

The Cargill Master Series

Who are the people behind Cargill's innovative ingredients, beverages and food? Here's an inside look at the experts who work every day researching ingredients and developing recipes, beverages and foods that feed the world.



Q&A with Bill Gilbert, CMB

Principal Food Technologist at Cargill



Bill Gilbert, Principal Food Technologist at Cargill, was the 23rd person to become a Certified Master Baker (CMB) in the Retail Bakers of America program, and the 7th person to pass the test on the first round. Gilbert came to Cargill in 2008, where he is one of only two Certified Master Bakers. Gilbert grew up in St Charles, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, in a family with no roots in baking. He and his wife now base out of Cumberland Hills, Tennessee. They have been married for 37 years and have two sons and a daughter. We recently caught up with Gilbert to find out more about what he does.

What was it like to take the Certified Master Baker exam, knowing the high failure rate?

I was nervous as anything going to the test. When I did it you had to score 80 percent or better on your tests. Any part you did not score that high, you had to retake the test. If you failed it a second time, you could never apply again. When they first started the testing, they did a couple rounds, and everybody failed. They pulled the program back in, redid it, and sent it out again in '91.

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I did my test in '92. Back then to qualify, you had to have 16 years of verifiable experience in the industry. Now it's 12 years. The testing process involves a couple different things. There's a half-day written test, and a day of practical baking. There were four categories—cakes, Danish, bread, sweets, and then you pick a category of your own. I picked donuts. I prepared a yeast-raised donut recipe from the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. It was intense and nerve-wracking to have to do all this stuff on time and then submit to the judges.

How did you start in baking?

I started at Dunkin' Donuts when I was 15. My sister was working there and they needed a guy at the counter on Friday and Saturday nights. There was a picture of a donut on the wall of the shop, and the owner said, "You keep making donuts until all of your donuts look like that picture." It took me about a year to finally create the perfect donut.

How did you get your vast repertoire of recipes?

I worked for different bakers and learned from their scratch papers. I worked with a German baker, a Polish baker, a third-generation American baker. Each time I'd work off the formula cards—that's what recipes were called—I would write down one ingredient at a time, eventually collecting a lot of recipes. One baker had a suitcase full of formulas from his dad. He let me bring the suitcase home, and my wife put together a booklet of formulas, one copy for him, one copy for me.

What are some of the more intuitive moments you've experienced when baking?

When I was taking the test to become a Certified Master Baker, the judge was walking around and noticed I wasn't measuring the temperature of my bread dough. I said that I'd felt the dough and knew the temperature was 72 degrees. He put his thermometer in, and it was exactly 72 degrees. Other times, it's knowing when I can save the dough or when we have to throw it away. I walked into a plant once and these two guys were trying to scoop this mass of peanut butter cookie dough out of a mixer. I examined the dough and said, 'You've got to throw that away.' I could tell by the feel of it there was no saving it.

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How do you help a client create or improve a recipe?

I go back to my scratch formulas, make a recipe from there, then I adjust depending on what we want to do. Whether it's label-friendly, egg-reduced, whatever the trend, it always goes back to the scratch formulas.

You've won a lot of awards for your baking. Which one is the most meaningful?

The Circle of Champions award that I got a few years ago was the high mark of my career, because it was a recognition by my peers.

What do you do when you're not working?

I'm a quilter. I've won blue ribbons at county fairs for quilts that I make. I do the embroidery and patchwork by hand. Quilting calms me down.

You also judge baked goods at the fairs.

Yes. One year, there were 57 chocolate chip cookies put in front of me, and I had to pick 1st, 2nd and 3rd place. If a cookie doesn't get by my nose, it doesn't go into my mouth.

Word has it you make your own excellent chocolate chip cookie. What is your secret?

I use butter for a nice clean flavor. You have to use the right fat, sugar and flour or you won't get that mouth feel, the crumbs, structure and flavors. And don't skimp on the chocolate.



Bill judging cookies at a county fair.

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