



Katie and Belinda team together to add icing artistic touches to the gingerbread animals. The royal icing they use for holding together and decorating the components works like a culinary cement.

Gingerbread Ark Floats To New Heights

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DALLASTOWN (York Co.) — A winning York Fair gingerbread creation has made it to the big time.

Katie Myers' gingerbread ark, complete with its parade of two-by-two animals, took first place in its category at the York Fair in September. Her mother, perennial regional baking contest winner Belinda Myers, arranged to have a professional photograph taken of the culinary creation. Belinda submitted the photograph with an entry form to the "Good Housekeeping" magazine's annual gingerbread contest.

The gingerbread ark snagged third place in the national contest and a \$500 prize.

Belinda and Katie split the prize money, then put their heads together in the family's Springfield Township farm kitchen to remember the details of how the creation had been fashioned from original patterns they designed. The magazine needed step-by-step directions since it planned to have the gingerbread ark recreated by a professional chef and displayed this holiday season, along with other top contest winners, at New York City's Rockefeller Square.

This mother-daughter culinary duo has had its ups and downs along the gingerbread contest path. In 2002, the first year that the York Fair held the Brer Rabbit molasses-sponsored gingerbread competition, Belinda and Katie built a barn. The barn was fashioned, of course, out of their Grandma's Gingerbread recipe, complete with appropriate animals and accessories, including a silo.

On their arrival at the fair with the intricately-decorated barn, they learned that the category had the unusual requirement of a dozen cookies to be submitted for the judges' taste-testing. Most contests call for a half-dozen cookies. They tried, unsuccessfully, to halve each of their six cookies to meet the requisite dozen.

"I told Katie at the time that I felt there was some special thing the gingerbread barn was supposed to be meant for," Belinda says, relating how they swallowed their disappointment at

the submission error and hauled it back home.

In a classic lemons-to-lemonade move, the gingerbread barn was donated for fundraising during the junior livestock sale. The sale generated proceeds of \$7,000, which the juniors had voted earlier to donate to the Red Cross' post-Sept. 11 disaster effort.

This year's gingerbread construction was a unique challenge, due to the ark's curved shape. Incorporating a giraffe, with its head poked out through the roof, required an extra measure of deftness as well, so as not to break either the roof or the giraffe's long, delicate gingerbread neck in the process.

Cereal squares provided appropriate shingles for the roof, as well as shredding handily for interior animal "bedding." The ark's two-by-two animal parade included chickens and cows, pigs, rabbits, elephants, lions, butterflies, all air-brushed with food-color painted touches. A pair of sugar bees alighted on a green-icing-covered, ice-cream-cone pine tree. Perched on the top of the ark, which appeared to have come to rest in a pretzel-fenced setting of royal icing grass, was a sugar dove.

And, all that had to fit into the required 12x12-inch display area.

"Getting it there was fun, too, with all the holes and bumps in the roads," said Katie of the trip to transport the fragile, finished creation.

Katie opted not to leave her winning ark at the display area once the judging was complete and the ark bore a blue ribbon. Instead, she and Belinda carefully moved it back to their kitchen, where it sat for a few weeks in the oven, with a candle burning to keep the gingerbread from getting damp. Meanwhile, Belinda contacted several professional photographers before finally finding one who would agree to picture their gingerbread structure.

"Every time we needed to use the oven, we would carefully take it out, change the racks, set it aside, then put it back in when we were finished," said Belinda.

By the time the ark had been photographed against a blue background suggestive of dimish-



Finding animal cookie cutters of the appropriate size and type to complement the ark's dimensions was a challenge, but worth it. This ark took first prize at the York Fair in September and placed third nationally in "Good Housekeeping" magazine's annual gingerbread contest.

ing waters, hurricane Isabel had dumped her own moisture across the region, wreaking mold and mildew havoc. Dampness is a death blow to crisp, sturdy gingerbread, causing it to soften and sag. Mold was spreading across the ark when Belinda and Katie took one long, last look at their hours of work, then dumped it over the fence to their beef herd.

"The cows loved it," Katie said, chuckling about how quickly the cows devoured the gingerbread treat.

Meanwhile, Belinda was literally scouring the countryside for the December 2002 magazine edition that included the entry form for the gingerbread contest. After checking several medical and dental office magazine stacks, she finally tracked a copy down at the local library.

Then, she hit another snag. Her original entry paperwork was returned in the mail. The post office box listed in the contest's published address had been accidentally closed. Notification of the win, and receipt of the prize check, made all the entry frustrations just part of the memory.

The Myers' began entering local food contests many years ago, and Katie has ribbons for winning cookies baked when she was barely tall enough to roll dough at the table. Enrolling as a student at York County School of Technology, Katie initially considered studying in diesel mechanics, but ultimately settled on the school's culinary program.

A regular assistant to her father, Andy, with the farm's beef and crops chores, Katie returned to Vo-Tech for night courses in the diesel mechanics program. She works part-time at a neighbor's dairy farm and is considering returning to school for animal-related studies.

Along with the usual crush of baking specialties for the Christmas holidays, the mother-daughter duo is focusing on the upcoming Pennsylvania Farm Show culinary contests. Both have qualified in the Hershey cocoa competition, Katie with one of her favorite flavor combinations, chocolate and mint. She whipped another pair of flavor favorites into a quickbread, qualifying in that category with an innovative cheese and spinach creation.

Belinda is also eligible for the quickbreads category, along with qualifying with apple and shoofly pies and pineapple upside-down cake.



In addition to helping with the family's beef and crops operation, Katie is employed part-time on a neighboring dairy farm.

The Farm Show competition wraps up the culinary contest season across the region for several months.

One thing is certain though, Katie and Belinda will be busy in the kitchen whipping up trial runs for the next new culinary challenge.

TWO-BY-TWO GRANDMA'S GINGERBREAD

- 1 cup shortening
- 1 cup sugar
- 1½ cup Brer Rabbit dark molasses
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 5 to 5½ cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons ginger
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon cloves

Melt shortening in a small sauce pan over low heat just until melted. Add in order, sugar, molasses, and eggs. Mix well. Cool slightly. Add flour 1 cup at a time plus baking soda, salt, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. Mix well. Turn onto a well floured surface and knead to make a firm stiff dough by hand (you may need a little flour).

Chill for at least three hours or overnight. When ready to roll, set

out for at least 1½ hours for easier rolling. Roll out on a lightly floured surface ¼-inch thick. Using various pattern ark shaped pieces, and animal-shaped cookie cutters. Lay pieces on parchment-covered cookie sheets placing 1 inch apart. Bake in a 375 degree oven for 9 to 12 minutes (smaller pieces may not take as long).

To build the ark, glue pieces together with royal icing.

Royal Icing:
 3 tablespoons meringue powder

4 cups confectioners' sugar
 6 tablespoons water

Beat all ingredients for royal in a large mixer bowl. Whip with wire whip until icing makes stiff peaks.

Keep covered with damp towel while working.

Color-flow (using a small amount of royal icing, add a few drops of water to make a thick liquid consistency. Icing is ready when stirred, the mix will smooth out at a count of 10). The animal shapes are colored flowed on one side. Let dry until hard. Color with various shades.

Place on foil-covered cardboard. Use grass decorating tube covered base to hold animal shapes in place.

