



Victor of the 'Halloween Wars'

Local pastry chef replaces area confectioner on Food Network contest -- and wins.

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Susan Notter demonstrates her expertise last month at the ...


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There is good. And then there is scary good.

Pastry chef Susan Notter, a Lancaster County resident, was part of a scary good team on the Food Network show, "Halloween Wars."

But after the first battle in the "Halloween Wars," Notter's prospects on the show simply looked scary.

On the show, five teams — each consisting of a cake decorator, a sugar artist and a pumpkin carver — competed in timed

challenges to create elaborate, Halloween-themed confections of pumpkin, molding chocolate and sugar.

Notter, director of the pastry arts program at the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, a division of YTI Career Institute-Lancaster, began "Halloween Wars" as a member of Team Tarantula.

Team Tarantula was eliminated after the first round, spelling doom for Notter. But she got a reprieve — and it came, coincidentally, when another Lancaster sugar artist departed from the show.

Julie Bashore, a master confectioner and former owner of The House of Clarendon, a Lancaster bakery, had been put on a team called the Bling Bats. The personalities on that team did not mix well: Bashore clashed with the cake decorator and quit after the first episode.

In an interview, Bashore said she believed the show's producers were intent on stirring up animosity between her and her teammates. "I didn't feel that the focus was on skill. I felt that the focus was on drama," she said.

After Bashore bowed out, Notter was invited to take her place on Team Bling Bats. She hesitated at first.

"I did not want to be eliminated twice and I was also really tired after going through the first round," Notter explained. "I had to find myself emotionally again and work myself back into the competitive state of mind.

"It's like having really good momentum, stopping and then restarting. But once we restarted, we never stopped!"

She joined the Bling Bats in the second episode, and when the credits rolled on the fourth episode, Notter and her fellow Bling Bats were sipping champagne as the winners of the show's \$50,000 prize.

The Bling Bats wowed the judges with their detailed creations. These included a Marie Antoinette-era vampire, with pink hair Notter created with spun sugar, and a macabre, skeletal Sleeping Beauty, surrounded by stark trees, fashioned by Notter out of pulled sugar. "I think my favorite piece was Sleeping Beauty — just beautifully horrific!" Notter noted.

She drew particular praise from the show's judges for her tasty treats. In the final episode, which had an underworld theme, she whipped up a batch of dark chocolate candies with a

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lemon jelly filling and cayenne pepper ganache.

"Halloween Wars" was taped last December, but Notter was bound to keep the show's outcome a secret until the final episode aired last Sunday.

She has enjoyed the reactions of her students to her victory. "They were really excited about it, which was nice," she said last week.

Notter, who hails from England, is the mother of two grown children and an 8-year-old son. She was named one of the top 10 pastry chefs in the United States by Pastry Art & Design Magazine. She has been with the YTI Career Institute since 2009.

She describes pastry as "an art and a science," which demands creativity, discipline, time management and focus. She sees competitions as means of honing her skills.

"To do different things, to meet different people, to be in new environments, to push yourself to do different things, it just makes you better," she said.

Last year, Notter competed in the "Sugar and Candy Fashion" episode of "Food Network Challenge." In January, she'll represent the United States in the "Pastry Queen" competition, an all-female pastry chef contest, in Rimini, Italy.

Doing "Halloween Wars" was physically demanding. She was away for 12 days, and worked 12 hours a day. "It becomes very draining," she said.

But she got along so well with her Bling Bats teammates, pastry chef Karen Portaleo and pumpkin carver Shawn Feeney, that she and Portaleo have worked together on subsequent demonstrations. "Everybody gelled — there was nobody pushing, saying 'This is the way it has to

be,' " she said.

She said she hasn't yet received her share of the "Halloween Wars" bounty; she intends to use some of the money to take a sugar artistry class in France. "Fifty thousand dollars, split between the three of us. It's like, 'oh, wow!' And then you begin to break it down ... and it's, 'oh, wow,' " she said.

Any monetary reward is nice, but it's the "visibility factor" that means more when you do a show such as "Halloween Wars," she said.

She appreciated the opportunity to showcase her talents. "It's nice to know that you're wanted," she said.

Contact Sunday News staff writer Suzanne Cassidy at scassidy@lnpnews.com.

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