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There's an old saying that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who eat to live and those who live to eat. I would of course be one of the second types. If you love to eat good food, love to shop at specialty markets and farmers' markets, and occasionally pull something out of the ground and bring it, covered in dirt, into your kitchen, this book is for you. If you want to begin living *La Dolce Vita* (The Good Life) or just love to eat delicious food, this book tells you my secrets about how I transformed my life, starting with the Friday evening meal. You can do it, too.

They say that the Mediterranean diet is the healthiest diet in the world, but it's more than diet, it's the lifestyle. As you read the chapters in this book, and begin consciously creating your own Friday evening *La Dolce Vita* menus and moments, you too will begin to reap the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.

My daughter Kristin is brain injured and in a wheelchair. Though I don't leave the house to work, my work is constant. If I can make these kinds of meals, you can do it, too. Yes, I do make everything

from scratch, and I do spend a lot of time during the day prepping for these meals. But I prepare them every day, while also walking my dog for an hour each morning, shopping for food 2-4 times a week, driving kids to therapy and school, taking care of many of my husband's daily needs like dropping off dry-cleaning, and frequently dragging a hose all over the yard, paying bills, and keeping some of the household books.

“*Eat cream, butter, sugar, and salt, but don't be an idiot; eat it in moderate quantities, and put it into your foods yourself.*”

Many of the meals and recipes in this book can be adjusted for faster preparation. You can, of course, buy many of the items pre-prepared. Strive to learn how to prepare your own basic ingredients and meals. The lifestyle is about spending time with your food and its preparation. If you must buy some items pre-prepared, try to use the very best ingredients



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you can find (while remembering that taking the time to find them is part of the lifestyle). I won't be too upset with you if you occasionally must sacrifice preparation time for your other time demands. This book is about living the lifestyle, not building a facade and populating it with take-out food.

If you get up each day, get yourself moving, spend time thinking about what you have to do and what you want to do, managing your time and starting a "holistic kitchen," you may find you don't need to pay someone to make your food. You don't have to drive somewhere to get prepared food, and you may not need to join a gym because you'll be carrying heavier bags of groceries, bending over to pick herbs, greens, and veggies out of the ground, and spending more time moving around your kitchen getting exercise.

The lifestyle I'm promoting centers around keeping the family at the table at the end of the day for seven or so courses of simply prepared and delicious foods, with wine, and, of course, a *dolce* (dessert), with spirited and intelligent conversation. This lifestyle requires a lot of thought about food, some time, but most of all, time management. If you merely adjust your habits, you can achieve happiness through this simpler lifestyle while still having time to pursue many of your other interests.

I recently found an advertisement from a kitchen equipment manufacturer. I cut out the photo and keep it as an example of the dream kitchen I hope to have someday. Warm, yellow sunlight streams in through bright, airy windows. It has everything a cook could possibly want. There are four ovens, each filled with some item being prepared for the evening's meal. A pan of crusty rolls is slowly baking, as the aroma of bread fills the room. Another oven has a casserole, perhaps with a chicken, some vegetables glazing in the simmering pan juices, or perhaps a roast to be left standing on the table to rest while wine glasses are being filled. There are two separate cook tops, one has a pot of water just starting to steam as the water begins to boil, and it cries out for a pound or two of pasta. The second cook top contains a covered stock pot, slowly simmering with the vegetable pieces not used in the main dish of the evening, but quietly gathering flavors to build the foundation of another night's meal. In the large farmhouse sink, a colander of freshly washed herbs stands in the sunlight, drying slowly as beads of water drip into the porcelain basin. In the middle of the room stands a large table with chairs and stools for any number of friends. Bowls of flour, butter, and eggs stand on the table with boxes of berries brought in from the

“*Chi ben comincia è alla metà dell'opera.*

(Who starts well is half way to a masterpiece.)”



garden earlier in the day. Pie crust dough is spread out on the table with two large rounds cut and resting inside one of several tin forms.

The knives are right next to the stove, on a magnetic strip. Ladles are hanging above it, and wooden spoons are at the ready on the counter. Another oven has a plate rack above it. The platters are ready to grab at a moment's notice when something hot is coming out of the oven and is ready to serve. The pots are stacked in an open space under the second cook top, and a range hood with a wood-burning oven are tucked next to one of the big farmhouse sinks.

A large wrought iron chandelier covers the ceiling, though in my kitchen there would be pots and herbs hanging from it. A separate butcher block table stands next to the farmhouse table, and baskets of

newly harvested fruits and vegetables are stacked on chairs, hand carts, and the floor. A colander of recently washed herbs is in the sink, and on the counter you can see a cutting board, bottles of oil and vinegar, pepper grinders, bowls of butter, and baskets of fresh bread. The doorway to the outside (presumably to the kitchen garden) is arched, with wide plaster ledges, and the walls are painted a mottled mustard yellow. The thick mud-colored bricks make for a very uneven floor. Kristin would be severely jostled in her wheelchair while navigating in this kitchen, but the tastes for her to savor would be exquisite.

This kitchen has the biggest refrigerator you could want. It has shelves for produce and plenty of room for one person to be grabbing a beer or a chilled bottle of Pinot Grigio while another is hunting for



heavy whipping cream. It will serve them both, with elbow room to spare. The dream kitchen is as big as my living room and is anchored by a used brick floor. It is the perfect marriage of the latest in high tech stainless steel components with an old world feel. This kitchen could be home to many a political argument, or discussions about religion, education, fashion, or gardening.

There was one thing missing from this kitchen, and it is the most important ingredient of all: people. There is no life to a kitchen without the sound of animated voices, shouting over the din of scraping chairs, chopping, bubbling, and the chink of stainless against wood, or steel or concrete. The smiles which come about when an elbow is bumped,

or a sauce is offered to taste, or a freshly plated dish of pasta, or a vegetable casserole is brought to the table are the reward for hours of labor preparing food for the family meal. How do we put the joy of working silently side by side, one chopping and another stirring, into the photo of the perfect kitchen? We begin by living in our kitchens, they are the tools of our lives, lives which are made better by the meals created and shared in them.

When I first saw the dream kitchen photo, I didn't wish for a remodel to put it into my home. My first wish was to have the opportunity, just once, to be cooking in this kitchen with my favorite *foodie* friends. Kate, my younger daughter, would be there, in the pastry side of the room, pulling together some



tasty dessert, always watching what we were doing and always eager to push her way to the big pot on the stove to stir, to taste, to approve, or to surreptitiously add some missing ingredient to suit her taste when I wasn't looking.

In the next room, or lounging around the farmhouse table with several bottles of opened wine, would be Jim and Kristin, and any number of friends, both real and imaginary.

I direct the reader to place yourself in this kitchen, in your mind. In this kitchen we will let the smells of the food erase the cares of the world and begin living *La Dolce Vita*.

Let's start with *Venerdì sera* (Friday night).

Most of us don't have these dream kitchens, and many of us who do don't fully appreciate the lifestyle they can so easily support. After visiting Italy, after many hours of imaginary conversation between my favorite food television stars and myself, and years of striving to prepare culinary masterpieces in the kitchen, I decided to write down what I've learned. My hope for you is that no matter what your kitchen is like, and no matter how busy your lifestyle, you'll realize that living *La Dolce Vita* is an achievable reality, not just reserved for dreams and vacations.

“One really good knife is far better than several stupid gadgets that will probably break anyway.”