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TELEVISION

'The Last Cake Standing' a recipe for stress and, perhaps, success

Contestants in 'The Last Cake Standing' face the kind of rigorous ordeal that feeds a genre's success.

By Rene Lynch

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A producer with the Food Network was on the line, pitching cake designer James Rosselle on its biggest, baddest cake challenge yet. Competitors on "The Last Cake Standing" would vie for \$50,000 and the title of "best cake artist in America."

In other words, it was a golden opportunity for the 28-year-old from Whittier, who is looking to open an appointment-only designer cake shop for his fledgling business, Elle Cakes. (Orders start at \$600 and go skyward from there.)

So what did he tell the Food Network? "I told them I had to think about it."

Absolutely nothing against Food Network, said Rosselle, who had already competed in three similar contests for the network and emerged undefeated. But the challenges are so physically and emotionally grueling that he had to do some soul searching and determine whether he was ready to do it again.

Now wait a second. Aren't we talking about baking cakes?

If Rosselle sounds like a battle-weary soldier, it's not by coincidence. The melding of two thriving TV genres -- reality competition and food programming -- has been an unbridled success, as with Bravo's "Top Chef" and Fox's "Hell's Kitchen."

But they get their traction from driving contestants in ways that the regal and genteel Julia Child would never have imagined.

"I hate these shows, I just hate them," said Ciudad and Border Grill chef Mary Sue Milliken, who added that she could have never predicted such shows would be around when she was costarring in "Too Hot Tamales" for the Food Network.

She said some of the prime-time cooking competition shows take it too far. "That's not what food is supposed to be about. Food is supposed to be about love and taking care of someone. . . . I get called all the time to be a judge on some of these shows and I'm like 'No!' I don't want to do it."

Take "Hell's Kitchen's" overlord, chef Gordon Ramsay, who recently hurled fresh meat at an underling who had displeased him. Or contestants on Food Network's hard-driving "Chopped," who fight back tears when they face elimination.

And on "Last Cake Standing," contestants faced a 24-hour cake-making challenge. That's right. Twenty-four hours. Of cake making.

Milliken might dislike some of these kinds of shows, but audiences are certainly tuning in. A rare flop came last month, when NBC pulled "The Chopping Block" off the boards after it was clobbered by the competition, including "American Idol." It starred legendary chef Marco Pierre White, who once trained Ramsay and is pretty fearsome in his own right.

During an interview before the start of the show, White was asked about the cooking competition genre and whether it was butchering the nation's already complicated relationship with food.

Quite the contrary, White said. "Have you ever been inside a restaurant kitchen?" White asked. "That is reality."

And anyone who has ever tried to hustle dinner onto the table or tried to feed a hungry restaurant full of diners can identify with the reality show contestants who exhibit the stress, anxiety and sheer, flat-out panic that plating a dish entails.

Or, God forbid, baking a cake.

The lie, White said, is when it's made to look as easy as pie.

For Rosselle, the decision to join the competitors in "The Last Cake Standing" was made more complicated by his past success.

As an undefeated alum, he had to wonder whether another appearance would be an unnecessary gamble that could tarnish his perfect record.

"There is so much that goes into it, getting ready for it and planning as much as you can, and then the challenge itself is just brutal," Rosselle said recently, standing in his kitchen, surrounding by designer cakes and rows of the

decorative sugar flowers for which he is known. (Made from sugar and hand-painted, the flowers look as if they were plucked from a garden. The process of making them, drying them and then painting them can take days.)

"There was definitely a part of me that wondered, is it worth it? Could I lose more than I could gain?"

In the end, though, Rosselle signed on. "I realized it was too good to pass up."

The anxiety was palpable for all the contestants in the first three rounds, as the producers tried to amp up the tension with curveballs and mystery challenges, height requirements and extra credit for anything "extreme." ("Extreme" in the cake-making world means motorized cakes with moving parts.)

"Intense," is the way Rosselle described it.

Rosselle was knocked out last week after he was paired up with fellow contestant and front-runner Bronwen Weber and had to come up with a superhero cake. It involved a caped crusader that flew around and around, but they were ultimately outdone by a glow-in-the-dark firefly with flapping wings.

Rosselle's last-ditch attempt to stay in the game involved a 30-minute showdown with Weber.

And when Rosselle heard that, he knew the writing was on the cake.








"She's just a master piper . . . there isn't anyone better," Rosselle said.

He added that he's still glad he decided to do it. "It's disappointing. But either way, it's been great exposure. I would have regretted it more if I didn't do it."

(The finale of "Last Cake Standing," the network's first-ever elimination-style competition, is Sunday night).

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