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State's top chef keeps learning

By Christina Siderius
Seattle Times staff reporter

Janet Shaffer would like people to stop apologizing for their recipes when she's around.

Just because the longtime Lynnwood resident was recently named the state's chef of the year doesn't mean she can't appreciate her mom's lasagna or a friend's humble brownies.

"No matter how good you are, we all have something to learn from everybody," she said.

That's the motto Shaffer, who was picked as the 2007 Chef of the Year by Washington State Chefs Association (WSCA), takes as a baking instructor at Lake Washington Technical College in Kirkland.

Whether you're a master chef or a student baker, you have something to learn and something to teach others, she said.

As a chef, Shaffer is part technician, part scientist, with a dash of artistry and pinch of precision all rolled together. The result is a dessert enthusiast who has a penchant for cream puffs and a passion for sharing the art of making delectable goodies.

"Dessert is the last thing brought to the table," she said. "It makes a big impression on people."

A decade ago, Shaffer started as a student in the same program and, shortly after graduating, landed a job at the college teaching students in the baking program where they concoct unbelievably ornate — and edible — showpieces. A chocolate grand piano, a bread bouquet and swooning swans crafted out of melted sugar are just a few.

Shaffer's former student Mike Lund, a 20-year-old from Bothell, landed a job at Mike's Amazing Cakes.

"When I first started, I knew nothing. She knew what I liked to do, and she really honed in on that," he said.

"People come from all over to go to this program because of her," he said.

Shaffer has held a variety of jobs in her life — from retail to office work — but creating art with food was what she was passionate about.



JANIS HOWES, LWTC
caption: Janet Shaffer stands next to the trophy she received for being named the 2007 chef of the year. credit: Janis Howes, LWTC

"It's just something inside you that keeps bringing you back to this," she said.

The mother of four was chosen from about a dozen chef nominees to receive the award through the WSCA, the local chapter of the American Culinary Federation. Shaffer has been involved with the association for three years and now works as the association secretary.

"She's always endeavoring to better other individuals," said Michael Higgins, who is on the WSCA board of directors.

Higgins said chefs are nominated by other chef members for the award for their contribution to the association, the culinary community and performance in competition.

There are more than 320 members in the association, ranging from people who are interested in food to professional chefs.

In between baking classes, Shaffer is working on her bachelor-of-arts degree in culinary management at the Art Institute of Seattle, competing in baking competitions and developing a line of truffles.

Shaffer won best of the professional division at the annual Washington State Sugar Artists Cake and Confectionary Show last April and has won two silver medals from the American Culinary Federation for her wedding-cake and warm-dessert entries.

"I do competitions to stay on my toes and get the students involved," she said. "If I want to get them involved I have to walk the talk."

Student C.J. Schimpf, 29, of Mill Creek, said Shaffer has taught her to be patient and to persevere as she works to become a chef.

"I can only wish to be as good as she is," Schimpf said.

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