

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

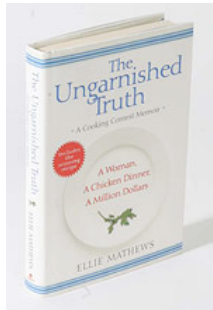
BOOKS

Gastronomy

By ARAM BAKSHIAN JR.

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The Ungarnished Truth By Ellie Mathews *Berkley, 276 pages, \$23.95*



Ellie Mathews must be the only woman in the world to parlay a cup of salsa, eight chicken thighs and a handful of other modest ingredients (cumin, cinnamon, almonds, honey) into a million-dollar payoff. She did it by winning first prize in the 1998 Pillsbury Bake-Off with her recipe for "Salsa Couscous Chicken."

The story of how she got there -- and of what she learned along the way -- lends thematic unity to "The Ungarnished Truth," an otherwise scattered memoir of food, family and the quest for victory. Competitiveness and neighborliness, normally at odds, converge neatly in a lot of traditional American activities, not least cooking contests.

On a national scale, no contest captures the convergence better than the Pillsbury Bake-Off, since 1949 an event that attracts thousands of ordinary Americans with a knack for home cooking. "I meet people all the time," Ms. Mathews recounts, "who say, 'Gee. I didn't know real people ever won those things.' I'm here to tell you we do."

A talented cook, Ms. Mathews is also a talented writer with a gimlet eye for the absurdities of instant fame. On "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" she is upstaged by the marginally undead duo of Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme and force-fed raw cookie dough by the unspeakable Rosie herself. Ms. Mathews suffers through an appearance on "Oprah," too, alongside other contest winners, including a Garth Brooks look-alike and a dog named Kirby, the champion of the Westminster Dog Show. Tarnished glitter aside, Ms. Mathews's story is upbeat -- a blend of pluck, self-deprecating humor, talent and culinary imagination.