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Loudoun

EXTRA

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PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

Elizabeth LaBrecque, 17, with her father, Bob, in the background, has been winning state baking competitions since she was 7.

The Sweet Taste of Success

The Baking LaBrecque Sisters Cream the Competition

By KARIN BRULLIARD
Washington Post Staff Writer

In the dining room of an airy Purcellville home, the walls are covered with framed purple and blue ribbons stamped with the names of various Virginia fairs, testaments to the LaBrecque sisters' baking dominance.

As Elizabeth LaBrecque, 17, stood by the dining table, smiling modestly, her beaming father, Bob LaBrecque, circled the room, showing off his daughters' winnings.

"It gets too cluttered if you put up the second-place ribbons," he said.

Some local fairs have banned the sisters — Elizabeth and Amanda, 20 — from entering their cakes and cookies, to give others a

chance. One year, Amanda LaBrecque's apple pie, topped with a pinwheel made of leaf-shaped pieces of pie crust, was disqualified from the Virginia State Fair because it looked bakery-made.

In the small world of Virginia competitive baking, the sisters sometimes are simply too good. Most of the time, they're just plain triumphant.

At this year's state fair, which ends today, Amanda won a best-of-section award for a chocolate box filled with truffles, mints and turtles, and four first-place awards. Elizabeth snagged 10 blue ribbons — some for photography, but most for sweets — and two best-of-

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Candy made by Elizabeth LaBrecque includes dark and milk chocolate truffles and two chocolate-clay roses.

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By MICHAEL
Washington Post

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Sisters Are Baking Champs

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sections. Both have been state champions in one confectionery category or another every year since they were 7.

The sisters, who compete in different age groups, each came out on top with their tart and reliably successful lemon chess pies. The pie's key, Elizabeth said, is fresh eggs, particularly fresh duck eggs. And she means fresh: A flock of black chickens and a few ducks jauntily roam the family's back yard.

Each has her specialty — Elizabeth tends to be better at pies, Amanda at breads — but the sisters say they learned all their tricks from their mother, Violet LaBrecque, a national baking champ who has since retired from competition to give baking classes at home. (One of her students, daughter-in-law Holly LaBrecque of Purcellville, took home several state fair ribbons herself, for canned foods and preserves.) Like her daughters, Violet also has been banished from contests for being too good.

On a recent afternoon, Elizabeth, Bob and Violet piled into their kitchen, a cozy, lace-curtained room that betrays no hint of a baking dynasty, save for its two convection ovens — one in a wall, one tucked into an island. Elizabeth gently rolled peanut butter cookie dough into small balls and explained what it feels like to compete, and win, for so many years.

"In the beginning, it was all great," said Elizabeth, a senior at Loudoun Valley High School. "Now that I've been into all this a long time, it's kind of like second nature."

As she spoke, Bob jumped in to show off photo after photo of little Amanda and Elizabeth at fairs — grounds somewhere, proudly holding up cakes and ribbons. He brims with pride, using "we" when talking about his daughters' victories — as in "We come up with our own creative recipes, and that's the key," or "Breads and pies, we're real consistent with them." But the LaBrecque women do not downplay his role. He is the taster.

"We're a team," Elizabeth said as she flattened the cookie dough spheres on a baking sheet.

"When he says you need to redo it, it's probably because it isn't your best," Amanda said by telephone. She is a junior at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she studies deaf education and



BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — FOR WASHINGTON POST

Elizabeth LaBrecque, right, makes peanut butter cookies. Baking competitions are a family affair for the LaBrecques. Violet LaBrecque, above left, was herself a national champion. And dad Bob? He's the taster.

lives in a house her parents purchased because it was a better deal than a dorm room. Bob and Violet replaced the home's old oven immediately, she said.

The day before the state fair judging, the LaBrecque kitchen and much of the rest of the house transform into an assembly line. Two leaves are added to the dining room table to hold baked goods. Elizabeth plays hooky from school and Amanda comes down from college.

The sisters rise at 6 a.m., and a baking marathon begins: The ovens pump out so much heat that the kitchen feels like a "sweatshop," Elizabeth said. As bread rises and cookies bake, cake batter is stirred and candy flowers are formed. Violet scrubs bowls and pans.

The sisters stay up until about 1 a.m., then get up at 4 a.m. to head for Richmond in a van loaded up with sweets.

"And they are dead," said Bob, who works for a data storage company.

At the fair, the family chats with figures they know from the local baking circuit, such as the pair of brothers from Glen Allen who win consistently, Elizabeth said, but not as often as the LaBrecque sisters.

"Everyone else that we don't know? They know us," Elizabeth said.

Even the judges, she said. Many have come to recognize the marks of a LaBrecque.

One is extreme attention to detail. The LaBrecques make baking a cake sound like nailing a triple Axel: You must work until it is right. "If it looks wrong, smells wrong or tastes wrong, we do it

again, because it's not going to win," Elizabeth said.

She acknowledged that she has, when pressed for time, entered a

dessert that she thinks "sucks." This year, it was a devil's-food cake that she described as crooked. It won first place.

Bob also offers his daughters, along with his taste buds, a little of what he calls "competitive analysis." This year, he concluded that Amanda should ditch the traditional crosshatch on her peanut butter cookies and do something different. So she buttered the bottom of a glass, dipped it in sugar and pressed it down on the cookies to give them a sparkly, sweet dusting. They won, too.



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