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Ten years after she took the grand prize at the Pillsbury Bake-Off, cook and author Ellie Mathews has published a page-turner of a book about the experience.

New book follows author's journey to winning the Pillsbury Bake-Off



By [REBEKAH DENN](#) P-I FOOD WRITER

If there was a Miss America of cooking, if Betty Crocker could come to life, they might get the sort of questions Ellie Mathews still faces 10 years after she dreamed up Salsa Couscous Chicken.

Winning the Pillsbury Bake-Off, as Mathews did with her chicken recipe in 1998,

bestows a timeless sort of kitchen celebrity, one that envelops the \$1 million prize winner as well as the recipe itself. The Bake-Off -- this year's will take place April 13-15 in Dallas -- has become as famously American as apple pie, or at least the four versions of apple desserts that have been winners since the contest began in 1949.

"Are you a fabulous cook?" people always ask Mathews, a former Seattleite now living in Port Townsend.

"How did you think up the recipe?"

"What was the Bake-Off like?"

"What did you do with the money?"

Mathews, a former cartographer and graphic software designer, knows she doesn't fit the cultural image of a cooking contest icon, in either her culinary experience (a "get it on the table" sort of cook) or her feelings about being featured on Oprah and Rosie O'Donnell's shows. (One TV appearance felt so awkward that Mathews actually embraced an actor wearing a Pillsbury Doughboy suit, so relieved that "someone from my team had come onstage to rescue me.")

The 62-year-old writer tells the story gently but candidly in her new book, "The Ungarnished Truth: A Cooking Contest Memoir" (Berkley, \$23.95), which is bound to spark a boom in cooking contest entries -- not because it's a how-to manual but because it's a page-turner, even though readers already know how the story ends.

"I'm an adequate cook. I don't fuss; I refuse to buy extravagant ingredients ...," Mathews writes. "There's not much I know to do in the kitchen that you couldn't look up in the second edition of the 'Joy of Cooking.' "

But what she does have is years of home-cooking experience, a competitive spirit, a nose for spices and a lucid and honest style. That last part leads her to confess one Bake-Off attempt using a can of baked beans in a desperately creative stab at baked-bean brownies, followed by the thrifty use of leftover beans ("though I'll probably live to regret making this public") in a baked-bean-chopped-peanut cole slaw.

"I forget which part of this sounded as if it would be good, although I make no apology for having experimented," she writes. "As I learned in the software business, a test is not a test until you break what's being tested."

The Pillsbury Bake-Off is considered the queen bee of cooking contests, but Mathews started small, as an avid backpacker who stumbled on a 1980 REI competition to develop freeze-dried camping meals. She concocted pancakes from instant brown rice for the contest, her mom came up with spaghetti "dressed in something akin to desiccated pesto"; her daughter, Karen, tried chili and dumplings. All three were among the finalists, and Karen won first prize.

That inspired Mathews to enter Washington state's Beef Cook-Off, at which she won second place, then, a few years later, first prize. Husband Carl Youngmann found similar success. The bug had begun, with the freedom to fail (if she sent in an entry and it went nowhere, what was the harm?) and the fun of learning new things and meeting good people.

"If I had reason to seek a whole new community of friends, I know exactly where I'd start. There's something about the fearlessness of creativity that makes a person interesting," she writes.

When it came to the mother contest, though, she devoted plenty of forethought and recipe tests. Salsa Couscous Chicken made her personal cut, along with others that included Salsa Seafood Creole, a soup using frozen peas, a self-frosting upside-down chocolate cake from a boxed mix, and a cardamom-scented muffin.

The irony of them all, including the chicken, was that they weren't recipes Mathews would normally make. The chicken, for instance, is "delicious," but packaged salsa is unnecessarily expensive. Plain tomatoes and onions would do the trick better.

Contests aren't about personal taste, though. Mathews tried to lean toward her own cooking principles of thrift and health, but she also approached entries as projects to design, or codes to crack. Bake-Off specifications had required that contestants use an ingredient from a list heavily weighted toward the prepackaged and the processed, and bottled Old El Paso Salsa seemed a benign choice. (This year's entrants had to choose two ingredients from options that included refrigerated sugar-cookie dough, brownie mix, taco seasoning mix and honey-roasted peanuts.)

In the end, her strategy paid off. And being chosen as a finalist, with an expenses-paid trip to the Bake-Off finals in Florida, seemed prize enough for Mathews. She truly did not expect to win; she wasn't just saying it to be polite.

The book is a window into her own life as well as the contest, mentioning her two ex-husbands, the dark days when her sister committed suicide, and the difficult relationship Mathews had with her mother.

"That's how people are," she said. "We all have disappointments and sorrows."

Also, if they're lucky, they have satisfactions and joys -- a daughter, a granddaughter, a loving husband, even a recipe for Salsa Couscous Chicken.

Mathews doesn't cook the chicken herself under normal circumstances. She'll make it for a fund-raiser or a photo shoot, but she prepared it too many days under too much stress to truly enjoy it anymore. Still, it does remain a source of pride, "as if I succeeded in doing the puzzle of what the recipe contest was."

She still enters the occasional cooking contest, winning \$10,000 for a

Vietnamese-style burger in 2005 and \$1,000 the same year for a blue cheese pear salad. She and Carl remodeled their "dumpy" Port Townsend kitchen into a bigger one, but decided against buying a fancy six-burner range, and Carl built the cabinet doors from the old fir boards a neighbor had junked. A lifetime of frugality can't be erased, even by a \$1 million.

Early on, Mathews wasn't sure what it would mean to her life to have won the Bake-Off.

"I was worried that it would change me."

In the end, it has only been for the better. After taxes, the money (a 20-year annuity) works out to about \$100 per day, which has been a manageable way for Mathews to take it in.

"The times I think about the money are when I'm considering buying a sweater, or when I'm at a nursery contemplating a plant," she said. "Those are my luxuries, though I always look in the half-price sections first."

Mostly, Mathews, who already was semiretired and a published author at the time of the Bake-Off, spends her time writing. "The Ungarnished Truth" is her third book.

Grand-prize winners are barred from entering again, so Mathews will watch from afar as two finalists from Washington state -- Sheilah Fiola of Kent and Elizabeth Bennett of Mill Creek -- attempt to duplicate her feat. She'd said she'd like to go back one day to see the contest from another perspective. She was too busy and nervous in 1998 to take in what was happening at all the ovens around her.

"I would go, and watch," she said. "I mean, it's a phenomenon!"

-- Rebekah Denn

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