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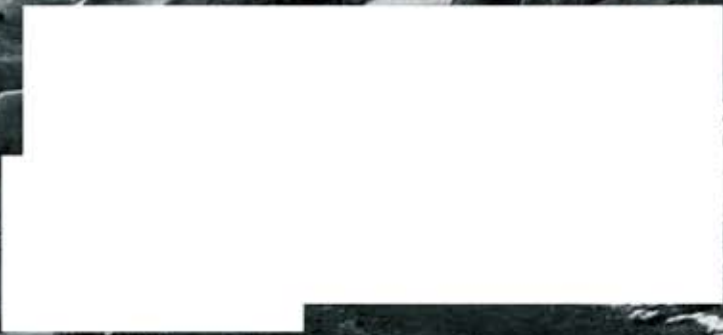
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GOOD LIFE ON A GREAT LAKE

Through
**Your
Eyes**
winners of
our first-ever
photo contest

'tis the season in
Sandusky

ways to feel the
warmth



home **sweet** home

While visions of sugarplums dance in children's heads this time of year, these adults are dreaming about gumdrops, candy canes, and gingerbread

By Christina Macejko

The Cleveland Botanical Garden's annual gingerbread competition brings out the sweet tooth of the best of them—amateurs and professionals alike. But these contestants are looking at the colorful candies more as building materials than as satisfying treats. They've spent months planning and preparing for the botanical garden's WinterShow event, which is displaying the *crème de la crème* of gingerbread abodes until January 4, 2009.

One unlikely, but extremely talented, builder you'll see there is northern Ohio dentist Dr. John Learner, who has taken first place in the contest for the past two years.

"I'm one of the few dentists who doesn't golf," says Learner jokingly. He is, however, very good at his chosen hobby, which started about seven years ago when he came up with an idea to recycle his two daughters' leftover holiday candy, cereal, and other snack items. He decided they would all build a gingerbread house together. After a seemingly short period of time, however, he says the girls lost interest and it was up to him to either "throw away the half-done project or finish it."

He chose to finish it and has since created seven houses, all on display in his Stow office for the holidays. But these are not your ordinary gingerbread houses. Learner constructs miniature models of real structures throughout the world. One idea was taken from a real estate ad that came in the mail showing a magnificent chateau in France. He didn't buy it, but he re-created it in gingerbread. It was the winning entry two years ago at WinterShow. This year's

entry is a reproduction of Saint Ignatius High School in Cleveland.

"It looks like something out of a Harry Potter novel," says Learner about the well-known 1886 landmark. His re-creation has six stories and is made from ice cream cones, pasta, and even chewing gum. The doctor started working on it in early August (he had a card table set up in his office with glue gun on standby to get in some work in between patients).

"It weighs 85 pounds," says Learner proudly, "twenty pounds more than last year's entry."

While he's been doing it for several years, Learner didn't begin entering the WinterShow competition until two years ago, at the urging of his father. The staff at the botanical garden was so impressed with his work, they transported his earlier creations to the facility for display.

Botanical garden spokesman Daniel Rush says the response to WinterShow has been overwhelming, making the Cleveland event one of the region's "biggest and best."

"This annual contest has grown into a real phenomenon," he says. "Each year, it's amazing to see the creativity and what can be done with gingerbread."

It has become so popular, in fact, that the Cleveland Botanical Garden now offers classes on how to make gingerbread structures, and not just for the yuletide season. Classes also were offered during the fall for spooky gingerbread homes.

And while Dr. Learner's daughters weren't that interested in gingerbread construction, the dentist has found many new protégés—as he now teaches the gingerbread house making workshops at the botanical garden. He hopes to see some of his students

compete in the event which has four competitive categories: Children 13 and under; Young Adults 14 to 18; Adults 18 and over; and Professional for food service employees. A noncompetitive category for nonprofit institutions is also available.

Chef Matthew Anderson, staff instructor at the International Culinary Arts & Sciences Institute in Chesterland, Ohio, competed in the noncompetitive category last year, constructing an entirely edible gingerbread creation on behalf of the Cleveland Museum of Art. The piece was made to resemble an Austrian castle to coincide with the museum's arms exhibit.

Gingerbread Along the Lake



WinterShow
Nov. 22, 2008, to Jan. 4, 2009
Cleveland Botanical Garden
11030 East Blvd.
Cleveland, OH
(216) 721-1600
www.cb garden.org
View the gingerbread houses while strolling through the botanical garden's magical holiday settings.

Gingerbread...Gifts...Glitz...
Dec. 5 to 7, 2008
1140 Delaware Ave.
Buffalo, NY
(716) 332-5900
www.gildasclubwny.org
Holiday gift sale and gingerbread auction takes place from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Dec. 6 and 7. The event is free and open to the public. The preview party on Dec. 5 requires reservations. Tickets are \$50.

Gingerbread Lighthouse Workshop
Dec. 13, 2008
Sandusky Maritime Museum
125 Meigs St.
Sandusky, OH
(419) 624-0274
www.sanduskymaritime.org
Learn to make gingerbread lighthouses from noon to 3 p.m.



The castle required 80 hours of labor (40 for construction and 40 for decorating) and included pitched roofs, a spire, and extensive brickwork. "The baking end was the easy part," Anderson laments. "The hard part was the construction."

Anderson suggests those interested in building their own house should start with a photograph and figure out the basic scale of the project. If it's too small, it's easy to lose focus; but if it's too big, it can become cumbersome, he warns.

"What's important is that it is structurally sound," he says. "And the details need to be there."

You'll also need at least five pounds of candy, adds Learner, who boasts that he knows where the best candy stores in the northeast Ohio are located. "If you've only got one pound of candy, you're only



one-fifth done."

The same tips hold true from other competitors along the lake. And apparently the gingerbread housing market is booming. Erie, Pennsylvania, will be hosting the Ultimate Gingerbread Challenge next

November, and not to be missed is the Food Network's *Gingerbread Champions* airing December 8 and Christmas day at 7 p.m.

The sweetest homes of all, however, may be those found in Buffalo, New York, where gingerbread creations are auctioned off for charity at the annual Gingerbread...Gifts...Glitz... event. In its seventh year, the affair is put on by Gilda's Club Western New York, which raises money to provide a free support community for those living with cancer. ≡

How-to Basic Gingerbread House



1 Make the house out of a small cardboard box and glue it to a base. A 20-inch by 20-inch base is good for a cardboard house no bigger than a toaster.

2 Cover one wall at a time with icing. Canned icing works well.

3 Press into the fresh/wet icing cereal, hard colored candies or pretzels—anything colorful that will make a nice "skin" on the house.

4 Slather the roof with icing and press gum, colored candies, or spoon-sized shredded wheat into it for shingles.

5 Cut out windows and doors and outline them with licorice or something linear.

6 Add decorations like window boxes, shutters, chimneys, pillars, etc.

TIPS

- The more colorful candy you can layer on, the better
- Cereal pieces are light and stick easily
- Hot glue works well (make sure to hide the glue from sight)
- Toaster pastries make great walls
- Never use chocolate. It won't last long
- Don't use wafer cookies, they come apart

TIPS FROM DR. JOHN LEARNER

