

Bed and Breakfast owner comp on FOOD Network

Lately folks have said to Susan Steffan, owner of the Farmer's Guest House in Galena, Illinois, "You are so lucky!" after hearing about my appearance on Food Network's Holiday Baking Championship. Or it could be due to being selected as one of the top 10 B&Bs in the U.S. for 2015. But Susan doesn't think it's about luck; she believes it is the result of hard work. "We look back over the four years since we bought the inn and see a steady line of dominoes that have fallen in place." Susan says, "First, we decided to read and prepare ourselves for the Bed and Breakfast industry as best we could. We joined national organizations, read books and took classes. Then we thoughtfully evaluated destinations and inns for sale. We consulted experts and finally found a property that ticked most of our boxes - Farmers Guest House in Galena, Illinois.

From the first day we purchased the inn we asked ourselves what we could do to improve our business. We examined the guest experience and explored ways to elevate it. We wanted to exceed expectations in every area possible; making FGH a luxury option. We were inspected and joined Bedandbreakfast.com's Diamond Collection, which was a leap of faith and finance that really paid off.



We noticed a difference in our clientele immediately. With huge common rooms on the first floor of our inn, we took the un-used 2nd floor library and added a massage room by turning the space into a spa-like haven. This quadrupled our massage services and improved guest satisfaction.

One of the biggest improvements we made was our breakfast service. I love to cook and have spent many hours a day in the kitchen practicing and creating new dishes for our guests to enjoy. So, I entered Bedandbreakfast.com's Best Breakfast contest, earning 1st runner up in 2014. The only thing worse than last place in my book is 2nd place so the next year I was determined to win, and I did. Best Breakfast 2015.

In April of 2015, a casting agent for a production company in Los Angeles was looking for a home cook with no culinary training who was doing a bit more with their skills than just cooking at home, to be considered for a Food Network show. She found the Best Breakfast 2015 winner announcement on-line and called me. That was an exciting moment! The next several weeks were a flurry of Skype interviews, photo sharing, applications, background checks, video submission and more phone calls. This took work - many potential candidates don't get past the interview stage because of all the effort that goes in to making tasty treats, photographing them, videotaping yourself at work and in the kitchen, filling out 20 page applications, preparing for a Skype interview with a spread of baked goods all while running your business.

Then came the day in June where I received the call that I was selected from hundreds of candidates to be a competitor on the Holiday Baking Championship. I didn't believe it until the plane landed in LA and a driver from the Food Network picked me up.



Susan Steffan

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I was living a dream come true! Weeks later I returned home with my lips tightly sealed for months, until finally in September we were permitted to let the cat out of the bag. Each episode includes 2 challenges, the first is for an advantage in the 2nd, which is an elimination challenge; someone is sent home and someone wins the episode. There are 8 episodes and 10 competitors. The final episode is a finale with the last 3 competitors. The winner gets \$50,000.

I went to LA with 3 goals. Survive the challenges, don't go out on the first episode, and enjoy every second of it! Don's goal was to keep the inn running smoothly by doing both out jobs each day, every morning flawlessly make one of the three breakfasts that he had learned, and not tell anyone where I was! We both achieved our goals. When the first episode aired, things got really exciting around here. I won the first episode. I still can't believe I won the first episode!! Amazing!! I was up against professional, culinary school trained bakers who owned bakeries from around the country and I won the first episode with my "First Snow Cherry Pie". That recipe is now on Food Network's website. What an amazing achievement! In the second episode I won the first challenge with my Peppermint Scones and that recipe is also on FoodNetwork.com. How cool is that!

By the third episode my lack of training was catching up with me and the cake challenge did me in. But I went home feeling like a winner. And our business has exploded since November and December when the show aired. Folks just come in off the street for a picture or autograph. I get recognized when we are out and people stop to chat with me about the show. Many asked if we had a cooking class. This interest birthed our new business - Breakfast Diva Cooking School. Now I do classes out of the dining room of

our inn every Saturday afternoon. We are looking at opportunities for expansion as well.

We were just recognized as one of the top ten B&Bs in the USA by Bedandbreakfast.com - I cried tears of joy. We have been working so hard at this labor of love and every success leads us to another new challenge. Don and I believe that there is no such thing as treading water. You are either going forward or falling behind and it is this attitude that has fueled the fire that keeps us going.

How is this romantic? We are a team. I couldn't make amazing breakfasts or be that "personality" that people enjoy if it weren't for Don reminding me to turn on or off the oven, or gently insisting that we take a day for ourselves, or keeping track of our finances so well. He doesn't want the spotlight, but makes sure the electricity doesn't get shut off! He is also my best taste-tester, the one I first bounce an idea off of, the beginning and ending of my every day, and the guy who keeps my feet on the ground and encourages me to reach for the stars! We have never been more in love - with each other and our life together.

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