

Harrington woman takes sweet opportunity to appear on 'Great American Baking Show'

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By Matt McDonald

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Baker Susan Simpson at her Harrington home on Wednesday. Ms. Simpson is a contestant on the sixth season of "The Great American Baking Show."

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By Matt McDonald

HARRINGTON — When Susan Simpson was told she had been selected to be one of the nine contestants on the sixth season of “The Great American Baking Show,” she needed a moment to snap out of it.

The first words out of her mouth: “Could you say that again, please?”

For the Harrington baker, the culinary series, on The Roku Channel, had all the right ingredients to satisfy her sweet tooth and taste for competition. But besides cakes, something else was rising in the show’s kitchen: friendship.

Ms. Simpson, 64, is a former sixth grade teacher turned home-school instructor and stay-at-home mom to her four sons. Her husband, Guy Simpson, is the pastor of a local church — the reason why they moved from Pennsylvania to Harrington 27 years ago.

Besides baking, Ms. Simpson also teaches violin and makes pottery and jewelry; she took a pair of cake earrings with her to England to wear on the show when it filmed last year.

From a young age, she enjoyed watching her grandmothers baking in the kitchen. One of them would do so without consulting a recipe. “She would just throw handfuls of flour, and she’d never measure anything,” Ms. Simpson said.

As a teenager, she made bread, cakes and cookies.

“If it has sugar and butter, I like to make it,” she said.

She had a deal with her mom; if she baked, her mom would clean up. At 16, she entered the first of many baking competitions to come and walked away with a win, courtesy of the twisted sweetbread she learned how to make from her Oma (German for “grandmother”).

That’s how she learned she had a bit of a thing for baking under pressure.

“(I) don’t remember if there was a money prize or not. But that didn’t matter,” she said, “I’m an adrenaline junkie and competition is just like ... it’s so much fun.”

She enjoys decorating most of all, something that was evident during an interview in her home a few days before the release of the new season. As of Friday, all six episodes are now available to stream on Roku.

She was making key lime macarons, crisscrossing each delicate cookie sandwich with melted white chocolate, to an asymmetric effect. Using her index finger and thumb, she finished each with a dusting of crushed freeze-dried raspberries.

It was one of several baked goods she was making ahead of the first of several watch parties with friends and family. Each episode, they will be enjoying some of the very same confections she made for the judges.

Ms. Simpson had wanted to be on the show, an adaption of “The Great British Bake Off,” for years, applying for four of the five seasons filmed before the show took a break during the pandemic.

She always made it past the first round of cuts and on multiple occasions was flown out West for in-person auditions that mimic the feel and pacing of the show — down to the commercial kitchens, blind challenges and constant distractions.

“They give you a recipe you’ve never seen before. You’re timed, people are talking to and interrupting you. You’ve got a camera in your face the whole time. It’s to simulate how you would do if you made the show. And it was so much fun,” she said.

“Can you imagine? She loves the pressure,” Mr. Simpson said from across the kitchen table.

One of those years, she got the call while on vacation on Smith Island, Maryland, asking if she could be in Los Angeles the next day. She and her husband made a mad dash to catch the mail boat back to the mainland next morning.

Her sixth time applying, in April of last year, was the charm. The show paid for her flight to the filming location, near London, and her hotel. Her husband stayed behind. There would be fewer questions from curious neighbors that way and therefore easier to keep the secret safe. The five weeks were the longest time the couple had ever been apart.

Filming days were long inside the show’s iconic tent that summer, all nine contestants’ ovens roaring.

“We were dripping with sweat,” Ms. Simpson said.

But the “Technical Challenges” were the hardest part of the whole show. Whereas other challenges involve competitors’ original recipes, this daunting test has them make an item they do not know until the moment it is unveiled. No recipe is provided; just a heap of ingredients.

“I lost sleep over the technicals,” she said.

There is no prize for the champion per se. The honor of winning is enough.

That’s not to say Ms. Simpson didn’t enjoy her five weeks in England — quite the opposite. “It was fabulous, one of the best experiences of my life,” she said.

One of the best things about the show were the new friends she made as contestants bonding in the flames of competition. What started as requests for vanilla while practicing some more after long hours of shooting now are phone calls almost every day.

“I definitely made lifelong friends. And while we were there, we encouraged one another. It was not like cutthroat,” she said, “It felt like we were the USA Olympic baking team.”

Ms. Simpson was particularly eager to get another shot at making those macarons. In episode one, contestants were asked to make Italian-style macarons for a technical challenge. But Ms. Simpson had only heard of the French way to make them — the difference is in the preparation of the meringue. It didn’t go as well as she would have liked.

“I want(ed) to prove to myself and my family and friends that I can do this,” she said.

That sharing part of baking is one of the greatest joys for her.

“I love giving baked goods to other people,” Ms. Simpson said. “(It’s) almost as good as licking the bowl.”

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