

INTRODUCTION

A PLATED DESSERT IS THE MEASURE OF A PASTRY CHEF. THE ARRANGING OF DESSERT COMPONENTS ON A PLATE—A SLICE OF CAKE, A QUENELLE OF SORBET, A TWIRL OF TUILE—IS AN ART FORM, AND ONE THAT REQUIRES A COMBINATION OF TECHNICAL SKILL, A SENSE OF TIMING, AND AN EYE FOR DESIGN.

Pastry chefs assemble plated desserts every day at restaurants around the world, where, informally at least, they are judged by diners. Here, on home turf, the chef is not under much pressure and is motivated by the opportunity to gain recognition from critics and the restaurant's clientele. But put a formal spin on this ritual by having a group of top pastry chefs as the judges analyzing every step of the process and scrutinizing every detail of the finished product, and then you have a pastry competition. This is real pressure, and it's the type of pressure that challenges competitors to step out of their comfort zone, learn new tricks, and exceed their reach.

This book focuses on America's most prestigious pastry competition, the Pastry Team Championships—World and National—along with fifty recipes for plated desserts from the top teams that have competed over the years. These team competitions bring together the most talented pastry chefs in the world in a three-day whirlwind of sweat, skill, and high drama, with big money and pastry bragging rights as the ultimate prize.

The championships were started in 1999 by Michael Schneider, the co-owner of a company that publishes *Dessert Professional*, a pastry magazine for professionals. Having worked with pastry chefs for many years, Schneider came to consider them more as artists than craftsmen. Instead of paint or clay, however, these artists use flour, sugar, eggs, and butter as their medium. Schneider's idea for the

championships was inspired by the Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie, a global pastry competition that was founded in 1989 by Pastry Chef Gabriel Paillason M.O.F. The "Coupe," as it's known, takes place every two years in Lyon, France, and brings together the world's finest dessert experts in a highly demanding head-to-head competition. In the Coupe, each participating country is represented by a team of three, and each team has ten hours in which to prepare a daunting menu that includes a plated dessert, three chocolate desserts, three frozen fruit desserts, an ice sculpture, a chocolate sculpture, and a pulled sugar showpiece. Technical, artistic, and performance skills are put to the test, and each team is under considerable pressure, with the honor of their home country at stake. As one might expect, countries that compete successfully in Olympic sports are usually represented at this event, including the United States, France, Switzerland, Japan, and Italy, to name a few.

For his competition, Schneider decided to take the idea of the Coupe du Monde to a new level, to create a pastry championship that was, unquestionably, the most challenging in the world. He opted to alternate national and world competitions, with the national challenges held in odd-numbered years and the world competitions in even years. Whichever team won the national event would represent the U.S. at the world event the following year. The first competition took place in Beaver Creek, Colorado, in 1999. From the beginning,

competitors—even seasoned Coupe veterans—found the new championship to be a grueling test of will and skill. In this competition’s format, each team has thirteen hours over the course of two days to present the following items:

- A plated dessert
- An entremets (cake)
- An entremets glacé (frozen bombe)
- Three types of bonbons
- Three types of *petites gâteaux* (small cakes)
- A sugar showpiece
- A chocolate showpiece
- An amenity piece composed of chocolate and sugar, on which to present the bonbons

Scoring is based on a point system, with 40 percent of the total score determined by taste, 30 percent by showpieces, and 30 percent by how cleanly and efficiently each team works. Each team has two judges representing them. At the end of the thirteen hours, when the final whistle blows and all work stops, each team has a half hour to transport their work, which can include huge sugar and chocolate showpieces, from their kitchen to the presentation table. This can be a stressful maneuver, a time when disaster can strike and dreams can shatter. At the 2003 National Pastry Team Championship, for example, Pastry Chef Chris Hanmer created one of the most magnificent sugar pieces anyone had ever seen. Just as Hanmer was about to place his six-foot-tall, *Phantom of the Opera*-inspired piece on the presentation table, he accidentally dipped it forward a tiny bit. He realized this and compensated by tilting it back. When he did this, the piece moved in a whiplike motion and suddenly exploded into tiny bits of pulled sugar. At the end, Hanmer stood there holding the base of the piece, the only thing that was intact. None of the shattered pieces of sugar around him was bigger than a silver dollar. Hanmer, head down, simply swept up the mess and returned to his kitchen without saying a word. A producer from the

Food Network, which was filming the event, was not quite so stoic—she broke down in a flood of tears.

There are other challenges inherent in this event. “One big difference between the Coupe du Monde and the Pastry Team Championships,” notes Schneider, “is that at the Coupe, the use of molds by the chefs to create their elaborate showpieces is accepted. So if a team wants to bring a mold in the shape of a six-foot scorpion, no problem. I can’t emphasize enough how much this means in the heat of the competition. Having a mold at hand to create intricate shapes that are part of a showpiece is a huge labor- and time-saver. When you have to form an animal or object without a mold, things can get pretty hairy.” In the Pastry Team Championships, the use of complex molds is strictly forbidden. The only molds that are allowed are ones for simple geometric shapes—it is unrealistic, explains Schneider, to expect chefs to create a perfect sphere or cube.

Other rules also create problems for competitors. Each team is required to submit a detailed recipe of each dessert they are presenting, including all ingredients and amounts. If the judges can’t taste an ingredient listed in a team’s recipe, it’s considered to be a violation, which usually results in a large scoring deduction. One year, for example, the Swiss team made a plated dessert that was supposed to contain lavender. But none of the judges tasted any lavender, and the team received an enormous deduction. Afterwards, they tried to argue their case—they only used a scant amount, they said, because lavender can be overpowering—but to no avail. If the team used such a small amount that a panel of chefs with highly refined palates could not detect it, then what was the point of using any at all?

Another year, the Italian team was the focus of a scoring controversy. They presented a plated dessert that was enveloped in a veil of vapor. To create the vapor, a small piece of dry ice was concealed in a covered container on the plate. During the judging of the dessert, the head judge, who was Swiss, warned another judge to “be careful when tasting this—dry ice is poisonous, you know.” In the end, the Italian team lost out to Switzerland for third place by one point. The Italian Team, who had heard about the “poisonous” remark, complained about the possibility

of the remark having a negative effect on their score. Had one of the judges who was tasting Team Italy's plated dessert given one less point to them because of the comment, it would have affected the outcome of the competition. In the end, though the final scores stood, Schneider agreed that the remark was contentious and did not ask the Swiss judge to return as head judge of the competition.

With a total prize purse of \$50,000 and an opportunity to be called one of the world's finest pastry chefs, it's not hard to see why the World Pastry Team Championship attracts so many competitors. But the competition itself is no easy feat. Some teams will prepare for up to eighteen months in advance, meeting weekly or more for long practice sessions. To get ready for the 2010 event, Team Japan actually staged mock competitions, creating all required

elements, including showpieces, as if it were the real championship. They did this *fifteen times* before the actual event. With this work ethic and preparation, it is no surprise that Team Japan captured gold at the 2010 competition.

Michael Schneider sees the pastry industry as a whole as the benefactor of these competitions. "In a funny sort of way I think the National and World Pastry Championships do more for the dessert industry than any other event. They inspire pastry chefs to try new techniques and reach levels that they might not have attempted otherwise. And because the events are televised, pastry chefs have gained recognition and respect for what they do." This recognition translates into career advancement and prestige that is worth more than any one-time financial reward. Of course the money's nice, too.

