

Candy houses for a cause



Seven locals entered the inaugural gingerbread house contest hosted by the Westin Verasa hotel and La Toque restaurant. All proceeds benefited the Boys & Girls Clubs of Napa Valley. La Toque owner and chef Ken Frank said the event was his wife's idea and will "absolutely" be back next year.

The Westin Verasa hotel and La Toque restaurant offered some sweet support to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Napa Valley on Sunday.

The resort and restaurant partnered to host their inaugural gingerbread house contest Sunday afternoon, giving all the entry proceeds to the clubs, which had their own tasty winter entry. Local bakers entered seven fully edible houses, ranging in design from a doghouse, to a Napa vineyard home, to a castle.

"Some of the stuff is really cool," said chef Ken Frank, owner of La Toque. "There's Asian ingredients, medicinal herbs. To be able to only use edible materials inspired people to be very creative. Some of them have an incredible level of detail, some of them were cute, some were adorable, some were made by 5- and 6-year-olds, one was made by a team of professionals, and it's really fun to see."

First prize in the amateur category went to Becky Stradiotto and her 17-year-old daughter, Jocelyn Stradiotto. They made a doghouse complete with a rice-crisp dog, inspired by their neighbor's canine, Velvet.

“My kids have done little ones out of graham crackers, and my daughter and I thought it would be a good thing to try and a nice way to support the Boys & Girls Clubs,” Becky Stradiotto said.

Their first attempt at a gingerbread house did not come without its challenges.

“We had to rebake the gingerbread a couple times because when we put it together the first time, the frosting wasn’t thick enough and it fell over and broke,” she said.

The Silverado Middle School clubhouse entered a traditional-style gingerbread house, adorned with frosting Christmas trees, cookies and plenty of candy.

The solo house in the professional category was made by La Toque pastry chefs Jack-Lynn Hill and Hayes Pickett. Their house was the only entry with a Napa Valley theme, modeled with a real Napa home in mind.

“Hayes wanted to do some vineyards to display Napa Valley, and near my grandmother’s home is a house that looks very much like (our gingerbread house),” Hill said.

Their entry incorporated fondant grape vines and a Christmas tree made of rosemary.

“The Christmas tree really brings the Christmas spirit to it,” Hill said of the pair’s first-ever gingerbread house. “Our favorite part in it is the pleasure, the pride in seeing it finished.”

Frank said he plans to make the contest an annual event. He estimated a few hundred dollars were raised for the clubs.

“It’s amazing,” Brianna Niem, the clubs’ marketing and events coordinator, said of the support. “You have up years and down years with donations in the community, so it’s always nice to have additional support because you never know where it’s going to come from.



Jayden Salinas, 10, said the castle-shaped gingerbread house was one of his favorites at the inaugural gingerbread house contest at the Westin Verasa hotel. Chantal M.



Jack-Lynn Hill, 21, stands with the house she and Hayes Pickett made for the inaugural gingerbread house contest at the Westin Verasa. Both women are pastry chefs at La Toque but this was their first time making a gingerbread house.



This house made by Napa residents Becky and Jocelyn Stradiotto, won first place among the amateur entries. It was inspired by their neighbor's dog.