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## Sarah Hardin: Cake designer and decorator

By Janet Sudnik Photo by Robert Sutton

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The fringed tips of Sarah Hardin's piecy blond hair could have been iced with the same hot-pink frosting that accents the three-tiered cake she's just finished decorating. The lime-green, polka-dotted, pink-bowed confection is a sugar and flour expression of Hardin's personality — bright, funky and fun. She bakes and decorates fanciful cakes and cupcakes at It Takes The Cake in Northport, and her talents have just landed her a spot on a Food Network Challenge competition.



Robert Sutton

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This month, From November 30 to December 4, Hardin competed in Denver, Colo., for a grand prize of \$10,000, and the episode will air sometime in the spring of 2011. Leading up to the competition, Hardin was busily planning her strategy and trying to contain her excitement. "Just to be invited is a huge deal to me," she said. "I'm gonna be competing with people who have competed before and are really good at what they do. It's just a total honor just to be chosen."

Despite this achievement, a life in pastries was never on her radar, but the creativity she brings to her work has been there all along. Artistic ability may be genetic for Hardin, who comes from several generations of talent in various mediums. Her mother is a graphic artist, her father a musician, and her grandparents possessed skill in pottery, stained glass and painting. Even her younger brother is planning to head off to art school. "It's unavoidable!" she said. "It's all in my blood."

Because of her love for drawing and painting, she always knew her career would be something creative, but she never imagined it would take place in the kitchen. After high school, while attending classes Shelton State, she applied for work at It Takes The Cake bakery simply because it was around the corner from her home. They took a chance on her, and she picked up the necessary culinary skills on the job. "I just fell in love with it, and since then I've been doing it full time."

After a stint at It Takes The Cake, she worked for another Tuscaloosa catering business, A Taste Above, for eight years, before returning to It Takes the Cake, where she's been for the last two years. "I really feel like not a lot of people can say that they love their job, and I really feel like I can say that."

Hardin has created everything imaginable for weddings, parties and themed events. She favors bright colors and whimsical designs, and takes her inspiration from her clients, who bring in favors or invitations they want turned into dessert. In Tuscaloosa, she's had a run of requests for zebra-striped cakes, and said the topsy-turvy style is still going strong. "One of the weirdest things I've ever done is an iguana — I did a 3D iguana for a groom's cake, and I've never forgotten that cake," she said, adding that the "Steel Magnolias" armadillo cake is also a popular one for weddings.

The work can be physically demanding — such as standing in one spot for up to eight hours — and emotionally stressful, Hardin said. "I'm really hard on myself as far as the need to succeed. If something doesn't come out right, I find myself putting a lot more unnecessary stress on myself. I'm a little bit of a perfectionist."

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But her perfectionist tendencies have paid off. In September, she took home the grand prize at the PattyCakes Creative Wedding Cake Competition in Georgia. At the event, she was approached by Joshua John Russell, a Food Network Challenge regular and renowned pastry chef in Atlanta, who was scouting candidates and asked if she'd be interested in competing in one of the network's popular cake-offs. Shocked and a little skeptical, she readily said yes. Two days later, she received an e-mail asking for her photo, bio and audition tape. With every step of the process, the opportunity became more real, and she headed to Denver for the taping of the competition. She brought her mother as her competition assistant, to utilize her talents for color selection and design. The theme of the challenge and the eventual results are top-secret until the show airs.

But the cake competition means more to Hardin than a cash prize and national recognition. If she wins, Hardin plans to give part of her winnings to an organization that supports family members dealing with Sudden Unexplained Death in Children, which she credits with helping her cope with the death of her daughter, Katie, who was 17 months old when she suddenly passed away. Katie was a copy of her mother, "the most beautiful thing that I've ever seen," said Hardin, with tears forming. "She was a happy, bubbly, beautiful child. We laid her down for a nap and she didn't wake up."

The sudden and tragic loss was deemed SUDC, leaving Hardin with little explanation and few answers. The organization has connected her with other mothers and families who can empathize with the pain and confusion she has gone through. "Nobody really knows what you're going through," she said. "It's like having the rug pulled from underneath you." The organization calls periodically to check up on her and to keep her informed of medical updates, and she would be thrilled to have the chance to give back to them.

In the future, Hardin would love to open her own bakery and continue to create edible art. "It's just a really satisfying job as far as making people happy and making kids happy," she said. "I really couldn't see myself doing something else."