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Gingerbread City Celebrates The Greatest Story Ever Told

by Elizabeth Guiten

This December residents Denise Jones and John Dowd combined a famous tale with lots and lots of gingerbread to create "Fondant the Yellow Brick Road," an entrant into the Epilepsy Foundation of San Diego County's Gingerbread City 2009 celebrating The Greatest Stories Ever Told.

The foundation's charity gala featured celebrity chefs and according to the pair is the largest recognized gingerbread structure competition on the West Coast. "Eighteen talented gingerbread artists donated endless hours in creating their gingerbread masterpieces to be auctioned off in silent and live auctions during the gala," said Denise.

The team chose the "Wizard of Oz, after we did research and discovered this year is the 70th anniversary of the film," she said. Their piece was purchased by Carlsbad boutique hotel West Inn & Suites and is on display for the duration of the holiday season.

As for how the couple entered into the world of ginger-baked goods in the first place, their embarkment on the journey can be charted back two years to a local gingerbread house-making contest in 2007. "We didn't know what we were getting into," Dowd said laughing. Modeling their submission after a historical cottage on Loma Lane the couple won the competition and discovered a new culinary passion.

"The next year the couple waited for the announcement of the competition only to learn that it wouldn't take place. Determined to keep the proverbial (dough) ball rolling Denise looked into other gingerbread structure building competitions.

"I heard about the Epilepsy Foundation of San Diego County's competition and called to inquire. The 15th annual competition had just been announced for the season. Although most of the competitors are 'premier chefs, artists and designers,' we were invited to participate," she wrote on a culinary blog she maintains.

The theme was Gingerbread in the City where, "each gingerbread artist was asked to create a recognizable structure found in any city, anywhere in the world." Avid watchers of cable's The Food Network, Denise and John went to work on Brownstones & Batali, a piece depicting a row of brownstones on one side.

A rendition of Mario Batali's BABBO restaurant and the buildings on each side of BABBO, on the other side; West Village Florist on one end and Mario Batali's Italian Wine Merchants on the other end completed the gingerbread block. "It was hard work but so much fun," Denise said.

With two competitions under their collective belt, the pair prepared for the 2009 affair after being invited back. "We wanted to tell the story of Oz in gingerbread," said John. The plan called for primary gingerbread structures for Munchkin Land houses, Dorothy's broken Kansas house, the Tin Man's cabin, Wicked Witch's castle and Emerald City.

Also envisioned, the yellow brick road weaving across the base from Munchkin Land to the Emerald City, where confectionery and other edible materials would be used for the yellow brick road, forest, corn fields, farmlands, hills and cliffs, plants and flowers along the way. "John sketched out everything and once we decided which gingerbread recipe we were going with we were set. A lot of people with more experience can use decorative icing or sugar tricks but we wanted to get back to what gingerbread actually was," said Denise

That desire to 'get back' took the couple as far as Julian, searching specialty candy stores for the just the right sweet to perfect the picture they sought to create. "We had a steep learning curve but we made it happen," John said.

Both employed full time, the couple said the process became like a second job. "We competed in the Grand category (4 x 4 foot base with no height restriction) so this structure literally took over our lives," she said.

For all the couple's hard work, the gala completion almost didn't happen. "The auction had ended and our piece hadn't been sold. It was very bittersweet," Denise said. "Here we'd put so much time, money and effort into this and our finished product, which we were so proud of, wasn't going to be able to fulfill its purpose of raising money to support the foundation."

What the couple didn't know was that their presumed 'failure' was, in fact, the hope for the hotel that ultimately wound up purchasing the piece. "Apparently people from The West Inn & Suites in Carlsbad were at the The Grand Del Mar, saw our piece and wanted to purchase it before the gala even began.

"They couldn't really announce their presence since they were in a competitor's establishment but once they learned it hadn't been sold at the end of the auction, a representative called, made a donation to the foundation and purchased our gingerbread piece, so it all worked out," she said. The couple is looking forward to next year's competition and said they are open to working on commissioned pieces. "I think the Del could use a gingerbread house," John said with a grin.

The pair, in addition to the gingerbread structures have branched out into other aspects of a culinary-seeped lifestyle. "We began hosting culinary challenges during the summer concerts and posting it on (local Web site) ecoronado. It was a lot of fun to choose a different dish and delve into the culture surrounding it. Toward the end we started doing wine pairings with WineStyles so hopefully we'll continue that next summer," she said.

To learn more about Denise and John's culinary adventures, visit <http://www.newfinmysoup.blogspot.com>