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THE FOOD & DRINK ISSUE

Giada De Laurentiis Shares Her Secrets for Eating Healthy the Italian Way

+ Don Guerra's Vision for a Sustainable Grain Economy in Arizona

+ How Indigenous Chefs are Reclaiming Native Foods

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Buon Appetito!

For Giada De Laurentiis, better health starts with better ingredients.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Giada De Laurentiis first rose to popularity in the early 2000s, when her daytime cooking show, "Everyday Italian," debuted on the Food Network. She quickly skyrocketed to international fame, thanks in part to her home-cooked comfort dishes but also to her bubbly personality and megawatt smile.

In the intervening years, De Laurentiis built an Italian empire, including hosting numerous cooking shows and winning a Daytime Emmy award, authoring 11 cookbooks, and opening multiple eateries. Her upscale restaurant Luna by Giada and grab-and-go cafe and coffee shop Pronto by Giada established Caesars Republic Scottsdale as one of the most sought-after dining destinations in Arizona.

But a busy lifestyle and high-stress schedule took their toll on the chef, and she found herself battling chronic fatigue, digestive issues, and burnout.

"I think as I hit my 50s, I learned that I couldn't rely on my old habits," she says. "I used to eat sugar by the cube on set to keep my energy up. Suddenly, habits like that left me feeling run-down."

While she loved cheesy pastas and rich desserts, she decided it was time to make a shift. This included returning to clean, nutrient-dense ingredients, healthy fats, and smaller portions.

"I worked a lot to make changes and find a diet that worked for my body and kept me nourished," she notes.

Now De Laurentiis focuses on helping others eat well and feel good. We recently sat down with the celebrity chef to talk about how foods affect us and the importance of healthy ingredients.

Why should people care about the ingredients in their food?

Learning what is in your food, both at home and in the grocery store, is so empowering. We all do our best in the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life to stay nourished and feeling good, but if you are eating highly processed foods, you're fighting an uphill battle. When you cook with great ingredients, you actually don't need to add that much to your food, because you can taste the quality. And the best news? It leaves you feeling more satisfied than something highly processed would have.

All photos courtesy of Luna by Giada



Italian food is not always considered the healthiest of cuisines. How do you balance flavor with wellness?

It's one of the great misconceptions that I've spent much of my career trying to clear up. Italian food is and always has been at its core, healthy. In some cases, we have strayed from that in Italian cooking, but the good news is that very small adjustments — caring about where your ingredients come from, portion sizes, eating pasta with veggies and protein — can change everything.

American diet culture tells us that pasta, carbs, and gluten are bad. In Italy, people eat and enjoy breads, pastas, pastries, even wine — without guilt and without a lot of the gastrointestinal issues or allergies that we find in America. Why is that?

The difference is how our food is made. It goes as far into the process as the soil the grains are grown in and how the pasta is dried. Many companies cut corners to save on price, but it has cost us quality, which is where that discomfort comes in. It's why I started Giadzy (an online one-stop-shop for recipes and cooking tutorials, as well as an Italian marketplace) — to bring the level of quality in Italian products they have in Italy to the U.S.



What are some of your favorite ingredients to cook with?

Obviously, great pasta is my focus. I incorporate pasta in so many of my dishes, as a grain on salads, as a side with protein. It is the food I enjoy cooking most. And good olive oil is everything. There are a lot of oils on the market that are blends or use low-quality olives, but when you have the right one, it's a great source of antioxidants, vitamin E, and oleic acid.

Are there any ingredients in Italian cuisine that you think are underrated when it comes to health benefits and flavor?

Anchovies. They get a bad rep, but they are the best source of omega-3s, omega-6, and fatty acids. They add the perfect amount of saltiness to a dish, as well.

Do you have any recommendations for choosing healthy packaged pastas?

All pasta should have two ingredients: semolina flour and water. Look for bronze-cut and slow-dried on the label. In a perfect world, the grains in your pasta are grown in Italy and produced in Italy.

Other than making good food choices, how do you stay healthy and fit while juggling travel, TV shoots, running a restaurant empire, and just living everyday life?

It's important to stay moving, so I walk a lot. I try to hit 10,000 steps for the day — or more if I have the time. I also do yoga. It's great for strength while staying low-impact on the body. And I make sure to eat enough protein and fiber. That fuels me to feel my best and keeps me going throughout the day.

What's your advice for someone who wants to start making healthier changes to their diet but doesn't want to sacrifice flavor or satiety?

Try to shop organic if you can, and find the items with the least amount of filler ingredients. You'd be amazed by what a difference that can make alone. But the important part is to find meals you like and try to eat mindfully, because healthier changes shouldn't be wrapped up in anxiety. Oh, and enjoy the people you spend meals with. That's important, too.

Giada De Laurentiis' Gluten-Free Pastina Soup

SERVES 4-6

Ingredients

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1 stalk celery, finely chopped
1 large carrot, finely chopped
2 shallots, finely chopped
2 teaspoons lemon oregano salt
1 (2-inch) piece Parmigiano Reggiano rind
1 quart chicken stock
2 cups water
1 box Giadzy gluten-free stelline
1 cup frozen peas, thawed (optional)
1 cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano

Directions

Heat a medium-size saucepan over medium heat. Add the olive oil, celery, carrot, and shallots, and cook, stirring often for about 5 minutes or until softened.

Add the sprigs of thyme, salt, Parmesan rind, chicken broth, and water. Bring to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes.

Add the pasta and stir with a wooden spoon to prevent sticking to the pan. Return to a simmer and continue to cook for 8 to 10 minutes more, or until the pasta is cooked and the liquid is slightly thickened.

Remove the thyme sprigs and Parmesan rind. Stir in the peas. Ladle the soup into bowls and top with grated cheese and lemon zest, if desired.

