

Richmond's alternative for news, arts, culture and opinion.

STYLE

Search All Style Weekly
[More Search Options](#)

- [COVER STORIES](#)
- [NEWS & FEATURES](#)
- [ARTS & CULTURE](#)
- [CALENDAR](#)
- [FOOD & DRINK](#)
- [FORUM](#)
- [CLASSIFIEDS](#)
- [PERSONALS](#)

October 7, 2006 [Home](#) [Contact Us](#) [About Us](#) [FAQs](#) [How to Advertise](#) [Buy Tickets](#)

FOOD & DRINK

October 4, 2006

Bread Alone

Just how tasty are those baking-contest entries at the State Fair? Only the judges know for sure.
by Deveron Timberlake

I always look at prize-winning cakes and pies at the Virginia State Fair and think what a shame they'll never be tasted except by the judges, but will sit on display for the next two weeks to slowly petrify into oblivion.

Now that I've helped judge the bread category at the 2006 fair, the irony hits home. Judges not only taste and then toss samples of each entry, but also sometimes do it under the hopeful surveillance of the contestants themselves, who watch for every gleam or grimace as their wares are being analyzed.

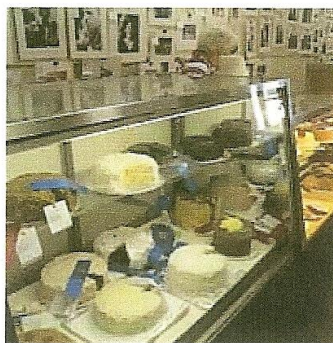
Some very delicious stuff does win, remaining a mystery to those who can only look but not taste. The whole exercise is part waste, part triumph.

Judges assess appearance first: Is the bottom of the loaf evenly browned? Does the roll have a pleasing roundness? Then, as it's sliced open, does the texture remain consistent, or are pockets of air or, worse, mush inside? Flavor counts the most. Is it fresh and free of aftertaste? Does it cry for salt or sweet or less yeast?

Judges take their time considering and ranking each item. The entries that don't make the cut go to local food banks; the winners earn blue, red and white ribbons or the sought-after purples for best in show.

One perpetual champ, 21-year-old Amanda LaBrecque of Purcellville, has piled up such a collection of ribbons with her sister and mother that there's no space left in the family dining room to display anything but purples. This year, she won best-in-show for a delicate braided sesame bread and firsts for her peanut and lemon-chess pies and several others. She and her sister Elizabeth stayed up until 3:30 the night before the judging, whipping up dozens of entries and then driving with their father straight to Richmond with all the goods, ready to compete and to win. It turns out they're becoming legends in state fair baking — the girls to beat for their extraordinarily detailed, scrumptious concoctions.

But of all the skills the sisters have learned, they can't control the variable that matters most: "You can't judge the judges," Amanda LaBrecque says, looking at me a little warily even after the ribbons are bestowed. Her sesame loaf is deservedly positioned in the display case as best of the best, but for



Winning entries in the Virginia State Fair's baking contest remain in the display case untouched after their initial tasting. Ribbon-winning items are displayed for the duration of the fair; other entries are donated to local food banks.

Photo by Stephen Salpukas