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Lighten

**up!**

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Lighten

UP!

The Authentic and Fun Way to Lose Your  
Weight and Your Worries

Loretta LaRoche



**HAY HOUSE, INC.**

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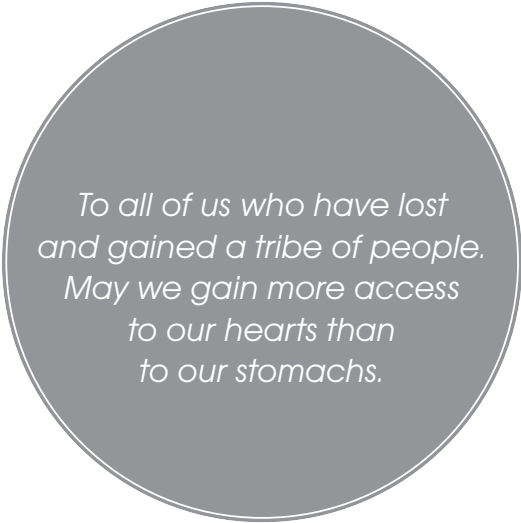
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*To all of us who have lost  
and gained a tribe of people.  
May we gain more access  
to our hearts than  
to our stomachs.*



# Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	xi
<b>CHAPTER 1: Food Is Neither the Enemy Nor the Savior</b> .....	1
“You don’t get a whole life just by eating whole grains.”	
<b>CHAPTER 2: How What We Eat Begins to Eat at Us</b> .....	19
“You’ve been sold a bill of goods— and have swallowed it!”	
<b>CHAPTER 3: The Truth Will Set You Free</b> .....	45
“Honesty is the best policy— in the schoolroom and in front of the mirror.”	
<b>CHAPTER 4: How to Get Fit Without Having One</b> .....	59
“Exercise is not an exorcism.”	
<b>CHAPTER 5: Tickle Your Tongue</b> .....	87
“If it doesn’t taste good, don’t eat it!”	
<b>CHAPTER 6: How to Take a Load Off Your Mind</b> .....	97
“The excess weight you’re carrying may be in your head.”	
<b>CHAPTER 7: The Strength Pantry</b> .....	125
“If you’re still alive, it’s not too late.”	

<b>CHAPTER 8: The Now of Chow</b> .....	141
“Eat, drink, and be merry—but don’t do anything else at the same time.”	
<b>CHAPTER 9: Lose . . . So That Others May Gain</b> .....	157
“Spread the weight around— it’s not all about you.”	
<i>Epilogue</i> .....	173
<i>Resources</i> .....	177
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	179
<i>About the Author</i> .....	181



# Introduction

*“The first thing you lose on a diet is your sense of humor.”*

— Anonymous

As I sit down to begin writing this book, I have to wonder: *What possesses me to want to deal with a subject that has thousands of books written about it already? What else is there to say? And is there anything I can add to the dialogue that’s really new?*

One of the reasons why I feel compelled to write this book is simple: I can’t stand it anymore! The other is the desire to encourage you to develop a more pragmatic and optimistic approach in relation to food, movement, and life’s inevitable ups and downs.

Weight loss, exercise, and stress management have become a national mania—the holy trinity of daily conversation. Virtually all of us spend precious time with our friends going on and on about food, exercise, or our overwhelming schedules. Every magazine (certainly those aimed at women) screams from its cover about new diet secrets, ways to be happy, or how to slow down. And those articles are juxtaposed with ones about how we can look thinner in our clothes without dieting, recipes that feature fried chicken or cream pies, and ideas on how to do more in less time. I suppose that the

editorial staff is trying to please as many readers as possible, but it can make one a little nuts.

In addition, we listen to newscasters who are constantly reporting scientific research on health, but the problem is that they want to report on everything that sounds interesting or provocative, even if a study has gone on for all of two minutes. We need to keep in mind that these findings aren't always ready to bear fruit—one of the primary mottoes of academics is "Publish or perish."

For example, right now blueberries are at the top of researchers' lists, with supposed evidence that you could live longer (and even have improved memory so you can remember that you did) if you eat at least a half cup every day. But that could easily change in the next few months and be replaced by bug juice. Gluten, on the other hand, is on its way to becoming the Antichrist. The end result of all the overreporting is mass confusion, which usually leads to a lot of people throwing their hands up and exclaiming, "The hell with all of it!"

Eating well, being fit, and learning to relax are at the core of living a healthy, vital life. But how did we as a culture grow so fat and become so tense over such a short period of time? Much of my work deals with stress management, and so do my previous books. I've chosen to focus on weight and its negative effects in this one because the topic has become such a national obsession. We cannot overlook the implications that anxiety has on weight gain, but it's not the whole enchilada. How did we simultaneously seem to grow more knowledgeable and aware about every molecule that passes our lips—including its calorie, cholesterol, fiber, and polyunsaturated-fat counts—yet most of us keep growing fatter and fatter?

### ***The Lean Years***

When I was a young child, it was unusual to see a really large person. Sure, there were some chunky people around, but it was rare to see someone who was morbidly obese.

My grandparents lived through the Depression and World War II when food was a bit harder to come by. Because people were forced to ration, it was difficult to overeat and get fat. There were no such things as deep-dish three-meat pizzas oozing with cheese, 32-ounce cola drinks, or ice-cream cones big enough to use as signals for highway construction. People were lucky to have a little bit of chicken, a piece of bread, and some soup.

Was there something about those years of deprivation that turned the subsequent generations into fatter versions of their relatives? Did we somehow alter our DNA, creating an inability to control our food intake because we feared there wouldn't be enough to go around?

Growing up, my family was big on beans, rice, vegetables, fruit, and pasta. Desserts were a rarity. Modern conveniences certainly weren't available, so calorie expenditure was much greater. Today we've allowed ourselves to become immobilized by our cars and gadgets. We barely move unless we have to. I'm surprised that people haven't mutated into beings with wheels instead of legs.

And one of the most significant differences between the former and present generations is the mass addition of sugar and high-fructose corn syrup to our foods. The typical American consumes 140 to 150 pounds of the sweet stuff per year. We've become "sweetoholics." There's a great deal of evidence to support the fact that these substances elevate

insulin levels, which in turn make it easier to get fat and stay fat. We're also at the mercy of a society that wants what they want, when they want it—in other words, live for today, eat it all, and diet tomorrow.

### ***The Era of Consumption***

On top of that, we find ourselves the target of advertisers who try to entice us into buying food by the bushel. They achieve this by tapping into our every desire. Everywhere we turn there's an enormous photograph of a rich, enticing chocolate cake; a triple latte; or a huge steak surrounded by all things fried. And we also have to add the all-you-can-eat specials for \$2.99—we're into value for our dollars. Of course we're fat! How could we not be? Our nature is stacked against us—as well as very powerful national food industries.

Mother Nature did provide us with a stop sign that says, "Hello, you're full!" in the form of a hormone called *leptin*, but for most, it's all too easy to override it. This is one way in which Mother Nature lets us down. In fact, she's working against us these days because our programming to overeat is so susceptible to the temptations of the food industry, which encourages us to go ahead and indulge. And worse, we're especially drawn to items that are filled with fat and sugar because they stay with us and give us energy reserves to deal with our stressed-out lives. Our brains haven't caught up with the 21st-century lifestyle; and it may be centuries yet before they do. Unlike everything else in the world these days, evolution takes its own sweet time.

At this point in history, it's estimated that Americans are collectively overweight by five billion pounds. Five billion! Talk

about supersized! It's a problem of titanic proportions. We're all concerned about the size of our waistlines, but what many of us don't think about is how the collective weight problem burdens everyone.

Diseases and chronic conditions related to obesity tax the health-care system enormously, including costs for diabetes treatment, high-blood-pressure medication, cholesterol-lowering drugs, knee surgery, and on and on. Plus, think about the future and how many millions of men and women with these medical conditions will need assistance from their friends or family members just to get through the everyday tasks in their lives. I often want to tell people that it's one thing not to care about their own health—but don't they care about their loved ones who will need to carry them and their oxygen tank around for years to come?

### *I'm Not Afraid of Heights, Just Widths*

This book wouldn't resonate with authenticity if I'd been Ms. Slenderella my entire life. Most of us bond when we feel we've walked down the same path, and believe me, I've worn down the path of weight struggle to particles of dust. My own tale of woe up and down the slope of yo-yo dieting may sound familiar. As a preteen, I suddenly started putting on pounds. And like so many, the reason was because my home life was rife with anxiety, which led to an incredible struggle to feel good about myself.

My first seven years were spent in the embrace of my grandparents in Brooklyn. Love, laughter, and lasagna were the basics of everyday life. I was a normal little kid who

weighed just the right amount. There were three meals a day, and occasionally there was a snack—maybe a piece of fruit or biscotti with a latte. (Yes, I was allowed light coffee, which wasn't unusual in those days. Maybe that's why I turned out so short.)

Both of my grandparents loved to cook and owned a bakery/spaghetti store before my grandfather had to stop working because of a disability. Their love of good food created an environment in which meals and cooking were a central part of each day. Many of us today may think that such care and attention to detail is a symptom of a psychotic disorder—however, it was wonderful. My grandparents went to the market every day and brought back fresh vegetables, fruit, and a little bit of meat. Meat was never the focal point of the meal; it merely enhanced it. Once they returned with the groceries, no matter what my grandparents planned to cook, it always felt like we were in the midst of filming a movie. Neighbors would stop by and sit and watch the drama (or comedy) unfold. And I was always given a bit part, whether it was stirring the sauce or tasting one of the dishes so they'd get my approval. I never thought of food as anything but fun and sustenance.

After we ate, there was always the after-dinner stroll, which was when my grandparents would go over the day's activities and gossip. The primary reason to walk according to them was to aid digestion, not for aerobic conditioning. Exercise was what they did all day. They never sat down or changed their shoes depending on the activity. They moved from one task to another seamlessly. Today that's called cross-training.

Unfortunately, all of that would soon change, and it would mark the beginning of my lifelong struggle with weight. The

transition occurred when my mother decided, ironically, to move to the suburbs because she thought it would be better for me and her new husband. My grandparents moved to their own place, and I was left with my mother and stepfather, both of whom worked and had a very strained, dysfunctional relationship. I became a latchkey kid—my primary nurturers, my grandparents, had disappeared. Our eating patterns changed, and the socialization I'd gotten from all the old eccentric Italians who stopped by had vanished, too. I remember feeling very lonely, and I began snacking more in order to stem some of the sadness. I didn't eat a lot, because my stepfather knew exactly what was in our pantry and refrigerator and would have thought nothing of embarrassing me if he'd noticed my overeating. But all it takes is an additional couple of hundred calories a day to start the shift. I slowly started to gain weight.

I was never morbidly obese, just "chubby," as it was called in my day. Yet my mother has never been one to communicate with empathy. She goes right for the jugular, or in this case, the butt. She'd make comments like, "You're starting to look like an egg" or "I don't think we can shop in the regular teen department anymore." I was mortified. But she wasn't interested in how my self-esteem would fare as she spoke her version of the truth. Her only goal was to get me to recognize that I had gained weight, and she didn't like it.

Well, I didn't like it either. Who likes being fat? And what can be worse than being a preteen with big boobs, as the boys point at you and rub against you when they walk by? I wanted to be looked at in the way that Julie Schmidt was—my blonde, slim, blue-eyed classmate. I was the ethnic opposite: dark eyes and hair and an overly curvy body.

I remember around this time I had a pair of woolen pants that I loved, but the thighs rubbed together in such a way that it sounded like birds were chirping between my legs. It got worse and worse until the thighs were almost worn out entirely, but my grandmother said, "Don't worry, I can fix them!" So she took my pants and gave them back to me a few days later with leather patches sewed on the inner thighs. Her intentions were loving, but I was mortified. What did she think I was going to do with these . . . be in a rodeo?

The *pièce de résistance* came when my mother took me shopping for school clothes in the "Chubbette Department." I was so embarrassed! I kept hiding behind mannequins, which were also on the heavy side, hoping that no one would see me. But of course, one of the other unlucky chubbies in my class was there at the same time. Unfortunately for me, he was not only overweight, but he also suffered from a big mouth. His sense of self wasn't compromised by his added girth, and he blabbed about our encounter in the fat department all over school. We're all aware of how cruel kids can be sometimes, so you can imagine the sort of harassment I got. I now not only had to deal with my mother's vitriolic comments, but she also had a verbal mafia at my school to back her up.

This propelled me into a lifelong journey of self-loathing, depending on what size or shape my body was in. I was always on a search for the right diet or the best exercise routine. While I was carrying my second child, I ballooned to 170 pounds. Eating became my primary drive. No matter where I went, I'd make sure I had a sandwich with me. I had to wear flip-flops because my toes were too fat to fit into my shoes.

Right after I delivered, my doctor put me on what were then called “black beauties,” or amphetamines. Speed really takes off weight, but it also makes you so wired you become the Energizer Bunny. I could have maintained an entire office building by myself. Forget sleeping—your mind never stops whirring. Believe it or not, this experience was common in those days. My physician wasn’t concerned about the side effects because he said that if it got too bad, I could always take Valium.

At the end of three months, I’d lost all the weight but was also a nervous wreck and suffered from panic attacks. I ended up actually having to take Valium, which slowed down my body and precipitated my wanting to eat more than I should have. (The irony of all this angst was the fact that I was probably only about 20 pounds over my ideal weight—which wasn’t a big deal. But my ability to counter my internal critic was practically nil.)

Over the years that followed, I kept trying to rid myself of excess weight in all the ways that were in fashion, including the Scarsdale Diet (it obviously didn’t work for Jean Harris because she killed Dr. Tarnower, who created it); the cabbage-soup diet, which isn’t great for social gatherings; and the Beverly Hills diet, which suggests a breakfast of eight ounces of prunes. It’s interesting how many of these diets prompt lots of bathroom visits. Maybe the point is that while you’re on the pot, you can’t eat. These schemes only served to make me feel even more discouraged and out of touch with real issues.

### ***Let's Get a Grip***

I've watched so many participants in my workshops and seminars struggle with the same dilemma. We're seduced into believing that there's some special food, program, or individual out there who's going to save us from our "fat pants." And as our national problem has grown exponentially over the years, so has the number of people trying to make a buck off our misery and paranoia.

It's time to come to our senses and stop buying into every nitwit who appears on a talk show touting the latest, greatest fat-loss program. The only outcome seems to be that these people get rich and we stay fat. Are there actually books and programs that make sense? Absolutely! (I'll list some of them in the Resources section of this book.)

How do we slog through this mess in the meantime? It feels like we're on a never-ending spiral of overeating, diets, too much stress, and too little exercise. The result of all this confusion is a loss of connection to what is one of the primary pleasures of life and its benefits. We need to *stop* the craziness surrounding how we think about food and start creating a lifestyle that resonates with healthier values. Eating well, exercising, and managing stress levels are the gifts we've been given that make life worth living.

Finally, I believe that much of the weight gain, stress, and lack of physical activity that's so prevalent today is also the result of a society that has forgotten how to nourish itself. We're often filling up with food to counter the sense of loneliness that has crept into our lives as we've moved more and more from a culture of community to one of isolation. In my book *Juicy Living, Juicy Aging*, I used the Italian phrase *a tavola non s'invecchia*, meaning "at the table one never grows old."

But instead of enjoying our time at the table, using it as a way to share current events or learn more about each other, we engage in nutritional one-upmanship. We bandy about words that make us sound as if we're conducting experiments at Harvard Medical School. One just can't sit at the table and expound on how delicious the spaghetti and meatballs are. Someone has to interrupt with a lecture on how good the tomatoes in the sauce are for us because of the lycopene (a substance that could help prevent some cancers). And someone else will suggest that we should have used 12-grain pasta or that the meatballs should have been turkey or soy that had been hand delivered by a eunuch from Outer Mongolia.

As soon as a new scientific theory is announced about a food source, a plethora of books emerge until it becomes something capable of curing anything from warts to flatulence to dry vaginas. Then the parade of lemmings begins, as we all trudge down to the supermarket to load up.

But there is no magic bullet. Despite the latest findings and all the varied weight-loss programs available, for the most part, losing weight is still very much a conundrum that requires real work. It will take a lot more research before we have a drug that may help those who have a biological problem keeping their weight in check. And there's no pill in sight to help those who simply overeat. Right now, most individuals who have lost weight regain it (plus more) within three years—meaning that once we've gotten on the fat train, it's very hard to get off and stay off.

I've struggled with this problem, I've watched countless friends suffer because of it, and I've helped tens of thousands of people deal with the stresses that bear down on their lives, often because of weight and health issues.

The following chapters offer a variety of solutions that you might not have explored up to this point. They require taking action. These answers aren't simple, but they're much easier to incorporate into your life than expending your time and energy on useless diets, gadgets, and faux scientific cures. They take commitment, common sense, and the ability to learn emotional self-regulation—three things that aren't particularly valued in society today.

But I'm always heartened to realize that our parents' and grandparents' generations were 20 to 30 pounds thinner on average than we are now. If they could do it, we can do it. We have access to a lot more information about food and health than they ever had; but they had more discipline, more community, and fewer choices. It's time for us to start using what we know now in combination with the wisdom of the past so that we can lighten up and gain a *huge* life.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Food Is Neither the Enemy Nor the Savior

*"You don't get a whole life just by eating whole grains."*

Doesn't it seem as if every day there's another news story about how some type of food has been proven to either be surprisingly good for you (like chocolate) or surprisingly bad for you (like wheat)? There's probably a "grain" of truth in these stories, but don't you think that some of them are made to sound bigger than they are just to grab your attention and make you buy magazines or watch certain shows? It's what the media does, after all, about everything. Reporters write about food with the same overblown drama they use to cover movie stars and politics. *"Tonight at 10: acai berries. Can they really raise your IQ by 50 percent?"* If you listen to these reports too much, you start to feel like everything you eat will either save your life or kill you.

This has given all of us what is almost a Calvinistic mentality—we spend an awful lot of time chastising ourselves,

making ourselves feel bad about some of the things we do to feel good. Taking a few licks from an ice-cream cone becomes (in our minds) something that we need to apologize and atone for, like adultery. You've seen it: people eat something rich or sweet and roll their eyes with a guilty smile as if to say, "Oh, I'm going to have to pay for this outrage." And then they'll come up with their penance: "I'm going to have to spend two hours at the gym tomorrow."

Remember when we'd roll our eyes with *pleasure* when we tasted something delicious? Now we do it with shame and guilt. It's nuts. Haven't we all heard people describe food as sinful, evil, or bad? Out of those three words, at least *sinful* has the good fortune to go both ways. Our ears perk up when we hear a food described as "sinfully delicious." Yet we rarely allow ourselves to enjoy something that fills us with delight; instead, we flog ourselves with self-recrimination. Even at a child's birthday party, it's not uncommon for the adults to refuse to take a piece of the cake or insist that their slice be so thin that it can barely be seen with an electron microscope. What kind of message are we sending to our kids? *There's something wrong about liking that.* That's just crazy. There's nothing wrong about enjoying a sweet treat. It's when we eat the whole cake that we have a problem.

Why did food become the enemy? How did we become so stupid as a civilization that we allowed ourselves to be brainwashed into believing that eating a piece of cake makes us the equivalent of Ted Bundy? It's a piece of cake, for God's sake!



Just as we've demonized certain items, we've also put all food so deep under the microscope that it no longer seems like something we can just naturally enjoy. If the scientific community paid half the attention to crude oil that it does to pizza oil, our cars would be getting 100 miles to the gallon by now. We're constantly bombarded with studies that tell us which foods can make us healthier and why they should be essential parts of our diets. For example, we've been told that eating salmon can help with brain function, raspberries may help reduce cancer, pomegranate juice removes warts, celery makes us hear as well as a dog, and on and on. We're given all kinds of complex statistics that state that if we eat enough of this or that, we can decrease our chances of getting cancer or heart disease or Alzheimer's . . . or even of dying an early death. I've often wondered, *If I were to eat everything that's suggested in these studies, could it be that I won't die at all?*

Then of course, the studies are often negative—warning us that eating certain foods may increase our chances of contracting a particular disease or illness. We've all heard how white flour is the devil incarnate, and carbohydrates could end the human race as we know it. Pasta? Might as well just jump into the grave right now; we're as good as dead.

I am in awe that my Italian relatives managed to live long enough to finish kindergarten. I know that not a day went by in which my grandmother didn't have a little pasta at some point, and she fed it to me constantly. If such a thing were possible, she would have given it to me intravenously. And guess what? She died at 93 with all her teeth and faculties, and she never even had to use a walker.

Meat is right up there with criminals on the "most wanted list." I'm surprised we haven't created a SWAT team to ambush

restaurants like Morton's Steakhouse and send the patrons away to do hard time for ordering a juicy rib eye. Of course, I'm kidding around a bit here. Is eating a two-pound steak for dinner good for you? Well, probably not unless you're an Olympic athlete. Plus, you really should pay attention to the level of hormones in the meat products you buy. But is meat something to be vilified and feared? No! The average American consumes about 200 pounds per year. *That* is what we should fear: the fact that on average, we're each eating an entire steer. If meat is included in moderate amounts—used as more of a side dish than the massive main element of a meal—it's absolutely a fine part of a healthy diet and a terrific source of protein.

Eating small amounts of meat and fish has always been a mainstay of the Asian diet until Western fast-food restaurants infiltrated their society. The average Chinese meal has shifted drastically from consisting of grains, beans, and vegetables to one in which almost half of the calories come from cooking oils, pork, poultry, beef, mutton, fish, and dairy foods. In China, people have always been fairly lean, but now at least one-fourth of adults are overweight or obese. They're also less physically active as they move from a primarily agrarian culture to one that is more industrial.

Ah, the benefits of progress. It seems as we progress, we regress! The rate at which adult citizens there are becoming overweight is climbing faster than in all developing countries except Mexico and is greater than developed nations such as the United States, Australia, and Great Britain.

So much for the old adage: "Clean your plate! Children are starving in China."

### ***The Food Spiritualists***

I'm constantly finding myself surrounded by people who think an interesting topic of conversation is their new style of eating . . . as if they'd stumbled upon the path to salvation. First of all, why in the world do they think I'd care about what they put in their mouths?

But more infuriating is when I notice that these folks are becoming more and more obsessive and taking on a tone

that appears fundamentalist in its rigidity. Their diet must be adhered to with absolute perfection and must exclude foods that they consider demonic. I call these folks “food spiritualists.” Sharing a meal with these monastic types could bring you to the edge and induce some major twitching.

If you dine with a food spiritualist, you must be incredibly vigilant about what you choose from the menu. Otherwise, they’ll point their bony fingers in your face and begin their professorial rants about the exact molecular composition of the entrée you’ve selected and how you’ll die an early death from your poor choices. They’re on a mission: to eat only what they consider to be “clean foods” and make sure that you do, too.

The term *clean foods* seems to have cropped up in recent years, and when I hear it mentioned, my gut reaction is to want to choke the living shit out of whoever said it. Because, let’s face it—if some foods are clean, then others must be “dirty.” If I choose incorrectly, I better have a mop and pail with me to clean up after my filthy self. How do these people not see how absurdly self-righteous they appear to others? *“What I eat is clean. It’s too bad that you don’t care as much as I do about the amount of filth you put into your body.”*

I think all this brouhaha about clean foods is simply another way for people to try to exert control over their complicated, stressed-out lives. When we feel out of control, we often believe that order will help. But of course, when we attempt to overly manipulate things that are by nature somewhat complex and difficult to regulate, we create a lot of unnecessary stress. Some things just can’t be controlled too much.

Are there some foods that have better nutritional elements than others? Absolutely. I’d never dispute that. And as

you'll see later in this book, I have some very strong opinions based on research and experience about what and how we should be eating. But I also understand that food is an enormously flexible aspect of our lives and that our relationship with it has nutritional, emotional, and social aspects—all of which should be honored and acknowledged. It's the rigidity and self-righteousness of some people that drives me crazy.

And it gets worse. If you have the audacity to ignore the chastising of one of the members of the food spiritualists' cult and eat foods they consider dirty, don't worry. They have a solution for you. They'll recommend that you do a "master cleanse." These folks are big into cleansing their insides.

Have you ever noticed how these cleanses are often embraced by celebrity types who spend days, if not weeks, at elegant spas that have created entire regimens around this process? I met someone who went to one of these cleansing palaces because she was desperately seeking a way to monitor her food intake. She was put on a 700-calorie "program" designed to rid her body of the poisons she'd ingested as part of her unhealthy diet. Several times a day she was given a variety of fruits, vegetables, and broths made with special life-enhancing ingredients. (There's always a lot of hullabaloo about the magical components of these broths—how they're made with the most exotic herbs that were transported from deep within the Amazon and that until now they've only ever been eaten by a rare parrot that has been alive for 300 years and can whistle "The Star-Spangled Banner.") After three days, this woman was so hungry she ate the centerpiece on the table.

Of course, checking into these kinds of spas can work, but I don't believe it has to do with any "cleansing." The programs are effective, thanks to the personal trainers, chefs, and

assistants. And most important, the people who spend time at these places usually are eating less and moving more often, which hastens weight loss.

Other programs contend that you should not only fast but also have a high colonic as well. (Has anyone ever had a *low* colonic?) This consists of a special technician (whom I like to think of as a pooper scooper) who has been trained to excavate the waste hanging on to the sides of your intestines. These people must be convinced that this stuff weighs a lot. I personally can think of a lot better ways to rid myself of waste matter, such as eating more fiber and exercising, but, hey, whatever floats your boat . . . or your bowels.

“The rationale for intestinal cleansing—to dislodge material adhering to the colon walls—is fundamentally mistaken. When fecal matter accumulates, it compacts into firm masses in the open interior of the colon; it does not adhere to the intestinal walls as the ‘sludge’ depicted in the advertisements.” (Harvard Health Publications, July 22, 2008: [www.health.harvard.edu](http://www.health.harvard.edu))

If you experience fatigue, weight gain or loss, rashes, insomnia, breathing problems, irritability, or are growing warts on your nose, visit your doctor—don’t go to a detox spa and embark on one of the many and generally idiotic cleansing programs.

And then there are all the insane diet plans. Over and over again, we’re being told about methods guaranteed to make us lose weight, reduce stress, eliminate wrinkles, improve eyesight, tone and tighten butts . . . and possibly bring us back

from the dead. Some of the “methods” are akin to being in a gulag—allowing only particular items that need to be eaten at certain times and in a certain way.

Most individuals who embark on these types of diets have great passion for them in the beginning; however, as time goes by, their enthusiasm wanes. We can’t satisfy our palates on a limited menu, just like we can’t get excited about having sex in the exact same way over and over. It becomes a little like watching a faucet drip! It’s just plain boring. Recidivism is huge with these plans.

Let’s face it. If any of these diets worked, wouldn’t everyone be thin? What’s really mind-blowing is that we never seem to believe what the best researchers in the field have been saying for years: *Diets don’t work*. End of story. But it’s not something we want to hear. Like all fairy tales, the promise of some kind of rescue by the dashing prince (or in this case, the magic diet that will make us lose weight without having to count calories or exercise) is appealing, but it isn’t a realistic or healthy way to live our lives.

## Where to Turn for Some Good Advice

I don't want this to be a diet book, even though I know as much about the subject as most of the so-called experts who pen nutty weight-loss plans. I don't think I should be giving advice on what anyone should or shouldn't be eating. And the truth is that what each of us should eat is a very individual thing that must be tailored to our body type, moods, fitness level, and all the other psychological issues I'm going to discuss in this book.

The trick to controlling what we eat is to be moderate in all things—which is where our bodies would go instinctively if we lived in a simpler society and had more natural lives. But we don't.

So if you need some advice on what the reasonable nutritional needs of your body are, here are some reliable places to go:

- **[www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)**: This is a government Website that provides tailored nutritional advice, caloric counts, and even menu plans based on the national recommended food pyramid for eating a balanced, healthy diet.
- **[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)**: The American Heart Association's Website is full of helpful information on ways to eat more responsibly in order to lose weight and improve heart health.

- **[www.webmd.com/diet](http://www.webmd.com/diet)**: WebMD has a ton of information and some interactive quizzes you can take to help figure out if your typical eating patterns may be taking you down a bad path. Plus, it has recommendations and calculators so that you can monitor your current shape, as well as where you'd like to be.
- **<http://nhlbisupport.com/cgi-bin/chd1/diet1.cgi>**: The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Website has an interactive tool that helps you calculate the approximate number of calories you eat in a day based on the list of foods you enter. Plus, it monitors other factors, including cholesterol and sodium levels. It's not a tool for weight loss per se, but it will give you a lot of information that may surprise you about what you eat on a regular basis.

Consider some of the following claims found in magazines and books, and check to see if you've believed any of them:

— *Drop 16 pounds in a week!* How is this possible unless some of your limbs are amputated? A pound is equivalent to 3,500 calories, so 16 pounds is 56,000 calories that would need to be burned in order for this claim to be valid. Running a marathon burns about 3,000 calories. Unless you can do the

equivalent of running three marathons a day for a week, this ain't happenin'!

— *Lose weight with the new honey slimming plan.* Who knew that a bee could be your best friend? If sugar is touted as a problem, how can honey be okay, especially since honey has *more* calories per teaspoon than table sugar and virtually identical ingredients? I know—it's natural, so it doesn't count.

— *Attack belly bulge with 40 fat-fighting meals.* Why is the terminology always made to sound like a preparation for an imminent invasion? And why 40 meals? This reminds me of some religious fasting model—it's going to take 40 days and 40 nights. Once I complete the program, am I saved from porking up for eternity?

— *Get a flat belly while you sleep!* What a deal! Does this happen from a firm mattress or by someone dropping a concrete slab on your stomach? A flat belly is the result of the reduction of fat in your body and strong core muscles that you can achieve only through abdominal exercise.

The ultimate insanity is that perhaps the only thing there seems to be *more of* in the media than diet talk is cooking shows. We sit and watch shows with chefs like Paula Deen as if they're pornography—and she uses sticks of butter like they were shakes of a pepper mill. And Emeril—*pow!* A 2,000-calorie meal! These chefs and many others are now members of a celebrity-based network that has become a crucial part of most people's lives. Watching these culinary artists create

their undoubtedly delicious wonders is mouthwatering entertainment. It's part of our fantasy lives!

Recently, the T.G.I. Friday's restaurant chain announced a change in their menu. They're instituting what they're calling a "right size" portion to cater to those individuals who recognize that "normal" portions served at restaurants are really abnormal. I wish them luck! The last time a big national restaurant (Ruby Tuesday) tried to cut portion sizes, they had to immediately go back to their old ways after receiving an enormous amount of complaints from their customers.

We've set up a huge conundrum for ourselves. We watch those shows that extol our innate love of good food with one hand, and with the other, we're told that any such enjoyment is not good for us and will lead us to an early grave. How did we get ourselves into this mess, and more important, how can we get ourselves out of it? Is there a way we can once again get into a sane relationship with food that nurtures us, fuels us, brings us together, and gives us joy?

Of course there is. But first we have to face the facts.

## The Literary Diet Roundup

Don't be fooled by the hype! We've been flooded with glossy diet books that promise successful weight loss from eating anything our heart desires to practically starving. It all boils down to common sense, though. Here's my take on some of the more popular titles:

— *Eat Right 4 Your Type*. This book tells you what you should eat based on your blood type. It's a nice claim that people would like to believe, and it certainly has a good "scientific" feel to it. However, the experts contend that there's no evidence that this best-selling book's claim works . . . no more than a diet that says you should eat according to your hair color. The guidelines for each blood type vary, but of course, there's one piece of advice that's the same for all types: eat fewer calories to lose weight. Surprise!

— *Sugar Busters!* This book was a huge hit and sold millions of copies. It made the claim that sugar is the enemy of the modern dieter. The authors suggest cutting virtually all sugar from your diet, including the natural sugar that comes from many fruits and vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, corn, and raisins. The book even states that eating according to its rules will stop diabetes; however, scientists say there's no proof that this style of eating will have any effect on diabetes. And similar to other diets, there's only one reason why people say that they've

lost weight on it: their daily calorie intake is substantially reduced.

— *The Sonoma Diet*. Sounds sexy, doesn't it? Makes one think of wine and country meals of grilled fish and vegetables . . . uh, yeah. This diet actually makes some sense. It tells us to eat more reasonable portions of foods that are healthy and allow ourselves some sweets and treats as long as we're conscious of portion size. It's about moderation and making healthy choices. Duh!

— *The New Cabbage Soup Diet*. This one has been making the rounds for years and still pops up as a quick-fix plan for folks who want to drop pounds fast. It includes eating bowls and bowls of cabbage soup each day, in addition to one or two other low-calorie items (like a banana or baked potato). Does it make you lose weight? Sure. But so would sucking on a rock. All this diet does is force you to lower your caloric intake by filling your stomach with a low-calorie, high-fiber vegetable soup. There's no magic to it, and you could get exactly the same results (and more pleasant trips to the bathroom) if you ate a similar number of calories of varied foods.

— *The Atkins Diet*. Probably the granddaddy of fad diets, this one has been with us for years and remains controversial. You can eat all the rich cheeses, meats, and fats you want—but almost no carbohydrates. People say that it works, and thousands have lost weight using this

program. However, many doctors remain unconvinced and maintain that ultimately the only reason individuals lose weight is because after a while they get sick of the high-protein, high-fat foods and consume fewer calories. And some physicians say that this diet puts people at risk for stroke and heart disease. Plus, the brain needs glucose to function properly, and carbs are the easiest source to obtain it. Are any of these health risks worth losing weight? To me, it's diet Russian roulette. Why participate in something that many doctors say could be risky when the same results can be had in a healthier fashion by simply paying attention to what you eat?

— *The Shangri-La Diet*. This plan says that in order to lose weight, you need to lower your body's "set point" (the place that is your natural, comfortable weight), which is often too high on people who are overweight. The diet says that this can be accomplished by training your body to stop associating calories with flavor, and it recommends eating a couple of tablespoons of high-calorie olive oil or sugar water between meals. It also says that you can bring down the set-point effect of foods by eating bland meals or trying unfamiliar foods. Is there any proof that it works? No—it's all anecdotal and based on the author's own success claims. Nutritionists are very skeptical, too. In fact, healthy foods *do* taste good, and adding major liquid calories doesn't make sense unless you subtract more calories from elsewhere in your diet.

— *Volumetrics*. This diet is based on the very real notion that most people like to eat more than less, and it shows the difference between what the author calls “high-energy-density foods” with “low-energy-density foods.” In other words, you can eat a lot more of some foods (for example, fruits and vegetables) than you can of others (meats, fats, and so forth). It seems to me that this is just another way of saying that you need to keep track of calories. High-density foods have a lot of calories, and low-density foods have fewer. Ultimately, this diet simply teaches you how to pay attention to the amount of high-calorie food you consume. Does it work? It’s common sense, God bless it.

— *The South Beach Diet*. This is a more sensible version that’s reminiscent of Atkins, in that it calls for a lot of protein and few carbs. However, unlike Atkins, it doesn’t permit dieters to indulge in rich fats, and it does include healthier carbs (such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains), as well as recommending reasonable portion sizes. In other words, eat less, focus on healthier vegetables and lean meats, and stay away from foods with very high fat and sugar contents. Couldn’t your grandmother have told you that 20 years ago?

*“Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”*

— James A. Beard



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# About the Author

**Loretta LaRoche**, the best-selling author of *Life Is Short—Wear Your Party Pants* and *Squeeze the Day*, among other works, is a stress-management consultant who advocates humor, optimism, and resiliency as coping mechanisms. She uses her wit and wisdom to help people learn how to take stress and turn it into strength, and how to see themselves as the survivors of their own lives—that is, to find the “bless in the mess.”

Loretta is a favorite with viewers of her PBS specials, as well as on the lecture circuit, where she presents an average of 100 talks per year. She lives in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Website: [www.LorettaLaroche.com](http://www.LorettaLaroche.com)



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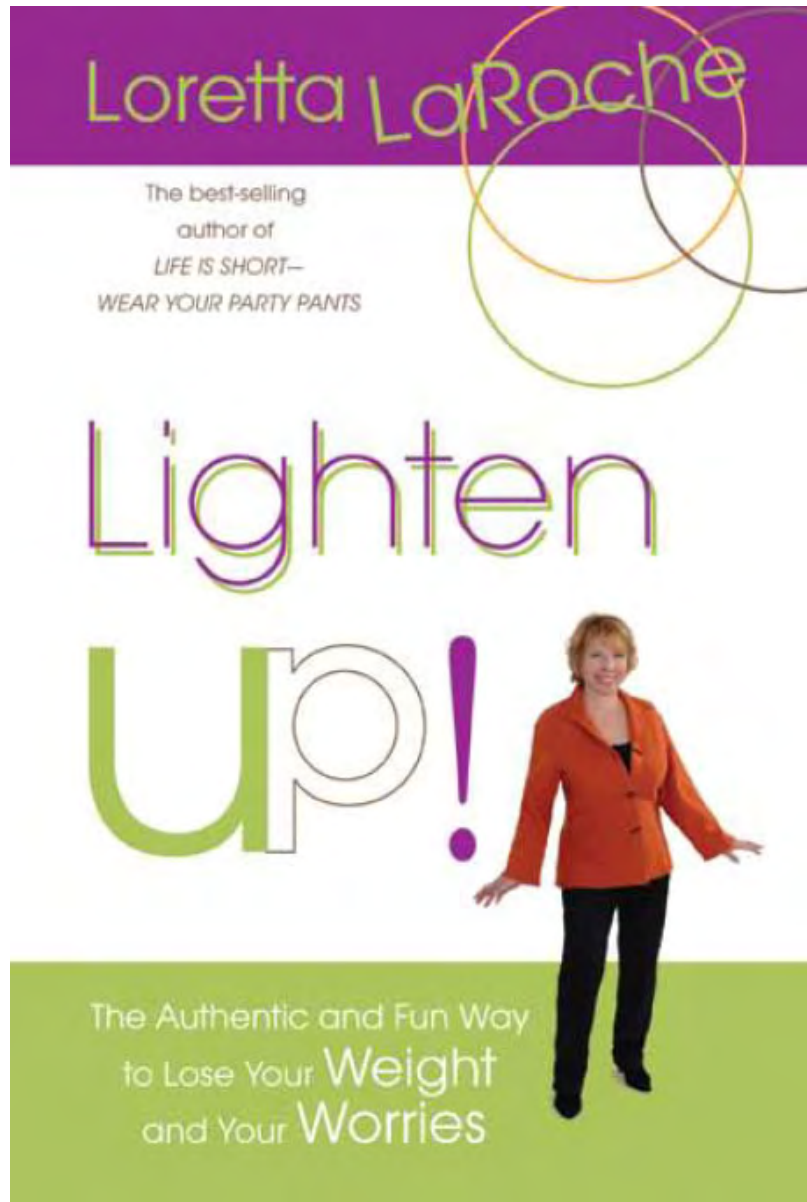
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