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Web's giggling gourmets savor success

Evanston sisters Isabella and Olivia Gerasole earn a prestigious food award for their Webcast cooking show

By **Stevenson Swanson**
Tribune national correspondent
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NEW YORK -- Standing before a glittering black-tie audience, the award winners knew the drill. They expressed surprise at their victory. And they thanked their parents and their grandmother for encouraging and supporting them.

But they could barely see over the lectern.

Sisters Isabella and Olivia Gerasole of Evanston, Ill., became the youngest winners in the 16-year history of the James Beard Foundation food awards Monday night when the cooking Web site where they appear -- Spatulatta.com -- won the prize for best Webcast, a new category for the Beard awards, which are considered the most prestigious in the food world.

Isabella, 10, and Olivia, 8, are the site's giggling gourmets who twice a month demonstrate how to prepare roughly five recipes. For the upcoming Mother's Day weekend, the girls demonstrate how to make breakfast for mom, featuring a "scramblette," a scrambled-egg omelet with turkey and spinach that is cooked in a microwave. They also prepare heart-shaped toast and a fizzy fruit punch, and show how to fold a napkin to look like a flower.

The year-old Web site is the creation of television producer Gaylon Emerzian, a neighbor of the Gerasoles', whose long-standing dream of starting a children's cooking site on the Internet became a reality after she realized that the girls would make ideal hosts.

"We're trying to convince kids that food does not come out of a box, and we're trying to encourage families to see cooking not as a chore but as quality time that families can spend together," Emerzian told the award audience at the Marriott Marquis hotel in Times Square.

Designed to be easy

Spatulatta's dishes are designed to be easy enough for children to make and also to introduce new flavors and ingredients to the often finicky palates of young diners. One recent show included spanakopita, the Greek spinach and feta cheese pie.

Spinach?

"It was really good," gushed Olivia, who wore a dove-gray satin gown made by her mother, Heidi Umbhau, a media trainer and former television reporter. For the reception after the awards, Olivia replaced her dress shoes with sneakers. Around her waist she wore an electronic light belt--bought from a New York street vendor--that flashed the message she had programmed into it: "Cooking rules."

Perhaps displaying the practical nature of an older sister, Isabella's belt spelled out Spatulatta's Web address.

"I think it's easier to accept learning if it comes from another child," she said, analyzing the appeal of the site, which has gotten hits not only from across the country but from Russia, Italy and Saudi Arabia.

And, added Olivia, "kids learn that food doesn't magically appear in front

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of you. You have to measure and stir and cook it. And it's really fun."

Emerzian, who co-owns Evanston's Trillium Productions with her husband, Roger Brown, tries to keep the dishes healthful, but without being too much of a grown-up about it.

"We do have cupcakes on there because I can't imagine going through childhood without brownies and cupcakes," she said.

Before the awards, the Gerasole family's anxiety was heightened by the fact that the girls' father, Vince, also was a nominee. Gerasole, a features reporter for WBBM-Ch. 2, was nominated for his food reports and reviews in the best local or national television food segment category. He lost to another Chicago broadcaster and food reporter, Steve Dolinsky of WLS-Ch. 7, but he professed not to care.

"I was so focused on the girls' award," he said. "I was in tears when they won."

Interest in food passed on

His daughters come by their interest in food naturally. Their grandparents own an Italian restaurant in Pittsburgh, and Gerasole and his wife enjoy cooking and entertaining. Olivia remembers helping her dad make pasta from scratch when she was 3.

"The girls were so charming and bright," Emerzian said. "They're sophisticated and yet they're pure of heart."

That quality comes across in Isabella's scramblette segment when she pulls the dish from the microwave.

"Wow! It looks ready," she trills, sounding a bit surprised that you really can cook eggs in a microwave.

Working with what Emerzian calls a "non-existent" budget, she and the girls shoot most segments in one take. Afterward, the family and Emerzian and her husband dine on the results.

Whatever happens on the set--the Gerasoles' kitchen--ends up on the Webcast. Like Julia Child before them, the girls have to adjust and move on, whether that means picking up a dropped egg or overlooking a more serious mishap.

"One time I made a blueberry pie, and it exploded in the oven," Olivia said. "We ate it anyway."

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