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Real Life: An honest meal of a book, with sticking power



By Mary Davies

Front page photo, March 19 Leader: Port Townsend High School junior Rachael Wiles has just been named Rhody queen. Her upraised hands frame a smiling face, mouth open in surprise. She looks delighted, but not without dignity. It's perfect. You have to wonder how long she practiced it at home in front of a mirror.

Well, who wouldn't? I started practicing right away when I submitted an entry for the PT Film Festival Academy Award winner speech, and I never even got an email acknowledgement, let alone an Oscar.

You'd think local author Ellie Mathews would have started practicing when she was named one of a hundred semifinalists for the \$1 Million Pillsbury Bake-Off in 1998. But she didn't expect to win, and she's not the type to practice surprise. You can read all about it in *The Ungarnished Truth*, her memoir about winning the contest.

It wasn't until I read how emphatically Mathews refuses to fit the winner stereotype that I realized I even had one. Onstage, when her name was called, she failed to scream and giggle and tear up with elation and simultaneous modest disbelief, as I thought we all had learned to do, watching Miss America pageants or "American Idol." In fact, emcee Alex Trebek had to suggest, in a whisper, that Ellie give him a hug. A good sport, she complied, as she did when they asked her to fly to Los Angeles to appear next day on something she believed was called the Rosy O'Donald Show.

But Ellie never did buy a Mercedes or first-class round-the-world airline tickets with her million dollars. She doesn't have a celebrity kitchen either, even though she had a perfect excuse to create one. Since winning the contest, she and her husband moved to Port Townsend, where they had to remodel a kitchen. Six-burner range? She couldn't remember using even four burners all at once. Sub-Zero refrigerator, billed as a "monument to food preservation"? No.

The memoir's subtitle suggests her grounded perspective: *A Woman, A Chicken Dinner, A Million Dollars*. She's perfectly clear about what comprises her real life, including illness and death and birth and rediscovery. On the other hand, devising a winning recipe isn't nothing. True, she needed to do something with the boneless skinless

chicken thighs she had in the freezer before leaving on a long trip, but that eventual stroke of genius was preceded by a lot of analysis and testing of other possibilities. Nevertheless, the Bake-Off, ultimately, is not life or death; it's a chicken recipe. Ultimately, it's Ellie Mathews who is most interesting, Ellie and her observing eye.

I like all this about her, and if she'd written the book I was expecting to read, full of gee-whiz giddiness and a montage of once-in-a-lifetime events, I wouldn't still be thinking about it. And yet her very moderation bugs me a little. Why? I guess I want her to get out of my way and let me have my vicarious thrill at her expense. It's hard for me to give up completely on the idea that winning that prize would change me - I mean her - in some important, positive way.

"Aren't you excited?" everyone kept asking Ellie at the Bake-Off. But nobody really wanted to know; they just wanted her to say yes. Just as I would have. I'm her worst nightmare. When I finally met her, I asked her every possible intrusive question. Chief among them, of course, is "What did you do with the money?"

She wrote the book partly because of the unending and insatiable curiosity of people like me. Fortunately for us, she doesn't give us the answers we expect. Now I suggest she make one response to every query: "I guess you'll just have to buy the book," she'll say with a charming twinkle in her eye. I just hope she's practicing.

(Mary E. Davies' thrice-monthly Leader column is also available online at ptleader.com. She's home now practicing her look for when she wins the Pulitzer.)