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Practice Makes Perfect?

The season… the music… the advertisements… the long days and short nights… the planning… More than 140,000 young Nebraskans look forward to this time of year annually. It’s almost more exciting than Christmas, the County Fair. Each year I look forward to the county fair and competing against my best friend. In Hayes Center, both my best friend and I have a reputation that anything we bake is going to be amazing. Being expected to bring in the best is not always easy; no matter how much you practice you still make mistakes. Baking for 4-H is not always easy because you can’t always tell what is going to come out. I have had many embarrassing mistakes. Some don’t make it to the county fair, others do but shouldn’t have, and then there are those mistakes that happen between delivery and judging.

In the middle of July I start preparing for fair. This means waking up at 8:30, drinking my coffee, then off to work in the kitchen until nine or so in the evening. Sometimes horrid things happen that you would never expect, like burning your most tedious project. This year I decided a puff pastry would be a good idea. Roll and chill every half hour, for about five hours. The marbling of the butter and dough looked beautiful, into the oven it went, and eighteen minutes I pulled out a dark brown, burnt, puff pastry. Out to the dogs that went. Each year I make some kind of dinner rolls, and each year I have to make those dinner rolls three to four times. Why? Well most of the time they are burnt on the edges and raw in the middle, so they get fed to my brother and the dogs. My family gets spoiled from my mistakes most of the time. For example, I can make an amazing chocolate cookie anytime of year, except fair time. When July rolls around my cookies get to runny or too dry, so I have to make several batches to get them good enough for fair. Eventually, I can get a good batch of cookies and rolls for the fair, so most of those mistakes never get to the fair but there is always that one that slips in.

Caramelized Onion, Spinach, Olive Oil, Quick Beard, doesn’t that sound amazing? I thought so too, so I made it for fair. Many times when I use a new recipe for fair I don’t take time to make one for the family, because I have another batch of rolls to bake. That bread was one of them, when I baked that bread I pulled out the most beautiful loaf of bread I had ever seen. Not thinking, much about it I let it cool and stuck it in the freezer. The night before exhibits were due I took that loaf of bread out thinking “Yes, this is the trophy winning bread and I am going to beat my best friend.” Soon, I am sitting in front of the judge watching her cut that wonnderful smelling bread. As the knife splits the bread in half and she pulls the two halves apart this nasty gooey liquid runs out. I just gave the judge raw bread, not doughy, just plain raw. That bread would have never made it to the fair if I had checked it. Many times is have let something like that slip into the judges hands but, sometimes my best creations get ruined on the way to fair.

Cakes, they are one of my favorites to make but my least favorite to pack. I have learned to put my cakes in boxes that they can’t slide around in. That trick usually works except for this one time… I saw the cutest Raggedy Anne cake on Pintrest, so I decided to make it. When I got done with that cake I was very proud. My sister was teasing me about my cake looking like a clown and how it was going to scare people, well it ended up looking a little scary. I put that cake in a box and set it in my hot pick-up for the drive to Hayes Center. Seeing as I had just pulled it out of the refrigerator the frosting started to melt together. Poor Raggedy Anne’s smile turned upside down. You have to be careful with frosting; it’s very easy to mess up and is the judges’ first impression. Not everyone was informed about the importance of frosting. My cupcakes were squished by one of the fair helpers, of course nothing could be done about it and they didn’t mean to. However, the judge evaluates what is put in front of them.

There has been many times when my smile turned upside down during fair baking, but each year I try to come back stronger. My best friend has the same problems I have had during fair season. That is always why we compete so closely; it is always fun to send each other burnt tea rings or any other failures. Having the reputation to bring in the best is not the easiest; no matter how much you practice you still make mistakes. Practice makes perfect? Maybe not all the time but practice does help a lot. Learn from you mistake and improve for the next season. I continue to practice to get better and learn new skills. Next summer I will once again join the 140,000 young Nebraskans that look forward for the county fair.