

# WHAT NO ONE EVER TELLS YOU ABOUT THOSE TV CAKE COMPETITIONS

TIPS FROM A SEASONED COMPETITOR

By Dana Herbert

Nothing thrills pastry chefs and cake designers more than the thought of going into battle in the televised gladiator-style cake competitions that have become so popular recently. The bottom line is that America loves to see what is possible and over the top in the cake and sugar world. And what we can accomplish is truly amazing.

As a gladiator myself, I have won and lost on different occasions in my culinary competition career. I suffered defeat in WeTV's *Wedding Cake Wars*, and TLC's *Ultimate Cake Off*. It wasn't until my latest television competition that I took the top spot and crown of the grueling *Next Great Baker* on TLC. Through victory and defeat, one thing remains, and that is you are always learning and sharpening the tools in your toolbox.

There are so many things that no one ever told me about these competitions, so I thought I would share some of my best tips and advice with you.

## **DANA'S TOP COMPETITION TIPS**

### **ALWAYS KNOW THE RULES**

Knowing the rules to the competition is one of the keys to winning. Not knowing the rules can come back and bite you in the rear. All competitions are different and the rules vary slightly. Some allow you to prep before you come and some do not. Be smart and be prepared.

### **PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS**

At no point in time should you try to defeat someone who is a master at a certain technique unless you have trained in that specific discipline to defeat them. It's kind of like the average man trying to get in the boxing ring with Mike Tyson. You already know what the outcome is going to be.



Do what you do BEST, and what got you noticed in the first place. Play the game to your advantage in creating something that makes your expertise shine.

### COME PREPARED FOR THE WORST

Always know what Plan B would be if certain things were to happen along the way, and know how you will deal with the worst possible situation. Trust me, in the bright lights, high adrenaline, and on hot sets, things crash, fall, get bumped, and more. It happens.

### ALWAYS PREPARE MORE THAN YOU NEED

Whether it's delicate flowers or pieces of fragile sugar, it only takes the wrong type of bump for your fragile works of art to fall and break. If you need 10 flowers, make 20. One day you will be glad you did.

### HAVING THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Develop ways to make your life easier. Bring tools to make it easier on yourself during competition. Whether it's a dehydrator or fan to accelerate the drying and cooling process or having the right stencil and impression mats, come loaded with items to accelerate the process of preparing your masterpiece.

### IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

Think about your concept. Many of these judges have made and have seen so many cakes and sculptures that it is hard to inspire and wow some of them. Make sure your piece is highly detailed and that there is good visual flow and design to it. Bigger is not always better. Think about captivating their eyes in a way where every time they look at a piece, they see something else. Lights and movement are always a plus. Most of all, keep it clean.

### CREATE A TIME LINE

Who would have thought it? A time line! Know where you would like to be at a certain time, hour by hour. New competitors tend to make a time table and use their fastest times. In these competition situations, people are asking questions and there is dialogue either with the judges, teammates or production, so things take longer than you think. Whatever you guess is your fastest time, add a minimum of 30 percent to it. If you're ahead of schedule then that's awesome because there is more detail time for the piece.

### BE IN CONTROL

The more you are in control of your competition items the better. Some competitors drive coast to coast to remain in control of their competition materials. Couriers or shipping companies don't necessarily care if your gum paste flowers get destroyed in transit, but you will. Try to take what you can on the plane, if travel is necessary. True story: I had 12 cakes destroyed in preparation for *Ultimate Cake Off*. The Executive Chef at the hotel called my room and left me a message and said, "Hey I know your stuff is broken. I saw the USPS guy just tossing your boxes." Moral of the story: no one cares about your stuff as much as you do.

### TEAMWORK

When you're a member of a team, be UNSELFISH. In the pursuit of excellence, I always let people do what they do best and allow them to shine. You will always get the maximum out of them. Tackle large items together to increase the time left for detail.



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