By Robin Saul - Finalist

When I read about the Manischewitz Cook-off I just couldn't resist entering. I was researching ways to gather funding for my daughter's education, and a $25,000 grand prize (cash and Maytag appliances) would surely help. I really did not think that I would become a finalist but, I do have a knack for creating original recipes that appeal to family and friends- a talent I do not take for granted. I created my original recipe inspired by a picture I had seen of a Panini that was so thin it looked like matzo, not bread. I added mushrooms, mango and balsamic flavors as the sandwich filler.

The contest rules encouraged simple, simple, simple – 9 ingredients, 3 of which had to be

Manischewitz products. I found it easy to enter under these rules because I like to limit my ingredients anyway, and often take shortcuts for ease in cooking and preparation. Using Manischewitz products was not a problem for me, because they are readily available, and I find their quality superior to other similar products. I especially enjoy the broths to make soups, rice dishes, and also as ingredients in flavorful reductions.

Imagine how surprised and excited I was to receive the initial phone call from the Manischewitz PR representatives asking me questions specifically about my use of products and my reason for entering the contest. And then, I was even more excited when they told me that I WAS a finalist and I would be flying to Newark, New Jersey to compete on contest day, March 21st.

Prior to the trip, I tried to learn as much as I could about the Manischewitz Company, the history, the employees, the CEO's and their mission statement. I took being a finalist seriously and really felt they chose me and the other finalists to represent their company. After all, our recipes were all to be showcased on the Manischewitz site. I was honored.

But the timing... was a huge issue. This year I was invited out for Passover Seder meals and did not have family to entertain,. So, even though the event was just 4 days prior to the holiday I was able to interrupt my Passover preparation schedule. However, the timing was a concern for the other contestants as well; everyone agreed that perhaps in the future the date should be reconsidered. (That is – everyone agreed except the person who won the grand prize!)

The Experience

After I landed at Newark airport, I was whisked away by a private driver to the Manischewitz plant, where I met the other contestants and was introduced to the Manischewitz PR team. They helped us set up our workstations, and organize the tools and ingredients we needed to create our recipes. I felt very comfortable and very much at ease with everyone I met. We all were taken to the hotel where we were able to refresh and prepare for dinner. That night along with all the contestants, their family members and the PR team we went to a well-appointed restaurant in Teaneck, New Jersey.. Originally I had read - we would meet the Manischewitz CEO's and the company executives. However, that was not to be that evening. The food was delicious, very well presented and we felt very special to be finalists in a competition, which attracted thousands of entries.

I had a sleepless night (well almost). I was emailing at 4 AM. The morning of the contest all the contestants were driven from the hotel to the Manischewitz plant which crowded with media

personalities, Manischewitz Company representatives, friends and family. I was so nervous I did not eat, even though there was plenty of catered food. The caterer also prepared "copycat tastings" of the competing recipes.

It was exciting as spectators and the media surrounded our workstations, took pictures, and asked questions, interviewed and videotaped us. So many people approached me from different newspapers, publications, food blogs – it was overwhelming. As I looked down the line at my fellow contestants, they too were surrounded. Is this what is known as the 15 minutes of fame? Or as my husband named it: "Queen for a Day."

The Judges and the Judging

I suppose that I had hoped for some quality time with head judge Jamie Geller. I had really hoped to meet her and schmooze. . After watching her videos, reading her cookbooks and learning about her background, I felt we could be "best buddies". Although time did not allow for conversation, I did ask her if my daughter could come to her home in Israel for Shabbat next year! (Jamie and her family recently made Aliyah).

And now the judging –No, I was not nervous, but my adrenaline was pulsing fast and I was trying to be bright and cheery while the clock ticked away. OOPS! One judge came by as I was flipping my Panini in the pan and the matzo had browned while being pressed and fried. She asked," Is that supposed to happen?" hinting that I might have I burned my sandwich. I told her yes, but then she started writing something on her clipboard. I know that I told someone else that a Panini was grilled like grilled cheese, or French toast but this judge didn't seem to care- I saw it in her face. OOPS again --There was another judge who loved that I was from Atlanta and just wanted to talk about the Atlanta Braves. Well, I was trying to sauté my mushrooms and I am not really a Braves fan. (Not a time to talk baseball!)

It was hard to know just what the judges wanted, but we were told ease of preparation was very important, as was multitasking. We had to continue creating our recipes (the clock was ticking) while interacting with whoever came to our stations to ask questions. (Somewhat like Food TV) Another contestant told me that her recipe could be made while she held her baby on her hip; we all laughed about that.

We had one hour to prepare and plate our recipes. After the hour was up, each contestant carried their dish to the judges' table, shared a bit about themselves and their recipe and then a Manischewitz assistant divided the food individually for each judge to taste. We did not get any

feedback and the votes were private.
At last the winning recipe was announced. No, it was not my Balsamic Mushroom Matzo Panini with Mango Jam, but a soup Faux Pho. I was surprised that a soup won the grand prize, for the 3rd time in 4 years.

The Mayor
I met a sweet media woman in the ladies room and she told me she was wearing turquoise jewelry because Cory Booker, the VIP guest, likes turquoise. Oh yes, I did get to shake Newark Mayor Cory Booker's hand--one of the highlights of my trip, since I admire all that he has done and continues to do.

The Wrap Up
My advice to Manischewitz: I, along with the other finalists, would have appreciated feedback about our recipes and the scoring. In the end, we really were left wondering what the judges saw, tasted, and chose. How wonderful it would have been for each contestant to meet the judge panel prior to cooking and have the main questions asked at that time.

Would I do it again? Maybe. I arrived home happy, but totally exhausted. I am looking forward to using all the Manischewitz products the company is sending me as a finalist prize. $500 worth of products will definitely keep me going for a while.

Robin Saul, a resident of Atlanta, GA was selected as a finalist in the 7th Annual Manischewitz Cook-Off competition. Robin is a dietician with 4 children and 4 grandchildren. She is passionate about creative, simple, and healthy cooking, nourishing family and friends, and vegetable gardening. Many of her cuisine inspirations come from traveling with her husband Art. She would love to see more kosher restaurants become farm to table with exquisite fresh vegetables replacing the typical fatty options.

Try Robin's winning recipe for Balsamic Mushroom Matzo Panini with Mango Jam .
The additional four recipes along with the grand prize winner Faux Pho can be found at Manischewitz.com
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