

Winners announced in the only U.S. professional baking competition

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by Timmy Trabon

Thirty-seven finalists in America's Best Raisin Bread Contest, the only professional baking competition in the U.S., gathered October 14-15 at the American Institute of Baking (AIB) in Manhattan, KS to compete for industry honors, industry recognition and a prize that includes a California tour of the raisin industry, Napa Valley, and the Culinary Institute of America.

"Our goal is to discover and reward the most creative and talented bakers in the country by challenging them to create raisin bread products in four categories – Artisan, Commercial, Breakfast and Student," said Larry Blagg, senior vice president of marketing for the California Raisin Marketing Board (CRMB), which sponsors the contest. "The competition has grown each year, and attracts the top bakers in America. This year's entries were impressive and innovative, and the judges had their work cut out for them."

Of the thirty-seven finalists, twelve bakers garnered top prizes for their innovative baking:

Grand Prize – Gary Gottenbusch, Cincinnati, OH (Servatii Pastry Shop) for California Raisin Walnut Pretzel

Judge's Prize – Jory Downer, Evanston, IL (Bennison's Bakery) for Sweet City Loaf

Idea Prize – Monica Hoffberg, Seattle, WA (Bakery Nouveau) for Raisin Rouleaux

Grand Prize – Rachel Crampsey, Carlstadt, NJ (Tribeca Oven) Currant Seeduction Bread

Judge's Prize – Angela Dodd, Lake Oswego, OR (Cargill) for Cinnamon Raisin Apple Streusel Bread

Idea Prize – Nancy Sepe, Providence, RI (Nancy's Fancies) for Nonni's Golden Raisin Sweet Bread

Grand Prize – Phillippe Sanchez, Orlando, FL (Marriott International) for Double California Raisin Whole Wheat Croissant

Judge's Prize – Bill Hunter, Grapevine, TX (Crestone Group Baking Companies) for Sunrise Bagels

Idea Prize – Joanne Wilcox, Utica, NY (Apple Crumbles) for Marathon Mini Loaf

Artisan – Morgan Choi, Chicago, IL (The French Pastry School) for Laminated Rosemary Raisin Epi

Commercial – Maddy Beck, Manhattan, KS (Kansas State University) for Barbeque Raisin Bread

Breakfast – Nicole Barry, Chicago, IL (The French Pastry School) for Muscat Grape-Vanilla Cream Raisin Danish

At the urging of the judges due to the quality and originality of the finalists' products, CRMB awarded one additional prize – The California Prize – in each of three categories.

"These winners didn't make the top three, but the quality was so good the judges convinced us to award three additional prizes to bakers who were very deserving. In one case, the judges deemed a gluten-free bread product 'the best they've ever tasted,'" said Blagg.

Artisan - Daniel DiMuzio, Greensboro, NJ (La Brea Bakery, Inc.) for Jumbo Raisin Fougasse with Toasted Walnuts

Commercial - Ron Guerrero, Lenexa, KS (Caravan Ingredients) for Gluten-free Raisin Bread

Student - Julie Thompson, Providence, RI (Johnson & Wales University) for Sunny Side Up Orange Raisin Brioche

All finalists received medals. The Grand Prize, Judge's Prize and Idea Prize winners received plaques and will receive an all-expenses paid trip to California to visit the growing areas of California Raisins, as well as a visit to the Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, CA to enjoy California cuisine and wines. The California Prize winners received plaques and \$500.

More than 100 professional and student bakers submitted between one and three original formulas to the competition. Finalists are determined by initially blind testing by the judges of both product formulas and photographs.

During the competition, each contestant was required to produce at least six samples of their original product at the AIB kitchens, while the judges observed technique, formulations, efficiency and professionalism. Finalists then presented their products to the judges, who questioned them about their formulas, production techniques, as well as the retail or commercial viability of their products.

The judging panel included Ciril Hitz, Department Chairman for Baking & Pastry at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI; Klaus Tenbergen, Certified Master Baker and Professor of Culinology at California State University, Fresno; Dominique Homo, President of Ecole du Pain in Montreal, Canada; David Guilfoyle, President of Half Baked Consultants, Inc. in Abilene, KS; Dan Malovaney, Executive Editor of Baking & Snack, Schaumburg, IL. Chief Judge and promoter of the contest is Theresa Cogswell, President of BakerCogs, Inc. Olathe, KS.

The 5th Annual America's Best Raisin Bread Contest will kick-off in January 2012. Bakers interested in competing should contact Theresa Cogswell at bakerscogs@sbcglobal.net.