



3RD ANNUAL
Holiday
Cookie
Challenge

SWEET, SWEET VICTORY

Maple rules at 2023 PG Holiday Cookie Challenge

By Gretchen McKay
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Personal taste often determines which cookie one grabs from the holiday dessert table. Some love thin and crispy while others go crazy over anything dusted with powdered sugar or heavily spiced with traditional Christmas flavors like cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger.

A great backstory can also help

differentiate between a ho-hum treat worth tracking down the baker for the recipe from one that's just not worth the extra calories.

All of the finalists in the Post-Gazette's 2023 Holiday Cookie Challenge did exactly that — made our mouths water while also making our hearts sing by pairing scrumptious-sounding recipes with heart-warming stories about how the cookies came into their orbit.

While family tradition and



Overall winner of the Post-Gazette's Holiday Cookie Challenge are maple iced cookies, recipe from Sandy Bacchus of Pine.

childhood memories inspired many of our entrants, especially in the popular Family Favorite category, some of the winning recipes from our 12 finalists claimed more modern roots.

Pine resident **Sandy Bacchus** has only been baking her delicate maple-iced maple cookies — the winner in our Iced category — for about three years. Yet the ritual of making them during the holidays never fails to bring to mind her mother, Carol, who passed two years ago.

"She loved maple anything,"

she says.

The top entry in the Chocolate category, a dense and chewy chocolate chip cookie from **Devin O'Leary** of Whitehall, is based on a recipe from food writer J. Kenji López-Alt, whose science-based "The Food Lab" won a 2016 James Beard Foundation Award. O'Leary added his own touch with brown butter.

Joyce Lynn Doyle's amaretti cookie recipe was handed down from her grandmother on her

SEE **COOKIES**, PAGE E-2

MAIN: Finalists in the Post-Gazette's Holiday Cookie Challenge include, clockwise from left, Brooke Schmitz, Amy Formica, Anne Cochran, Minnie Zhukas, Janine Peiritsch, Paula Pfrommer, Jane Wright, Devin O'Leary, Joyce Lynne Doyle and Holli Bobick. (Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette photos)

Winter brings holiday brunches and early-bird beerfest tickets

By Mary Pickels

Family, friends and food — not necessarily in that order — are among the hallmarks of the holiday season.

There also may be more time to relax and linger over that not-quite-breakfast, not-quite-lunch meal we occasionally enjoy on the weekends.

Throughout the region, there are brunch opportunities for fellowship, picking up some cooking skills, even bird watching and gearing up for a popular "suds" fest (with some bites in between) come the new year.

So head into the noshing season with a hearty appetite and enjoy.

Not just for the birds

The National Aviary on Pittsburgh's North Side is again of-

fering holiday brunches featuring Atria's Specialty Catering in the Garden Room.

This year's final seating is at 11 a.m. Dec. 17 and tickets include admission to the Aviary's warm tropical habitats.

Diners can enjoy offerings including whole wheat cinnamon French toast, firecracker chicken and waffles, poached Atlantic salmon, artisan butternut ravioli, barbecue ham, cheesy scrambled eggs, mini potato pancakes and a selection of Potomac Bakery pastries, along with fresh-cut fruit.

"The National Aviary's Brunch in the Garden Room is a holiday tradition families can celebrate together, with scrumptious offerings courtesy of Chef Josef Karst of Atria's," reads an Aviary statement. "It's a great way to spend a



Mike Faix

The National Aviary on the North Side is hosting a holiday brunch in its Garden Room on Dec. 17.

day with loved ones because you get to enjoy a meal together and then spend the rest of the day walking through immersive habitats."

Tickets are \$55, \$35 for those under 12. Beer, wine and cocktails will be available for an extra charge. More info: aviary.org

A delicious fellowship

As they have for 10 years, Holy Family Parish's Salvi Altomare and Bill Molyneux are planning a free Christmas Day community brunch through the parish's Serving Our Seniors ministry.

Meals will be served from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at Our Lady of Joy Church hall, 2000 O'Block Road, Pittsburgh, and at Saint Joseph Church, 825 Second St., Verona.

SEE **NEWS**, PAGE E-4

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