

After struggling for years with her own weight, chef Devin Alexander '93 lost nearly 60 pounds. How did she do it? By giving a healthy spin to her favorite comfort foods

By Debra Michals
Photographs by
Amanda Friedman



all the food you love

DIETERS TAKE NOTE: Devin Alexander '93 has found a way to have her cake—or burger or pizza—and eat it, too. The author and chef—a self-professed fast-food junkie—has landed on a winning formula that takes your favorite decadent goodies, from macaroni and cheese to double-chocolate brownies, and makes them over into meals that are better for you and just as flavorful as the originals.

By following her own recipes, Alexander (who was known as Renee Simone at Smith) lost nearly 60 pounds and has parlayed her culinary creativity into a successful career, having written two best-selling cookbooks,

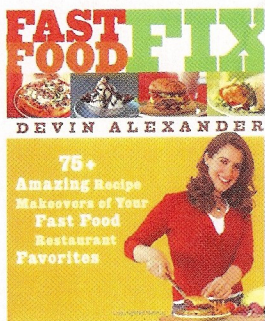
including *Fast Food Fix*, and launched a new cooking show, called *Healthy Decadence*, that airs Thursday nights at 10 on the Discovery Health Network.

Her message, which comes at a time when nearly 97 million people are overweight and fast food is often the culprit, has resonated, she says, because she makes people feel good about their food choices and doesn't adhere to the notion that diets and healthful eating mean cutting out your comfort foods. "I'm the cool girl chef," she says, "the person who tells you that you can eat healthfully and it can be all the food you love."

Alexander may embrace being a chef now, but early on she couldn't even say the word. "I was afraid if I admitted I was a chef, I'd end up being fat again," she says. As a child growing up in a middle-class family in Philadelphia, Alexander struggled with her weight. Since her father was often away on business, her mother didn't have a lot of time to cook, so the family enjoyed a number of "fast-food nights" during the week. Wendy's, McDonald's, and Burger King became favorite places. "Fast food was such a part of my childhood," Alexander writes in the introduction to *Fast Food Fix*, "that the only picture that exists of all my grandmother's grandchildren is in front of a statue of Ronald McDonald."

By the time Alexander was 15, she weighed 190 pounds. "I spent more of my life crying about my weight than anything else," she says. She even gave up her childhood dream of becoming an actress. "I figured I was too fat to be in front of the camera, so I decided to plan a career behind it—as a writer."

Then, in her late teens, she began experimenting with some of the recipes her grandmother taught her, looking for a way to make them leaner. Her first success: a pared-down chicken parmesan that used grilled instead of breaded-and-fried chicken and low-fat marinara and cheese. While at Smith, the drama major whipped up lighter versions of spaghetti, spicy meatballs, and orange custard squares for her housemates in the house kitchenette or on a hot plate in her room during mealtime, especially if she deemed the day's menu too fattening. Her recipes worked: the pounds started coming off. By the time she graduated, she was 30 pounds slimmer.



In her popular book, *Fast Food Fix*, Devin Alexander offers up recipes for healthier versions of decadent dishes such as pizza, onion rings, and milk shakes.

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But the thought of making money off her cooking skills never crossed her mind. After graduation, Alexander headed to Los Angeles, having been recruited for an internship at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences ("the Emmy people"), which liked a sitcom script, called "Not All Pearls," she produced under theatre professor Leonard Berkman at Smith. During her three-month tenure at the academy, she continued cooking, enthral-

ling her colleagues with her creations. "They kept telling me my food was so good that I should be a healthy chef," she says. At first, she resisted; then she took their advice and headed off to Westlake Culinary Institute. In 1994, she earned her professional chef certification, having worked with such notable chefs as Julia McWilliams Child '34, Paul Prudhomme, Graham Kerr, and Martin Yan.

While catering a Los Angeles Planned Parenthood event with one of her teachers, she ran into Hollis Brookover '82, then president of the Los Angeles Smith Club, who was so taken with Alexander's food, she hired her to cater other events. From there grew Café Renee catering, Alexander's first business, which made her an in-demand chef among Hollywood elite seeking to eat well and keep their weight down. She continued catering for nine years, while also juggling stints as a writer with publications such as *Shape*, *Fit Pregnancy*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Muscle and Fitness*. She changed her name in 1999, partly because there were at least two other Renee Simones in Hollywood, one an actress and one a writer who had been fired from one of the jobs Alexander hoped to get.

Though she'd developed quite a following through her business, things really took off for Alexander after she wrote her first cookbook, *Fast Food Fix*, which offered lean and tasty makeovers of fast-food favorites like Big Macs, Cinnabons, and DQ Blizzards. (Alexander's "cinnabons" cut 26 grams of fat and 371 calories from the original.) Television shows like *Good Morning America* came calling, inviting Alexander to host cooking segments showcasing her recipes. She even landed a stint as a chef on NBC's weight-loss show *The*

Biggest Loser in 2006 and co-authored *The Biggest Loser Cookbook*. It wasn't long before she was pitching an idea for her own show, which eventually became *Healthy Decadence*.

These days, she says, her kitchen is "her playground." "I work with three twentysomething women—an assistant and two interns—and we just cook all day," she says. She's meticulous about her recipes, testing and retesting every ingredient (low fat vs. fat free, for example) to find the best-tasting ingredients. "I turned my obsession with food into, well, an obsession with food—only now it's positive," she jokes.

Long days in the test kitchen often mean no time to exercise, but Alexander has a healthy attitude about it. "I give myself a five-pound window when it's crunch time," she says. "And I never eat out Italian because I know how much extra fat they put in the sauce and meatballs." To satisfy her chocolate cravings, she enjoys her own low-fat, low-calorie treats, like chocolate raspberry smoothies, brownies, and black-and-white cupcakes. The secret to her slimmed-down recipes is in the substitutions: Alexander swaps ingredients such as applesauce for oil, egg whites for whole eggs, and cocoa powder for bars of cooking chocolate, which contain oil and fat.

When she reads another report on the obesity epidemic or hears another story about a child being tormented for being overweight, she realizes the importance of her work and the role she can play in reversing the trend. "I lived through this myself," she says, "and I know what it feels like to be picked on as a kid or to struggle and think you're going to be heavy your whole life."

Her dream, she says, is to create an empire where she's "actually changing the face of the obesity epidemic." "I want people to see they can eat healthfully and have it be the foods they love, and still lose weight," she says. In the future, she hopes to create a line of prepared foods, comfortable workout clothes, and books, starting with *The Most Decadent Diet Ever*, due out in April 2008. "When you say healthy chef, there isn't just one person who comes to mind," she says. "But I think if people start saying, 'There's that girl who makes good-tasting, healthy food, who's been there, and who looks good herself,' that'll be the turning point." **Q**

Debra Michals, Ph.D., is a feminist writer living in Massachusetts. She is currently working on a history of women entrepreneurs.



Smith bio

Name: Devin Alexander '93 (Renee Simone)

Current occupation: Television chef and cookbook author

Smith major: Theatre

Smith house: Tyler

Most memorable Smith professor: Leonard Berkman. "He encouraged everyone to think outside the box. He was a gray-haired, ponytail-wearing, shorts-and-high-top-loving (even in the winter), cool guy. He inspired me to blaze my own trail and helped me map out how to get it done."

A lesson I learned at Smith: "My parents taught me that with hard work I could have anything, and Smith really reinforced that."

➤ Go to www.saqonline.smith.edu for some of Devin Alexander's favorite healthy recipes.