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How to make desserts worthy of Culinary Olympic gold



ERIN NEGLEY | Staff Writer Nov 10, 2016



Photo courtesy of Susan Notter

One of the desserts Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.



These petit fours, weighing less than a ½ oz., were the smallest parts of Team USA’s menu for what’s known as the culinary Olympics.

Local pastry chef Susan Notter spent 18 months with the team testing, tasting and perfecting these petit fours and other desserts.



All that work paid off. The team won three gold medals and ranked fourth in the world.

For Notter, the precision of these tiny confections was the most challenging part of their Olympic training. She had to make seven petit fours: one for testing and six on the plate, all exactly alike.

Notter crafted seven tiny chocolate feathers to decorate the steampunk chocolate hats. Judges later told her they noticed the details on the feathers were not exactly the same in each treat.

“Stuff like that, that’s the hardest to do,” she said after returning from Germany. “To have things that are real food be so precise sometimes is tricky.”



Chef Susan Notter made desserts for the gold-medal-winning Team USA in the international culinary Olympics.

PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL OF CULINARY ARTS

Notter was one of the two pastry chefs and the only woman on the American team for the [24th Internationale Kochkunst Ausstellung International Exhibition of Culinary Art](#).

When she's not preparing for the competition known as the culinary Olympics, she's program director for the [Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts](#). Notter's also appeared on Food Network cooking competition shows, including "Halloween Wars," "Cupcake Wars" and "Food Network Challenge."



American Culinary Federation sent a national team and other teams, including a military team and a youth team, to the culinary Olympics in Germany.

Photo courtesy of Susan Notter

About a year and a half ago, Notter was recruited onto American Culinary Federation's Team USA. Since then, each month she's traveled to Texas to train over a weekend. The team planned the menu and practiced the timed cooking challenges.

To prep for each training weekend, Notter would spend a week prepping ingredients.

She worked with another pastry chef on the team. She handled hot food kitchen dessert and petit fours for the cold food presentation. The other pastry chef handled the plated desserts and the towering dessert showpiece.



This is not the first time Notter's participated in the culinary Olympics. She competed with the Maryland team in 1996, the U.S. team in 2000 and judged in 2004.

She agreed to join the team one more time because it's a lot of work but also a lot of fun.

"Challenging yourself, working to that level, trying to come up with new ideas, helping push the team, it's a pretty exciting thing to be part of," Notter said.

For the competition in Germany, Team USA created a steampunk theme for the cold competition and incorporated as many U.S. ingredients as possible into the hot-food side.

The group picked a fight song for the opening ceremony: 50 Cent's "Ready for War" to make an impression.

"Sweden had come before us and they had music about sustainability and here we come saying we're ready for war," Notter said.



For the hot kitchen competition, teams have 90 minutes to set up. Then they have six hours to prepare a three-course meal for 110. The appetizer was potato-smoked halibut timbale with Petrossian caviar, corn mousse, roasted beet, celery-herb salad and king crab emulsion. The entrée was a thyme-basted pork loin with country sausage, braised shank and a white bean fritter with a foraged mushroom ragout, red cabbage, parsnip, cipollini onion tarte tatin and Madeira Jus Lie.



For dessert, Notter made a bright yellow quenelle of 10-flavor sorbet sits on bed of roasted pineapple. The main part of the dessert is a coconut financier cake, named because it doesn't crumble and can be eaten on Wall Street without a mess. The cake's topped with a chocolate plaque, a white chocolate and coconut mousse covered with a tropical glaze and filled with banana crème and strawberry sauce.

“So you go into it, and there’s all of these other flavors inside as well,” Notter said.

It’s topped with a flower made of ultra-thin piped chocolate. There’s a merengue covered with coconut, a crispy macademia nut cookie, a steamed banana cake with a banana on top, hibiscus foam, edible citrus grass and an edible star flower.

That night, the team finally had a chance to eat. They added the left-over caviar at \$1,000 a tin as a pizza topping.

They spent the next day prepping the cold food items from 9 a.m. to 3 a.m. Then they had two hours to set everything up.



One of the desserts Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.

Photo courtesy of Susan Notter

Notter made a medley of chocolate hazelnut and orange for the second display.

The gear is made of very thin chocolate. There are pieces of chocolate roulade cake and knots of piped marshmallow topped with edible flowers. A quenelle made of chocolate semifreddo (a semi-frozen dessert) with a chocolate glaze sits on top of hazelnut cream. Caramelized hazelnut and orange slices garnish the dessert. In the glass is an orange broth with orange zest and edible flowers to be poured into the plate.

She also made the petit fours.



One of the petit fours Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.

Photo courtesy of Susan Notter

The base is a candy with blueberry vodka in the bottom. A very thin sugar cone is filled with lemon crème.

“When you bite into it, you bite through the sugar layer and then it’s got the lemon and the blueberry inside,” Notter says.

On top is a meringue and a chocolate disc.



One of the petit fours Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.

Photo courtesy of Susan Notter

The base is passion fruit ganache. The hat is chocolate ganache dipped into a shiny chocolate glaze with chocolate feather.



One of the petit fours Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.

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The cameo's made of chocolate. A spice cake with dates and walnuts is wrapped in almond paste.



One of the petit fours Susan Notter made for the culinary Olympics.

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The corset is an almond cookie with piped-on lace. Inside, there's torrone (and Italian nut and nougat confection) with pistachios and dried apricot.



The next day, the U.S. team learned all of that practice and the menu earned enough points to place fourth out of 30 countries. Singapore won first place.

Notter broke the glass ceiling for the U.S. team, as the first female pastry chef in a gold medal-winning team.

“I’m pretty stoked. I’m really happy about it,” she says. “I would like to set a precedence for other female pastry chefs and say, ‘Work hard. You can do it. You can get to this.’”



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