



How to have your cake and eat it...

Celebrity chef Devin Alexander used to weigh 200 pounds – a human double-helping – but declared war on calories and made her name creating less fattening versions of all the foods we love to eat. Here, in her own words, is how.

HEALTHIER EATING

WHAT IF someone told you you could have the body you wanted without dieting... without giving up your favourite foods... without setting foot in a gym... and without surgery or magic pills?

Well, I'm telling you: you can! I know, because it's my life, and my passion. By the time I was 15 years old, I weighed 200 pounds and was obsessed with food. My Italian grandmother taught me how to cook – and taught me, in turn, how to get chubby.

Which, as it turns out, became the biggest blessing of my life.

It turned into a life-long passion for helping others – after I'd fought my own demons, and perfectionism, and tapped into the only talent I was given: the ability to cook foods that taste much more fattening than they are!

I'm now 45 years old and was recently offered a deal to write a book on how to cook to look 10 years younger.

Most people guess that I'm in my

early to mid-30s max. I even get carded occasionally in the US, asked to show my driving licence as proof of age.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You couldn't possibly think I'm 20?"

Yes, that's goofy, but it's one of the joys I've found in being able to help others – another being my love of "better" food, which, by the way, includes a daily dose of chocolate!

But it hasn't always been like that.

I became a scared child at six years old when an uncle I was close to was shot and killed, and then my best friend lost her parents in a plane crash when I was eight.

Despite all that childhood pain, I've somehow reversed age, transforming myself from a teenager who was on the fast track to diabetes, low in

energy and uninspired, into a 45-year-old business owner, globe-trotting TV chef, media personality and speaker who's lucky enough to be able to inspire others.

So let's go back to the beginning. I was brutally bullied in high school, ▯

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and knew I needed to make a change. I tried the yo-yo dieting that most women have tried – and that led, perversely, to my greatest period of weight-gain.

I have zero willpower when it comes to food. And I've always had a creative approach to it.

So telling me to eat plain chicken and too many grapefruit simply sent me into a tailspin of starving and bingeing.

I weighed myself incessantly, desperate to shed the pounds, as if a few hours would make a difference.

I cried constantly and couldn't understand how I could get straight A-grades in school, be a doting daughter and, I hoped, a decent person, yet be plagued with the inability to control myself when it came to food.

The truth was (and I knew this to my very core), that I was never, ever giving up my Italian heritage, which included eating pasta, and I was most certainly not giving up chocolate. It just wasn't going to happen.

Then, after years of dieting, I heard that if you cut just 100 calories from your diet per day, on average, you'll lose 10 pounds in a year.

It was my Eureka moment. I knew everything in the world there was to know about calories at that point, and I knew how to cook.

My competitive nature kicked in in nanoseconds, seizing on the notion that I really didn't have to give up anything.

All I had to do was to figure out how to

cut back just a little bit. And it worked!

I shed about 25 pounds in the first year, which was a huge win after gaining 10 to 15 pounds a year while I was dieting.

The best part was that I was actually enjoying what I was eating, and I was eating a heck of a lot more of what I wanted.

By the time I got to college, I'd lost

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most of my weight, but I still did a lot of white-knuckling and was mentally mean to myself.

A few years later, I'd got down to a size 2. But the problem remained: food was my life (in a negative way) and it was taking the joy out of my life.

I thought being thin would make me happy. Instead, it made me crazy.

It made me obsess about every calorie. It made me turn down trips and adventures with friends for fear that I

might not be able to get my restricted food. And while I always dreamed of being small enough to walk into a department store and look great in anything, I quickly realised that no-one looks great in everything. Clothes need to flatter our body type, whatever our size.

The worst years were when I was the thinnest. In fact, I was so hard on myself, I ended up in Over-Eaters' Anonymous where I met a friend who changed my life.

Heather was a beautiful 24-year-old with the brightest blue eyes and an adorable figure. But she was bulimic.

After months of getting to know her and loving her in the programme, she fell off the wagon, ate too many pancakes and tried to commit suicide.

I was shocked.

How could someone so beautiful hate herself so much?

How did she not get that she was perfect?

Then it struck me: I was so busy trying to be perfect in my appearance and with my eating that I was killing myself.

On that day, I decided to put 10 pounds back on – or whatever amount of weight it took for me to enjoy all of the foods I love in a sensible way. And to truly stop dieting.

I took to the kitchen – and I look back at that period in my life now as my premature mid-life crisis.

I owned a catering business at the time, which was quite a challenge for a girl who struggled with food.

I was cooking at Midnight often when I wasn't hungry. And I wished I was a person who could just avoid food.

I realised, during that period of self-reflection, that what I most loved doing was giving cooking lessons.

I got so much joy from teaching people, one-on-one, how to overhaul their favourite family recipe so they could eat it and feel great.

Why wasn't I doing that on a bigger scale?

I quickly landed a job at Muscle & Fitness Magazine with the goal of learning the ins and outs of the media world.

And it worked. My column there turned into my first book, Fast Food Fix, and in less than two years I found myself on Good Morning America.

Suddenly I was able to show people, in their millions, how to eat food like I did.... how the simple changes were the true solution.

Today, I don't count calories, which is shocking to most people. In fact, a few of the contestants on The Biggest Loser that I've remained friends with freaked out when they realised that.

“How,” they asked. “How is that possible that you've maintained your weight within 5 pounds for the better part of the last 20 years and don't count calories and don't go to a gym?”

I should address the bit about not going to a gym”. I am not sedentary. I am quite active. I just don't believe you have to do it in a gym.

Many of my colleagues will tell you that I prefer power-walks over sit-down meetings. I offer to coach people for free if they'll take a beach walk with me.

And I love playing tennis. Beating myself up on a treadmill feels like just that – torture.

On a stair climber, my thoughts are filled with “my body isn't perfect so I need to keep going” and “this feels like a waste of time”.

When I'm playing tennis, my thoughts are occupied with where to put the ball, rather than “this hurts”.

So I find it to be an amazing release from my otherwise hectic days – especially when it's beach tennis I'm playing!

In today's world, people are striving to be more health conscious. There seems to be a new diet fad every month and it drives me insane!

I know we all hear “eat less, move more” is the solution. And it is. But without the right recipes and the true freedom to eat what I love and the choice to say only nice things to myself, I swear I would weigh 400 pounds.

I always say if I can do it, anyone can.



After all, I'm around food all day so it's theoretically harder for me.

I cook when I'm not hungry and even have to taste my creations when I'm not hungry – and at all hours of the day and night.

I obviously don't have a fast metabolism or I never would have hit 200 pounds by 15 years old, and I crave sweet and salty! So I'm telling you, anyone can do it.

The secret, as you'll discover, is to create healthier, lower-calorie versions of the foods you actually love.

And that's something I can help you with, whether it's through my website or my books.

I've taken on blueberry pancakes, chocolate cakes, even extremely sticky buns (see my recipe overleaf) – everything we love to eat, in fact, but which the diet books say we shouldn't.

But my Everest, the one they said I'd never conquer, was the Big Mac from McDonald's.

Could I make a healthier, lower-calorie version of that?

You bet! And, as they say, I'm lovin' it.



DEVIN’S DELICIOUSLY DECADENT STICKY BUNS

OHEY, gooey, and out-of-control drippy! That’s what I think sticky buns should be. My friends says they become the star of their mommies’ groups when the others realise these decadent treats are so low in fat and calories.

And my friend John, who’s quite the bachelor and had never cooked before trying my recipes, succeeded first time.

Be careful, though, not to add too much flour to the dough or on your work surface. The dough should stick just a tiny bit so you can roll it out thin. Otherwise, it will bounce back too much. But definitely flour the rolling pin. You don’t want that to stick at all. Makes 20 Sticky Buns.

- 1 cup fat-free milk
- ½ cup light brown sugar (not packed)
- 1 tablespoon light butter
- ¼ cup fat-free vanilla yogurt
- 1 large egg
- 1 large egg white
- 1 package (¼ ounce) active dry yeast
- 3¾ cups plus 4 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Butter-flavoured cooking spray

COMBINE the milk, brown sugar, and butter in a medium microwave-safe bowl. Microwave on high for about 2 minutes, until the milk is hot (130°F).

Whisk in the yogurt and continue whisking until the sugar dissolves (some small lumps of yogurt may be visible). Add the egg and egg white. Whisk to mix well. Add the yeast and whisk in until dissolved.

Combine 3¾ cups flour, the cinnamon, and the salt in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook or in a large mixing bowl. Mix with the hook or stir by hand with a wooden spoon.

Pour in the milk mixture, and then mix on medium or stir vigorously until well combined. The mixture will be very sticky.

One tablespoon at a time, add up to 4 tablespoons of the remaining flour, mixing or stirring to incorporate the flour into the dough until it is just a bit sticky.

Turn the dough on to a floured work surface. Add more flour, no more than 1 tablespoon at a time, if needed, as you knead the dough until it is smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. The dough should be soft and barely sticky.

Lightly mist a large bowl with spray. Place the dough in the bowl and mist the top of it with spray. Then cover the bowl



tightly with plastic wrap. Allow the dough to rise for about 1 hour, or until doubled in size.

Meanwhile, prepare the Cinnamon Filling and the Sticky Topping.

When the dough has doubled, gently punch it down and place it on the lightly floured surface. Knead for 1 minute. Cover with the plastic wrap and allow it to rest for 10 minutes.

Lightly mist a 13 x 9-inch oven-proof glass baking dish with spray. Stir the Sticky Topping just enough to recombine the ingredients, and then pour it into the bottom of the baking dish. Set aside.

Cut the dough in half. Return half of it to the bowl and re-cover it. Use a floured rolling pin (don’t re-flour the work surface if at all possible) to roll the remaining piece of dough into a 24 x 7-inch rectangle, making sure the ends are as wide and as long as the centre.

Use a butter knife to spread half of the reserved butter for the Cinnamon Filling evenly over the dough. Sprinkle half of the brown sugar mixture evenly over the top.

Starting at one longer side, roll the dough snugly in jelly-roll fashion into a log. Cut the log into 10 equal rounds. Place each round, spiral side up, evenly spaced, in the dish on top of the Sticky Topping.

Repeat with the second half of the dough and add the rounds to the dish.

Lightly mist a piece of plastic wrap with spray and use it to cover the dish. Refrigerate for 1 hour, or until the sticky buns have risen.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Then uncover the dish and bake for 21 to 25 minutes, or until just barely golden brown on top and a tiny bit doughy in the very centre.

Run a butter knife around the sides of the dish to loosen the sticky buns. Turn

the hot buns out on to a platter. Cool for about 30 minutes. Brush any of the topping pooling on the platter over the buns, or pull them apart and dip them in it. Serve immediately.

- Cinnamon Filling
- 2 tablespoons light butter
- 3 tablespoons light brown sugar (packed)
- 1½ tablespoons ground cinnamon

Place the butter in a small bowl and set it aside to soften. Stir together the brown sugar and cinnamon in a second small bowl.

- Sticky Topping
- ¼ cup light brown sugar (packed)
- ½ cup light butter, room temperature
- 3 tablespoons honey
- ⅓ cup dark corn syrup

Use an electric mixer fitted with beaters to beat the brown sugar, butter, honey, and corn syrup in a medium mixing bowl until well combined.

A traditional sticky bun has 272 calories, 5g protein, 38g carbohydrates, 12g fat, 4g saturated fat, 29mg cholesterol, 1g fibre, 359mg sodium – but mine have 190 calories, 5g protein, 37g carbohydrates, 4g fat, 2g saturated fat, 19mg cholesterol, 1g fibre, 137mg sodium.

So you save 82 calories, 8g fat, and 2g saturated fat.

This recipe is taken from The Most Decadent Diet Ever! by Devin Alexander, published by Broadway Books.



Devin Alexander’s world

MULTI-TIME New York Times best-selling author, celebrity chef and weight-loss expert, Devin Alexander is the chef on The Biggest Loser which originated on NBC in the US.

She is the author of eight best-selling cookbooks (see above) including The Biggest Loser Cookbook series and The Most Decadent Diet Ever!

Devin’s unique approach to healthy cooking and her own motivational story has landed her regular appearances on talk, news, weight-loss and fitness shows for more than a decade.

She is widely regarded as America’s go-to expert for decadence without consequence and has shared her secrets through frequent appearances on The Today Show, Good Morning America, The Biggest Loser, Dr Oz, Dr Phil, The View, Fox, CNN, and others.

She has also served up free helpings of her expertise through 500 magazine features including Prevention, Men’s Health and Shape.

And here she is in Luxurious Magazine, so make that 501.

She’s cooked for top celebrities and owned hit restaurants, coached thousands of pounds off others, all while maintaining her own 70-pound weight loss for almost 30 years.

She truly lives and eats her message that you don’t have to deprive yourself to be fit and healthy.

And she loves showing others how to eat what they love and find fun activities that keep them fit without having to go to the gym!

For inspirational tips and guilt-free recipes, you can find her on Facebook, on Instagram (@devinalexander) and on Twitter (@chefdevin).

devinalexander.com

