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PEOPLE LIFE CHANGES

One recipe can yield a lot of dough

Pillsbury Bake-Off winners get rich, but the money doesn't change who they are.

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Two pies, a torte, a chicken dish and a panini sandwich don't seem like much to most people. It's hardly even an impressive deli menu.

But for five winners of the Pillsbury Bake-Off, each of those dishes served up a cool \$1 million.

On Tuesday, 100 finalists in the 42nd edition of the Bake-Off will start their ovens at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center, and try to claim a \$1 million prize in the Olympics of home cooking.

Whether the award goes to Robin Wilson of Altamonte Springs for her Fudgy-Peanut Butter Banana Parfaits or Jenny Flake of Gilbert, Ariz., for her Toasted Mexi-Meatball Hoagies or any of the other creative cooks, the magnitude of it all takes a while to settle in.

It's a win that makes you a hometown hero. It's a reward that lands you on the Today Show or Oprah. And it's a payoff that can change your life.

First man standing

"It was pretty hectic at first," recalls Kurt Wait, 54, the 1996 winner of the first \$1 million Pillsbury Bake-Off in Dallas -- and the first male winner in the contest's history.

Although the Bake-Off began in 1949, the cash prize for this biennial contest has been \$1 million for only 10 years. The prize is paid with annual checks of \$50,000 for 20 years, but after the first year, a winner may elect to take the remainder in a lump sum.

After Wait's win for Macadamia Fudge Torte, this Redwood City, Calif., business analyst and single dad appeared on Good Morning America and The Tonight Show.

But he declined movie offers and a book contract. Instead, he simply returned to work.

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"I had a 9-year-old son to consider," Wait says. He set aside funds for taxes and invested a large part of the prize in stock for his son's college fund. About half of the cash went to taxes, he says.

No sleek European car. No luxury yacht. No Rodeo Drive make-over.

He did use a \$10,000 Sears kitchen-makeover prize given to Bake-Off winners to make home improvements, including ceiling fans and a garage-door opener.

On top of that, Wait pocketed \$5,000 from another recipe contest soon after the Bake-Off. And he still loves to enter contests. Most recently, he was one of 20 finalists in the \$50,000 2005 National Beef Cook-Off with his recipe for Chipotle Beef and Chimichurri Sauce.

Wait did not win or place in that contest, but cooking remains a hobby, and he plans to keep entering.

Financial experts say that remaining true to your interests and values is a key element of success after the big win.

"There are two people who are really happy when something like this occurs," says Charlie Fitzgerald, certified financial planner with Spraker, Fitzgerald, Tamayo & Moisand in Maitland, "the recipient and the IRS."

One of the dangers in dealing with sudden wealth is "lottery mentality" -- when instant millionaires spend beyond their means, wildly change their lifestyles and end up worse than before the payout -- says Cary Carbonaro, a certified financial planner and local chapter president of the Financial Planners Association.

But top-dollar cooking-contest winners are more likely to save and spend wisely, says Fitzgerald, "because they earned it and worked at it."

Creativity . . . and an iPod

Ellie Mathews of Port Townsend, Wash., has a knack for entering cooking competitions -- and winning. Cash prizes are intriguing to her, but she sincerely enjoys the art of developing a contest recipe.

"Making a recipe is about having an idea and being creative with it. It's not unlike when I worked as a [graphic] designer. The creative process is what intrigues me," says Mathews, a 60-year-old writer.

Mathews entered her first cooking contest in the 1980s, and in 1998 collected \$1 million for her Salsa Couscous Chicken at the Bake-Off in Orlando.

Her media blitz included appearing on Rosie O'Donnell's talk show and being interviewed by dozens of newspaper reporters. Her book, *Ambassador to the Penguins: A Naturalist's Year Aboard a Yankee Whaleship* (David R. Godine, \$29.95), was released in 2003 to good reviews. The book is a tribute to her grandfather, Robert Cushman Murphy, a distinguished naturalist and environmentalist.

For Mathews, the win was wonderful, and the lucrative prize is a nice turn of luck, but she is careful to stress that the money doesn't define her in her creative pursuits or in her everyday life.

"I still shop at Goodwill. Probably 80 percent of my clothes come from there," she says. "Winning a contest is an external thing. It doesn't change who I am."

"I was in my 50s when I won the Bake-Off. My values and habits were already in play. I wasn't interested in re-emerging as someone else."

Mathews stresses her winnings come in yearly annuities, which "doesn't put you in the realm of butlers and private jets."

Last year, she pocketed \$10,000 in the Sutter Home Winery Build a Better Burger contest in the alternative -- no beef -- burger category for Grilled Pork Burgers Indochine. She currently is writing a book about her experience winning the Pillsbury Bake-Off.

"I'm pretty far along," she says. "It's memoir, and the spine of the story is the contest, but the book is mostly about me and my values."

After the burger event, Mathews treated one of her fellow cooks, who had much higher hopes of winning, to a night out.

"It seemed like the right thing to do," she says.

The second thing she spent the burger winnings on was an iPod.

She admits the iPod was a luxury but found it hard to resist.

"I don't need to be going around with ear buds all the time. But those devices are slick."

Staying grounded

The closest that 2000 winner Bobbie Sonefeld came to splurging was her decision to do home-remodeling work. Other than that, daily life is much the same as it was before she won the Bake-Off with her Cream Cheese Brownie Pie.

Sonefeld, 41, of Hopkins, S.C., still works as an administrative assistant for a commercial-mortgage banking company and remains active in her children's school activities.

"The money has given us a better sense of security, but we're still the same people we were before the Bake-Off," says Sonefeld, who never considered quitting her job. "We invested for the kids' college educations and our retirement."

An answering machine helps screen calls from those who want to "help" the Sonefelds manage their money. "We have someone we have confidence in, and that works just fine for us," she says.

While she's not keen on entering more food contests, Sonefeld did win \$4,000 on the game show To Tell the Truth soon after her Pillsbury win. And in addition to the talk-show circuit, which is required, she went on QVC to help Pillsbury sell cookbooks.

Any advice for the 2006 winner?

"Enjoy the ride and be careful what you say," she says with a laugh. "I was so flabbergasted at my win, I couldn't believe the things I said to reporters."

Handling the money

In 2002, a Nashville entrepreneur who liked to cook creative dishes for her family won the Bake-Off simply by following her own advice.

She challenged herself to achieve a goal.

"I had a goal of making \$1 million by the time I was 40, and I did," says Denise Yennie, 42. "I didn't expect to do it like this."

Yennie wowed the judges with Chicken Florentine Panini, a pressed sandwich that uses refrigerated pizza crust.

When the media stopped calling, life settled down. There were no luxury acquisitions. "I've got a financial background, and I know what money is about," Yennie told *The Tennessean*. "I could go to fancy stores -- and the point would be what?"

One idea that began to jell after the contest, however, involved her belief that she could use food to express her creativity. Before the contest, she had developed 2Renegades, which advises start-up companies. With the prize money, she expanded the business to teach Renegade Cooking, courses that encourage creative thinking by looking at food in different ways.

In 2005, she joined 2nd Generation Capital, a merchant-banking firm based in Nashville and Louisville, Ky., as director of its advisory services group.

When the initial payment for \$50,000 arrived from Pillsbury, the first check she wrote was to her church. Then she re-arranged her financial affairs to accommodate new tax obligations, and she took a few short family vacations. After that, she stashed most of the winnings in investments to be used for her children's college education.

Modest indulgences

Even if Pillsbury contestants have dreamed of winning, a \$1 million paycheck can be a shock.

When winner Suzanne Conrad received her first check in the mail, she and her husband were terrified. "I had never seen a check that large, and we couldn't get it to the bank fast enough."

A 36-year-old former librarian from Findlay, Ohio, she barely remembers her name being announced at the 2004 Bake-Off in Hollywood, Calif. Her Oats n' Honey Granola Pie, a dessert reminiscent of a pecan pie, had won over the judges.

"I was just stunned. It was a fog. I couldn't believe it," she says. "We had to borrow the money from my parents so that my husband could attend the contest with me.

"My dad just laughed about how much money he had spent on college, and then I make all this money from a pie recipe."

Since the win, her parents have been repaid, and she and her husband have worked to secure a comfortable future.

"It's nothing on the outside that you can see," she says. "We started nice college accounts for our kids and started paying into a retirement fund for my husband and myself."

Her only indulgences have been a "nice" laptop and a Roomba, an automated floor-cleaning device. The Conrads did have to buy new kitchen cabinets to fit the Sears appliance package into their kitchen. But they opted for basic components from a home-improvement retailer rather than a designer line.

Does she still feel compelled to shop for bargains?

"You can't change who you are," Conrad says. "You won't enjoy the money if you do.

"I still shop at T.J. Maxx. In fact, it's the only place I do get recognized," she says with a laugh. "I'm usually down on my hands and knees in the clearance section looking for the orange sale tags, and someone will always say, 'You are that pie lady.' "

For Conrad, the money was easier to handle than some aspects of her instant fame. "I'm not a big PR person, and I'm not used to having my picture taken," she says. "You have no idea how many times you have to have your picture taken after winning something like this. I didn't know what to wear, how to look. It was pretty funny. I look completely different in every publicity photo."

In the process, she met Oprah Winfrey and Matt Lauer, and was on a December 2005 cover of Women's World magazine.

"I still enter cooking contests," she says. "I haven't been a finalist in anything since Pillsbury, but I don't want to be a one-hit wonder."

Her Bake-Off entry was her first contest try. "I know I was lucky. But you know what? The whole thing was a lot of fun.

"It pays to enter, because," she pauses, then giggles again, "you just never know when your life might change."

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