

Still the best baker in the show

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One might say the life source of county fairs runs through Ron Crook's veins.

His great-grandfather handled livestock and was involved in horse racing at local fairs. His grandparents and their friends sold the property currently occupied by the Del Norte County Fair to its board of directors in the 1930s. His father was instrumental in getting the lamb barbecue. His brother was a county fair livestock manager for "years and years and years." And his sister-in-law volunteers at fairs to this day.

Now 78, Crook retired a year ago after 40-plus years as the Curry County Fair director and another 10 as director of the Coos County Fair.

So, there you are. County fairs are in his blood.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the wall of Crook's home on the family ranch just off Pistol River, some 16 miles north of Brookings, is filling with grand-champion competition ribbons.

His category of choice? "I've competed in the Del Norte County Fair for several years in baking," said Crook.

“I’ve always enjoyed competing in other fairs. You can’t enter in your own fair, right?”

His most-recent best-in-show honors in Crescent City were earned by his apple pie with decorated crust, braided challah bread, and yeast dinner rolls.

Crook said he’s been baking ever since he was a “4H-er” as a kid. He even started a catering side gig with a fellow maintenance man in 1993 to earn a little additional income.

Over the years, that evolved into formation of a nonprofit group with dedicated volunteers averaging \$25,000 in donations annually to the Curry County Fair to help underwrite fair maintenance.

But for competitions, he enjoys baking rolls, breads, pies and cookies. His recipes come from family and friends, then by trying the results on gatherings at the Pistol River family ranch.

“Baking has always been a fun, fun thing,” Crook said.

Some chefs will say they’re only as good as the recipe they follow. So Crook must have been provided with some pretty good recipes ... he’s won at least one best-in-show each year he’s entered.

That said, he did notice the turnout was down this year at the Del Norte Fair. “The fair has always been a part of my life. I always liked to enter. I encourage others to enter, too,” Crook said.

“So much of our history is derived from the county fair. It’s the one time of year you get to see neighbors from the north and south parts of the county that you haven’t seen all year.”

So Crook was surprised to see the dip in the number of baking competitors at this year’s county fair. He urges local chefs to plan ahead and participate next year.

“We’ve got to get more entries in there. It makes for a much more interesting show,” he said. “Plus, it’s educational. The judges explain what won first place and why it won. It gets others talking about why one entry is better than another.”

As for Crook, he’s already planning his next year’s entries, and in more categories, especially now that he has a little time on his hands since retiring.

He’s also planning to enter his winning recipes at the Oregon State Fair, which kicks off Aug. 23 in Salem. Those plans include new recipes in breads, pies, cookies, even cinnamon rolls.

“I’ve never entered in the state fair,” said Crook, “not since I was a ‘4H-er.’ I thought I’d do it this year for the thrill of it.”