

AND THE WINNER IS...



For food fans it's difficult to imagine a more pleasurable proposition than a day of grading artisan pies or cheese at an awards show, but there's much more to being a judge than meets the eye. **Jenny Linford** finds out what it takes to hunt down a gold star dish



DID YOU KNOW...

It takes a year of training to become a Women's Institute food judge



JILL SAYS...
I want my judges to be professional, diplomatic and educational – they shouldn't just say something is 'great'



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hen it comes to food TV, the competition format wins hands down. The success of *MasterChef*, *Great British Menu* and *Great British Bake Off* just shows how strong our appetite for the emotional drama that comes with people competing against each other actually is. The appeal, however, isn't just limited to the TV. In the real world of food, recent years have seen the number of food-centred competitions increase hugely, while winning prizes or awards can have huge implications for artisan producers.

Traditionally village and agricultural shows have been an extremely important arena for local competition, giving jam enthusiasts and home brewers alike the chance to pit their talents against like-minded makers. Often present at these events is the Women's Institute; members can be found at shows across the country conscientiously assessing all kinds of delicious delicacies.

The training of the WI's judges is taken very seriously according to Jill Brand, lead tutor for cookery judging at the institute. "It takes

about a year. I want my judges to be professional, diplomatic and educational – they shouldn't just say something is 'great'. If there's a problem, a good judge should be able to articulate exactly what it is." As you'd expect, a good understanding of cooking techniques and flavour is essential for would-be judges, and Jill encourages all of her students to take part in food competitions themselves too.

The Art of Judging

Judges are trained in the technique of analysing iconic dishes such as Victoria sponge cakes and shown how to offer meaningful critiques, before being sent out over the summer to shadow expert judges at village, town and county shows. For Jill, spreading knowledge is at the heart of judging, and she regularly takes part herself. "In a day I'll have to try something like 90 cakes!" she laughs. "Judging is about educating and that's what the WI is all about. It's also a great opportunity to learn about your own shortfalls; I'm always discovering something new. Most people take the course because they want to develop their own skills and improve their cooking. Everyone knows the level of training involved, so WI judges are very highly regarded."

For food producers as well as amateurs, entering their wares into competitions also offers a chance to learn from feedback.

Food retail expert Sandy Boyd, the brains behind Chatsworth Farm Shop, Ludlow Food Centre and the Bodnant Welsh Food Centre, is frequently on food judging panels. "Competitions give businesses an impetus to care about the quality of what they do. Judging feedback, as long as it's constructive, is absolutely critical in helping people evaluate what they've done wrong." Not only entering but winning is, of course, useful. Sandy cites Great Taste, an awards scheme set up by the Guild of Fine Food in 1994 as a competition offering genuine opportunities to food producers. From 246 entries in its first year, 2014 has seen a cap set on the number of entries at a massive 10,000.

Increasingly, more contemporary food competitions are honing in on one particular type of food, with special ceremonies being held to celebrate everything from cheese and beer, to more niche topics like jam, marmalade, Scotch pies and even oyster shucking. In the age of social media, competitions of this nature are proving an excellent way of increasing interest in a specific specialities. Having successfully achieved European recognition – by way of Protected Geographical Indicator status – for the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie, the Melton Mowbray Pie Association launched the British Pie Awards in 2009 and is now one of the country's most popular food competitions.





WEIRD & WONDERFUL
 There are now events dedicated to jam, Scotch pies & oyster shucking!



food photography for PR and some of the imagery was so outstanding I wanted to shout about it, but there were no awards schemes to enter them in," she explains. "I woke up in the middle of the night three years ago and thought 'well, we'll have to do something about this.' With the rise of food bloggers and smartphones, food photography is a vast cultural movement. I felt it was an unrecognised art form. It's not just about pretty pictures of food on a plate, it's about the whole cultural range of eating."

Among the prestigious jury of judges for this year's awards is award-winning journalist Jay Rayner. "We're saturated with images, which is why we need the awards. This is about setting standards," he declares. "Digital technology means that anybody can now take photos of their dinner and anybody does. In Britain we have one of the most sophisticated cookbook sectors in the world, in terms of both looks and content. The food photographers we have are very, very good at what they do. There is an imperative across all media to celebrate the really good stuff," he adds.

This month at Great British Food we're launching our first ever food awards scheme, The Farm Produce Awards – which will celebrate the very best local food made with the UK's fantastic farm produce. For more information skip to p.64



All Eyes on the Pies

"The thinking behind it was pretty simple," explains Stephen Hallam, treasurer of the association. "We're a nation of pie lovers, so we thought let's celebrate the best. The awards judge all sorts of pies – traditional pork obviously, but also hot, cold, sweet and savoury." Embraced with enthusiasm by food fans, the event takes place in the magnificent St Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray, every year and has become a huge part of the town's culinary scene.

Sally Lewis of The Pie Kitchen set up her pie-making business with her partners three years ago because, she explains, "we just thought there were so many bad pies around!" Focusing on pastries made with local, Suffolk produce, Sally and her team were delighted to win the top title of Supreme Pie Champion for their Chicken, Chantenay Carrots and Bacon pie. "It was fantastic and really gave us

a confidence boost. It gave us loads of publicity and we even got to film with Heston Blumenthal." Winning the award has seen The Pie Kitchen's sales double. "Farmers' markets we couldn't get into before suddenly had a different attitude to us. We're entering again this year, so the pressure is on!"

Such is the power and appeal of the competition format that the food media themselves have set up events, such as Radio Four's highly-respected Food and Farming Awards which honour the best of British food. Food writing, from cookbooks to journalism, is recognised by the Guild of Food Writers' Awards, established in 1996, while food photographers can now compete in the Pink Lady Food Photographer of the Year Award.

The latter was established by Caroline Kenyon of Kenyon Communications because, as she explains, "I commissioned a lot of