not a good time to be original and experiment with raspberry/peach topping!

When Wells heads out to the fairgrounds on Wednesday to judge for this year's fair, she will take along her own equipment that helps personalize the experience for her: her own apron, fork, knife and linen tea towel to clean her utensils with. Other judges, many of them domestic science teachers, will don their white lab coats and carry their own supplies.

Crackers and warm water will be supplied, so that the judges can clean their palates between tastings. Do the judges actually eat the samplings? Sometimes, but frequently the morsel is chewed, savored, then discreetly spit out, particularly when you're sampling 30 butter tarts, explained Wells.

LOOKING GOOD

Taste is not the only criteria for the judges, though. "Eye appeal is a very big factor," said Wells. "Regardless of how good it tastes, it has to be attractive."

The most difficult categories for Wells are the butter tarts and the chocolate chip cookies. Generally, the judges get down to the last four, and it's so close they have to go back to things like eye appeal.

"The quality at Markham Fair is usually excellent," Wells said. "Some people have been entering for years, other winners only enter their particular specialty."

Visitors to the fair are treated each year to cooking demonstrations and this year is no exception.



Marion Wells has been judging food entries at the Markham Fair for eight years, and has also judged at the Uxbridge and Sunderland Fairs. A fine cook herself, she is currently busy with her preserves!

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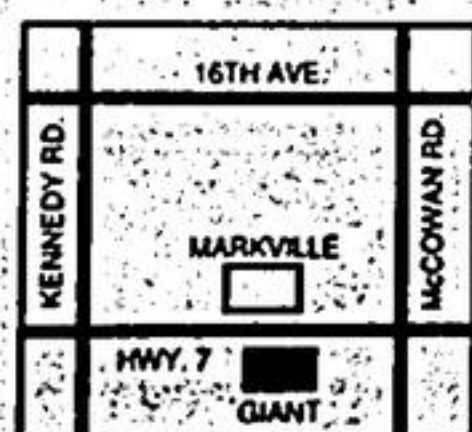
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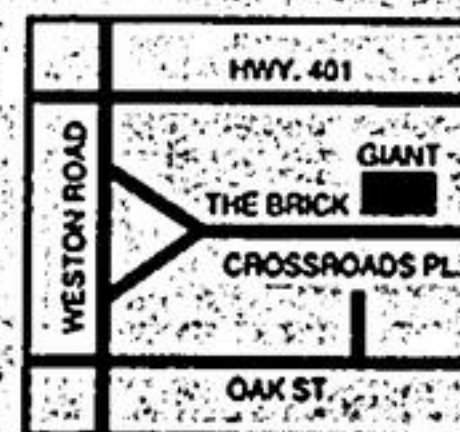
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