

This Baker Is No Faker

A Hampton Bays High School alumna bests the competition

BY AMANDA BERNOCCO

From the very first moment Courtney Hubbard was able to hold a spoon, she has been an avid baker. When the Hampton Bays High School alumna was a small child, she would always be in charge of the mixing bowl when she baked cookies or brownies with her "nana," Linda Hubbard of Hampton Bays. "I liked to bake whatever I liked to eat," Ms. Hubbard recalled as a big smile spread across her face. "So brownies were my favorite thing to bake with her, because I think her recipe was the best recipe." As she got older—and her parents started trusting her to use the oven in the kitchen—Ms. Hubbard, now 21, started baking on her own, and getting more creative with her craft. She baked a cake to look like a tiger for her younger sister Olivia Pervete's birthday, and wedding cakes with intricate flowers and designs.

She transitioned from home baker to professional when she graduated in January 2016 from Suffolk County Community College's culinary school on East Main Street in Riverhead, where she studied baking and pastry arts.

This past November, the young baker was a contestant on the Food Network's game show "Bakers vs. Fakers"—and she came home with the \$10,000 grand prize.

On the show, hosted by Buddy Valastro, both professional bakers, like Ms. Hubbard, and amateurs are brought in for a bake-off where they are asked to make treats with unusual ingredients—such as bacon, aromatic ginger or even beer.

When Ms. Hubbard was brought on the show, she and the two other

contestants were asked to bake cupcakes using hot peppers. A self-proclaimed picky eater, Ms. Hubbard said it was chal-

lenging, because she doesn't care for spicy foods. "I was, like, 'Really? That is going to taste good? Who is going to want to eat that?'" she recalled. "I just thought of heat and chocolate. In Mexican chocolate, they have heat in there."

She used her go-to chocolate cake recipe for the base of the cupcake, adding in pepper jelly and ancho chile powder along the way. The cupcake was topped with cream cheese frosting.

"I was tasting it along the way," Ms. Hubbard said. "I was, like, 'This has to come out good, or it's going to taste like a nacho or something.' So I tasted the batter, and I thought it was very spicy, because I just don't like spicy food. But when I tasted the baked cupcake, I tasted the spice but it was a little mellowed out."

Ms. Hubbard explained that while

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the judges seemed like they were looking for a stronger pepper taste than her cupcakes offered, she was excited that she still managed to secure second place in that round.

In the second and final round, Ms. Hubbard was tasked with baking something using, as ingredients, "school snacks," such as baby carrots, chocolate milk, raisins, applesauce or Fruit Roll-Ups.

Ms. Hubbard chose to work with chocolate milk and Fruit Roll-Ups—two of her personal childhood favorites. She used the chocolate milk to make the pastry cream for a napoleon. Then Ms. Hubbard reduced the Fruit Roll-Ups with port wine to create a reduction sauce for the plate.

"They weren't a big fan of that," Ms. Hubbard said of the judges' reaction to the reduction sauce. "But I like Fruit Roll-Ups, so that was delicious to me. I was, like, 'You can say that—but I will eat it all day long!'"

When the judges were tasting her creation, she remembers



crossing her fingers, hoping she would win. She said she went into shock when she opened the gold envelope that showed she won.

"They said my name—I still have the envelope," Ms. Hubbard said. "I was, like, 'Did they say my name? Did I imagine that?' It was like I was dreaming. I really didn't think I would win."

Perhaps the hardest part about the entire competition for Ms. Hubbard was not telling anyone that she was going on the show. Viewers are not initially told which of the contestants are bakers and which are "fakers," so to help keep the secret Ms. Hubbard had to sign a contract that kept her from being able to share the exciting news with her friends and family.

From the time she filmed the show in Jersey City, New Jersey, in November, until the time it aired on January 25, Ms. Hubbard had to bite her tongue every time someone would start

a conversation with her about her baking. "I thought about it every day until January 25," she said.

The secret became even harder to keep once Food Network aired a commercial promoting the episode, called "Caliente Cupcake," on December 26. She was quickly recognized by her signature French braids—but at that point she still couldn't confirm that it was she on the show.

"Everyone [saw] it," Ms. Hubbard said. "I had people messaging me saying, 'Did I just see you?' and I was, like, 'I don't know. You'll have to watch!'"

Ms. Hubbard calls the 17 hours she spent on the "Bakers vs. Fakers" set the best day of her life. She credits most of her success to her nana and to chef Richard Amster, who taught most of her baking classes in culinary school.

"This is for her," Ms. Hubbard said of her nana. "This is me saying, 'Thank you—thank you for showing me my dream.'"

While the elder Ms. Hubbard was the one to introduce her to

her craft, she credits Mr. Amster with giving her the confidence to be a successful baker.

She recalled her first day of class with Mr. Amster: "My very first day, I cried. I was so disappointed that I couldn't get something right, and I was so disappointed and so discouraged with myself. He took me out in the hallway and he told me, 'Courtney, there is no crying in baking. If you want to be a pastry chef, you have to be confident and just get it done and do it right.'"

She listened to Mr. Amster's advice, though she admits she cried when she learned she won \$10,000.

"So I asked him, 'Can the "no crying in baking" rule be edited to "no crying in baking unless you win \$10K"?' And he said, 'You won—you make the rules.'"

Mr. Amster said on Monday that he is proud of Ms. Hubbard. "She did a great job," he said, pointing out that he noticed Ms. Hubbard used some of the techniques taught in his classes. "It was a pleasure to see her. How can you not appreciate a student who comes in and gives 100 percent?"

Ms. Hubbard is saving her winnings from the show to use toward opening a bake shop in the future—possibly locally. She is sticking to baking in her kitchen until her business, Courtney's Sweet Tooth, picks up.

Until then she is taking orders and sharing pictures of her treats on her Facebook page, [facebook.com/courtneyssweettooth](https://www.facebook.com/courtneyssweettooth).

*She was tasked
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Courtney Hubbard works on a cake in her kitchen in Hampton Bays. DANA SHAW





Host Buddy Valastro and Courtney Hubbard on "Bakers vs. Fakers."

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