



General Mills

history of innovation

the Pillsbury Bake-Off® Contest



In 1949, the Pillsbury *Bake-Off* Contest began as the “Grand National Recipe and Baking Contest,” held at the elegant Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. Executives at Pillsbury and its advertising agency created the contest as an opportunity for American homemakers to share their treasured recipes, promote *Pillsbury Best* flour, and celebrate the company’s 80th birthday.



Theodora Smafield was the first contest winner with her recipe for “No-Knead Water-Rising Twists.”

The first year, there were thousands of entries, which a panel of home economists narrowed down to 100 finalists. These 97 women and three men were invited to the competition to make their recipes and perhaps win some of the \$70,000 in prize money. The first contest’s winning entry was “No-Knead Water-Rising Twists,” created by Theodora Smafield of Michigan. She used a unique rising method to make her winning creation by wrapping her dough in a tea towel and submerging it in warm water to rise. For her creativity, she was awarded \$50,000 — with the eight other finalists splitting the remainder of the prize money.



The first contest was held in 1949 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City.

Since response to the 1949 contest was so overwhelming, Pillsbury decided to hold it each year. The media dubbed the event the “Bake-Off Contest” — a name that fit so well, Pillsbury officially adopted it.

In the early contests, the only required ingredient in recipes was *Pillsbury Best* flour. Initially the cost of holding such an event was questioned, but the increase of 700,000 *Pillsbury Best* customers and the goodwill toward the company quelled the fears of some of the shareholders.

By the second *Bake-Off* Contest in December 1950, a junior division was implemented. The winner of that was Ruth Drousseau of Wisconsin. She received \$5,000 for her Cherry Winks.

the Pillsbury Bake-Off® contest

In the 1950s, scratch cakes represented the largest category of *Bake-Off* Contest entries, followed by yeast and quick breads, pies and cookies, with few main dishes in the finals. In 1957, the competition left New York for the first time and headed to Los Angeles. Now contest sites vary, having been held in Washington, D.C., Florida, Texas and California, among other venues. While the contest was held annually until 1976, subsequently it has been held every other year.

As American culture changed, time became more precious — especially for preparing meals. The 1969 *Bake-Off* Contest marked the first time a recipe made with convenient, refrigerated dough won the grand prize.

Men are making their mark at the *Bake-Off* Contest finals. Although men have been a part of the contest since its inception, the greatest number of men – 14 – competed in 1998. In 1996, the *Bake-Off* Contest's first \$1 million grand prize went to a man, Kurt Wait of California. In 1962, the junior division was won by a 12-year-old boy.

The contest's entries and winners continue to reflect the changing face of the American family. Today, ethnic cooking concepts are being fused to create a new “melting pot” cuisine. Tastes have become more international as people taste and crave ethnic flavors. Two-paycheck families with greater demands on their time need easy recipes. The *Bake-Off* Contest launched its current “quick and easy” emphasis in 1996.

Every year brings changes to the food industry, and food professionals and trend trackers believe that cooks will be even more adventuresome. An American institution, the Pillsbury *Bake-Off* Contest will continue to share the recipes of the changing face of cuisine.