



PADMA DISHES IT OUT

The *Top Chef* host has cooked up the perfect plan that lets her indulge in her favorite foods and stay in great shape. Find out Padma Lakshmi's secrets to eating so well while looking this good.

By Patty Adams Martinez Photographs by Jeff Olson

Padma Lakshmi has gained—and lost—15 pounds 10 times during the past seven years. No, she's not a yo-yo dieter; the weight comes with her job.

Every season on *Top Chef*, Padma goes up two dress sizes, thanks to eating all the decadent dishes the chef contestants whip up.

Arriving at her photo shoot for the *FITNESS* cover after nearly two months of filming in New Orleans, Padma, 43, admits she had been anxious about this moment. "I found out about the cover right before doing *Top Chef*, knowing that I'd be gaining weight," she says. "I was terrified. It's *FITNESS*. I'd better be fit!"

Mission accomplished, as you can see. So how did she do it? We got Padma to spill the workout strategies that help her ditch the pounds, plus the cooking and eating tips that keep her slim and still let her enjoy all her favorite foods. Her sensible ideas will work for you too.

So how do you lose the weight you gain on the show?

I follow a clean diet: no meats, no sweets, no alcohol, no cheese, no fried food, no wheat. And I work out five days a week, boxing three days, lifting weights the other two.

Do you change your workout after you reach your goal?

To maintain my weight I strength-train, use the treadmill and elliptical,

THROW A KILLER DINNER PARTY

Padma tells you how—just in time for the holiday season.

Mix up your invite list. Your gathering will be more fun if you bring together people from different worlds—say, your work friends, your workout pals and your BFFs from your book club.

Don't try to impress your guests with fancy dishes. "Just stick to the basics and do them well. I like to serve a Spanish tortilla and a hearty stew with white beans. Guests are coming over to hang out with you a lot more than they are to eat."

Make at least 75 percent of your menu ahead of time.

"No one wants a stressed host. I finish cooking and set the table an hour before the party, then I take a shower."

Create a party playlist. "It should be upbeat but not too loud. When the dinner starts, switch to classical or jazz to encourage conversation."

Relax and enjoy. "I have a glass of wine before the first guests arrive. They'll have a good time if you're having a good time."



PADMA'S WORKOUT SECRET WEAPON

No fancy-schmancy boutique classes or trendy workout equipment for Padma. She would rather hit the stairs. "After having a baby, I didn't have time to go to the gym, and I had to be back on TV in less than six weeks," Padma says. "That's how I started doing stairs. Now, whether I'm home or traveling, I climb as many as 70 flights a day, which takes me about 35 minutes. I don't run them. I walk at a steady pace, two steps at a time. It's the perfect workout because pretty much anywhere you go, there are stairs and they're usually empty."

EAT OUT WITHOUT FILLING OUT

Padma dines at restaurants several times a week when she's filming. Here are the smart tricks she's learned that make even the most indulgent meals healthy.

● "I cheat on my date. I eat a cup of cottage cheese before going out so I won't gorge myself. It fills me up, and you can't beat it for calcium and protein. I season and dress it with vinegars and spices and serve it like fresh mozzarella

or fancy goat cheese. Honestly, in my house it's a glamorous ingredient—not a diet food—that my kid is always trying to steal from me."

● "I ask the server to take the bread basket away. If you go to a restaurant hungry, you'll inevitably start

eating the bread. Why torture yourself? If I'm really craving a slice, I'll butter and eat the crust only, because that's the yummy part where the flavor is. I don't eat the center because, to me, it's like a sponge. I just picture it on my thighs!"

● "I eat the carbs on my plate last. By the time I've eaten all of the protein and vegetables, I may not want all of the potato."

● "I drink 10 ounces of water after every glass of wine. Water fills you up, and alcohol is just empty calories. I would rather eat my calories than drink them."

and box three times a week. I also do planks at home and jump rope. I carry a jump rope with me everywhere, especially when I'm working. It's a great way to squeeze in a quick workout and get your heart rate up when you don't have time to go to the gym.

You gained 45 pounds while pregnant with your daughter, Krishna, who's now 3. Was it harder to get that weight off?

Yes! I did all my usual workouts, but the most important thing was that I found an exercise buddy in my makeup artist, Michelle. Having an appointment with her makes me get to the gym. Instead of meeting friends for dinner or drinks, meet to work out! You can still spend an hour and a half chitchatting, but you're getting in your reps too. Also, I always try to get enough sleep because the body holds onto more calories when it's tired, and I tend to eat more when I'm tired. Rest is important to weight loss.

It took 13 months to get the weight off. It was hard. I went from a size 4 to a size 14 when I was pregnant. What's interesting, though, is that, in my experience, men don't want skinny girls. When I was a size 14, I got much more attention from men than I do now.

Has your body changed since you turned 40?

I've seen a slow decline in my metabolism from the time I was 30. Even when I'm at my ideal weight, I have to work out regularly—otherwise I'm jiggy. So I exercise consistently, even if it's just doing some jumping

BEHIND THE SCENES OF TOP CHEF

Here's what you don't see on TV.

Time spent filming: Up to 15 hours a day, sometimes until 4:00 or 5:00 a.m.

How Padma feels after a night of eating the contestants' food: "Like a human Dumpster!"

Amount of time the judges deliberate before a chef has to pack his or her knives and go: As long as five hours. "We get very passionate," Padma says.

Most gag-inducing dish she's had to eat: "It's a tie. A lemon curd dessert by Ariane [Duarte] that was a nuclear sugar bomb. And a silky chocolate ganache with a morsel of liver embedded in the middle made by Ilan [Hall], who won season two. I was like, 'Oh, what is that in the center?' It was meaty and gamy—horrible!"



jacks, planks and stairs or jumping rope for 10 minutes. I notice a difference if I go a week without exercise.

What are your healthiest habits?

I drink a homemade cleanse of two ounces of pure cranberry juice, six ounces of either green tea or plain water, one Emergen-C Vitamin C packet, and a teaspoon of fiber powder three times a day. I also drink two to three liters of water a day.

You've been quoted as saying, "I would rather spend half my life at the gym and eat whatever I want than sit on my ass and starve." Do you still feel that way?

Yes, 100 percent. I love food way too much to starve myself just to look good. I will put in the work at the gym so I can enjoy what I eat.

What's your food weakness?

I have lots of them. Pizza, nachos, cheese, potato chips, fried chicken. I believe in everything in moderation. I never say, "No, I can't have any of that." I have it and enjoy it! After I finish this photo shoot, I'm going out for pizza, and I'm literally going to take down a whole large pie by myself.

PADMA'S SPINACH AND BLACK PLUM SALAD

Serves 6

Dressing

- 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon yuzu* or lime juice
- Juice of 1 ripe lemon
- Freshly ground black pepper

Salad

- 3 black plums, firm and not too ripe, pitted and sliced
- ½ cup torn fresh mint leaves
- 6 ounces baby spinach leaves
- Crushed sea salt

1. Combine dressing ingredients in a salad bowl.
2. Just before serving, add salad ingredients, except salt; toss.
3. Sprinkle salt over salad.

*Yuzu is a Japanese citrus fruit. You can buy the juice at amazon.com and some gourmet markets.

Recipe from Tangy Tart Hot & Sweet: A World of Recipes for Every Day by Padma Lakshmi. Available from WeinsteinBooks.com, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2007.



5 TRICKS CHEFS USE TO COOK HEALTHILY AT HOME

Try Padma's easy techniques for more flavor and less fat in your meals.

1. Grind spices right before using them.

This heightens their flavor and gives dishes a more robust taste.

2. Squeeze in some citrus.

"To give seafood some tanginess, I marinate it in lime for at least

15 minutes before grilling it, as I do with my shrimp dish [left]. I also put citrus in my dressings and squirt lemon or lime into soups and stews before serving them."

3. Toss sweet and tart ingredients in salads

to make them more satisfying.

One of Padma's favorites: the Spinach and Black Plum Salad recipe above.

4. Experiment with herbs and vinegars.

"If you use flavor enhancers like cilantro, basil and mint, and

vinegars, you can add taste without a lot of calories," she notes.

5. Get creative with garlic. When putting it in dishes, Padma leaves the cloves whole. "It's a time-saver, plus you can pick out the cloves if you don't want garlic breath."