

Holiday baking brings new accolade to Aurora's Levitt

The holiday season was extra sweet for Aurora resident Steve Levitt as the Great Canadian Baking Show alum took home the trophy in Food Network's Holiday Baking Championship.

Since the eleventh season of the popular show debuted on Food Network near the start of November, contestants from both the United States and Canada were put through their paces, with a series of festively-themed baking challenges. The final episode of the season was broadcast December 23, allowing Levitt's friends and family in on a secret he'd been harbouring for months since filming stopped.

'It was tough keeping the secret,' Levitt tells The Auroran with a laugh, adding that a scheduling shift which saw American audiences treated to the finale ahead of Canadian viewers made the secret-keeping a particularly difficult challenge. 'If those nine months were tough to keep it quiet, that last week was excruciating!

'People weren't pushing ' they knew I wouldn't tell them anyway. The week that I almost went home when in the bottom two, I had a lot of notes from friends who were nervous. I had one friend (Vincent, the winner of Levitt's season of The Great Canadian Baking Show, in which Levitt placed in the top three) who said by Week Five, 'I guessed every week who is going to go home before the show aired.' I asked, 'How could you?' because you never knew what was going to happen, and he said it was just by the strengths and weakness. I said, 'So, who is going to go home next week?' There was silence on the phone. I said, 'It's okay if you think it's me ' there's nothing wrong with that.' He said, 'I really think it is going to be you,' so I said, 'Cool, let's see what happens!'

Vincent was able to see just what happened when he came to Levitt's Aurora home for a finale viewing party.

'I think he was shocked when I actually won and it was a great moment to have him there as well.'

Prior to the finale, the only people outside of the production itself who knew the results were Levitt's wife and daughters.

'Looking into my wife's eyes, trying to get the words out on Facetime, I remember breaking down. I was sitting in the dining area of the hotel and I could feel the words in my throat. To watch [the finale] again with my wife and children and friends and family ' it was emotional, just crazy.'

Having placed in the Top 3 in his season of The Great Canadian Baking Show, Levitt could be forgiven from coming into this new baking arena, one with a much broader international audience, with a fair share of confidence. But, up until the end, he says he had no idea he was on track to win it all.

'There was no chance,' he says, chuckling over how the finale was filmed. 'The editing showed the troubles I was having with my buttercream, but it didn't show the mountain of problems I had baking. Everything that could have gone wrong went wrong and halfway through the bake I just realized there was no way I was going to win. Then, this wave of calm came over me, like, 'There's no pressure now, all you have to do is try and finish your bake. They can't send you home, so enjoy this, take it all in.'

'I was having a ball taking it all in, looking at the other bakers and because of that I looked at my cake in a different way than it was. I left the kitchen seeing [the other contestants'] flawless cakes and then I see my sort of joke of a cake in my head. When we left, I turned to the others and said, 'I don't know how this is possible, but I just finished fifth out of four people!'

Judges, however, saw something much different. In fact, they saw that he'd nailed the assignment.

'You could have knocked me over with a feather. I knew they liked the flavours, but it was still not registering there was a chance I was going to win. It was only until I watched the show that I felt, okay, I deserved to win and then this outpouring of direct messages from people on social media, comments on posts I made ' to say 'humbling' is scratching the surface. It was unbelievable

? the nice things that people said about me, about my baking, about what I did, about how they were pulling for me, it was unbelievable and it is still happening.

?I always felt I could do something, no matter what I do. A lot of people go in saying, 'I don't know if I can do it.' My feeling is, 'I can' until I find out I can't, and then I started figuring why I couldn't and try to fix it. I went into this one with that same thought process ? my goal was to make it to the second episode. I knew I was going to be in there against professionals and just wanted to see how I would fare.

?How long could I last? I didn't go in with any idea that I had a chance of winning at all and then when I met the other bakers and learned their pedigrees and saw what they do, it really became, 'Okay, every day that I make it in here, that's my goal, that's my bar,' but I made the second episode? I got great feedback and every day was a little bit more and more of, 'I do belong.' I never thought I was at that level but I was in there having a good time and it really just reinforced my feeling that I went in there with ? just have a good time, just find the joy in this. I did that at the Canadian show and when I went here, it was the same thing.?

Asked whether he would consider trying out for another baking show given his recent success, he says, 'I would do this every day? because he simply loves the process, but it's not something that's at the top of his agenda at the moment. That being said, however, if he was ever offered the chance to host a program like this, he'd consider it.

?I still think I have the palate of a seven-year-old, so I am not sure I'm the right person to be a judge,? he says. 'Do I want to go on another competition and bake again? Never say never ? not that I am looking at [Holiday Baking Championship host and fellow Canadian] Jesse Palmer's job, but if they ever had another TV show and they were looking for a host who knows a little bit about baking and cooking who likes to smile a lot, I'm your guy for that! I wouldn't even hesitate ? I would say yes to that in a heartbeat!'

By Brock Weir