



The 12 finalists of WFA's Kids Can Cook



Grand Prize Winner Ellie Baiano and her family



WFA member judges: Maryrose LaCavera, Sarah Boger, Corina Danielson, Maria Crann, Tina Sauvage

KIDS CAN COOK *brings families together*

Contest offers young bakers the ingredients for a fulfilling future

story and photos by LEIGH CORT

Family relationships often blossom in the kitchen with children helping busy parents, taking care of other family members or just enjoying their own creativity with food. With many cherished family recipes and baking memories disappearing from tables in America today, the Women's Food Alliance believes in nurturing young children with an appreciation for healthy, delicious ingredients that express their individuality and curiosity about food.

As 50 family members and friends gathered at The Venue in Hastings for the finals in the 2026 Women's Food Alliance Kids Can Cook Baking Contest, there was a special excitement when each of the 12 young finalists in the baking competition gathered behind the long presentation table with their entry positioned perfectly in front of them. A quiet anticipation filled the room while the children awaited the five judges who were viewing and tasting each beautifully baked item. It was hard to believe that the children were only 8 to 13 years of age. They behaved with maturity that they have been taught by the family or seen on some of today's TV competitions!

The judges visited the children and asked questions about each baked entry. With a bit



Grand Prize Winner Ellie Baiano

of shyness, the finalists told brief personal stories about why they chose their specific desserts and recipes. Even at young ages, their presentations reflected something meaningful in their lives that brought smiles and tears to the audience and the judges.

Choosing a winner wasn't easy. The categories for selection weren't just about presentation or taste. It also involved imagination, a creative name and their personal stories.



First Runner Up Sereanna Saville

From Banana Foster Banana Bread, Loaded Oreo & Biscoff Brownies, The Devil's Quilt Cake and Fruit Pavlova to Baked Apples in Pastry, Brown Butter, Sage & Pear Sweet Rolls and the winning Torta al Limone e Lampone, the competition was intense. Finally, the announcement of the grand prize winner

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was made: The winner was Ellie Baiano for her Torta al Limone e Lamponi! Ellie's cake was "the most scrumptious," according to the judges.

"I was so surprised to be the winner," Ellie said. "When I arrived at The Venue, I didn't believe it was going to be an easy win. I saw a lot of great-looking cakes and desserts."

A young entrepreneur who has spent most of her childhood baking and cooking, Ellie isn't your usual 13-year-old who enjoys occasional culinary activities. She has already participated in other school-related competitions and has a website that she updates with cookies, cupcakes, cake pops and her signature Yuk Yuk cookie! Golden Goodies is the forerunner of her upcoming website Ellie's Pop Shop.

"Winning the Kids Can Cook Baking Contest has been a big win for me mentally and personally," she said. "I proved to myself that I will have more confidence in the future. My winning dessert represents my Italian heritage. My dad has taught me a lot about baking, and it's something we've always loved doing together. I'm dedicating this cake to my Nana, who is battling stage 4 cancer for the second time. She has always given me baking advice. When I was little, I loved

baking with her whenever I visited. Baking helps me stay connected to my family and learn about my heritage!"

With only one point difference between grand prize and first runner-up, the latter award went to Sereanna Saville, age 12, for The Devil's Quilt Cake. Judges agreed it couldn't be compared to any other entry for beautiful presentation and complexity.

"In my family, baking and quilting are things we do together," Sereanna said. "Devil's food cake from dad's side; fluffy yellow cake from my grandma's aunt's recipe. Together, it creates a fun checkerboard cake on the inside like a quilt. From memories of picking fresh raspberries with my Nana, the raspberry topping and white melted chocolate trickles down the sides."

Sereanna has dreams of opening her own bakery one day. Known as mother's "little helper" from her earliest years, she tried to stay confident throughout the competition. Practicing her award-winning cake three times in the days leading up to the finals, she enjoys the imagination that baking brings into her life.

"I'm so proud that I won first runner-up," she said. "I can't wait to find more kids' contests to enter!"

What inspired the Women's Food Alliance's 5th Annual Kids Can Cook Baking Contest?

Over the more than 13 years that Women's

Food Alliance members have celebrated diversity of cultures and careers, Leigh Cort (founder), recognizes how members discover business and friendship opportunities as a "sorority" of hospitality business leaders. WFA is dedicated to empowering members and providing them with trusted connections to advance and endure. Networking is essential as members build a strong path to new ideas and support from peers.

This year's Kids Can Cook Baking Contest reflects similar principles with the children. Early childhood memories in the kitchen emerged with the finalists who proudly arrived at The Venue with their favorite baked dessert entries. They settled into their assigned seats, compared finishing touches on their desserts and talked about recipes. They shared laughter and family stories. They applauded each other throughout the awards ceremony.

This year's finalists will hopefully remember whom they sat next to or whose dessert looked almost as beautiful as theirs. Will they recall an outstanding day with their families forever in their memories for years to come? The Women's Food Alliance hopes so.

The Women's Food Alliance's mission is to support, connect, lend a helping hand and inspire today's generation of hospitality women and the generations to come — always remembering that it's Friendship First!

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