

RAW FOOD FOR REAL PEOPLE

Living Vegan Food Made Simple
by the Chef and Founder of Leaf Organics



ROD ROTONDI

Foreword by Michael Bernard Beckwith

PRAISE FOR RAW FOOD FOR REAL PEOPLE

“Rod’s down-to-earth approach and his ability to simplify raw-food preparation are outstanding. Raw food is healthy and delicious, and as Rod clearly demonstrates in *Raw Food for Real People*, it’s for everyone.”

— **BRENDAN BRAZIER**, professional Ironman triathlete and author of *Thrive: The Vegan Nutrition Guide*

“I’ve been enjoying Rod’s delicious raw foods for years. It’s a true win-win — good for my health and good for the environment. Rod has inspired me to adapt a good portion of my diet to raw.”

— **ANDY LIPKIS**, founder of TreePeople

“Rod’s food philosophy provides a guide to conscious eating for real people. . . . Rod is revealing the next evolution in raw food, and the possibilities are limitless. I invite you to enter a delectable adventure in raw dining.”

— from the foreword by **MICHAEL BERNARD BECKWITH**, author of *Spiritual Liberation*

“The time has come for us to love ourselves enough to take action to heal ourselves. This book gives us the skills to do so.”

— **RABBI GABRIEL COUSENS, MD, MD(H)**, Diplomat of the American Board of Holistic Medicine, and Director of the Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center

“The solution to our country’s health problems is simple and well within reach: eating a raw, alkaline, electron-rich diet as outlined in this book can ensure a consistently healthy, fit body free from chronic sickness and so-called disease, or dis-ease.”

— **ROBERT O. YOUNG, PhD**, coauthor of *The pH Miracle*

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*To all the people who have suffered or are suffering from health challenges
due to the food they eat. The good news is that the human body
has an amazing ability, even after years of neglect and maltreatment,
to rebound and renew itself when properly fed.*

True wisdom consists in not departing from nature
and in molding our conduct according to her laws and model.

— **Lucius Annaeus Seneca**



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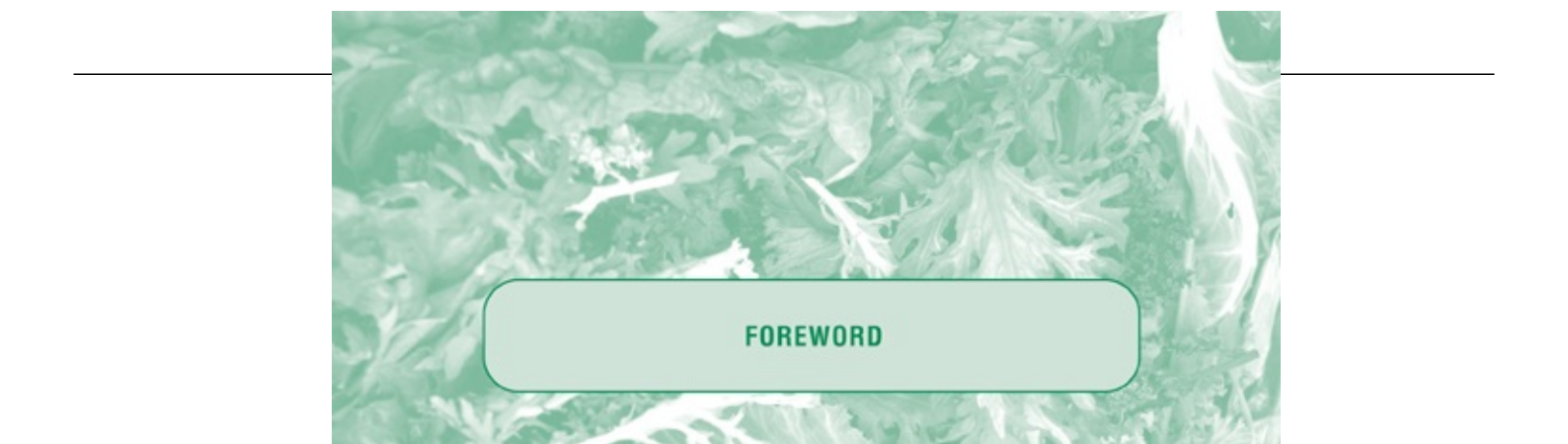
First off, I wish to thank Marc Allen from New World Library for his support and the incredible company he has built. I greatly appreciate Georgia Hughes and Kristen Cashman, my fantastic editors who went way beyond the call of duty in bringing this book to fruition.

I wish to thank my whole family for their love and support, but especially my dad, Roger Rotondo, for his unwavering support and for sharing his love of food and family. What a great heart!

I thank Jeannette Rotondi for being an amazing mother to our daughter, Lilli, and for her help with some of the scientific background for this book. And Lilli, thank you for joining us on this journey, putting it all in perspective, filling my heart with love, and making me laugh.

I also want to thank all my colleagues at Leaf Organics, especially Ray Gonzales, who has completely owned our mission to “Make it easy for people to eat healthy food.”

It truly takes a village.



FOREWORD

***Raw Food for Real People* delivers on its promise.** It offers a way of nourishing ourselves that delivers vibrant health and vitality. It also takes into account the emotional comfort we derive from food that satisfies both body and spirit. Rod's food philosophy provides a guide to conscious eating for real people.

People routinely comment on how healthy and energetic I am. One of the things I attribute my well-being to is that I prepare many of Rod's recipes at home — the recipes that are most frequently requested in his restaurants: amazing salads, savory sauces, smoothies, nourishing soups, dessert dressings, and more. Rod's food aesthetic, as well as his ethics and concern about how the Earth's resources are inextricably intertwined with how we grow, prepare, and eat our food, reminds us that eating is a sacred act, an art, and a spiritual practice of inner joy and satisfaction.

Ever since I began going to Rod's restaurant, Leaf Cuisine, four years ago, I have known I could trust him not only with my taste buds, but also with feeding me in a conscionable way. His food preparations are in accord with my belief in placing sunlight-fed, organic foods into the body temporarily while respecting the environment by keeping it free of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. The vision Rod presents of quality, purity, and enjoyment of our food is inspired by his commitment to the benefits of the raw-food lifestyle. My family and I have benefited so much from Rod's knowledge and love of foods that I extended an invitation to him to set up an outdoor food booth each Sunday at the Agape International Spiritual Center, the community I founded in Los Angeles in 1986. Upon experiencing Rod's cuisine, many individuals have changed the foods they eat and tell us regularly how their health, vitality, and well-being have greatly improved.

Today people are realizing that there are new choices to be made about food, as evidenced by the increased popularity of farmers' markets and the range of organic foods now available in traditional grocery stores. America's unhealthy relationship with food is evidenced by its expanding waistline as well as its increased incidence of childhood diabetes and other health issues. Today more than 50 percent of Americans admit to having been on a diet at one time or another. Increasingly we realize *food choices matter*. Rod's holistic and fun approach to food education and preparation convinces us how optimal health can be realized through food choices rather than diets.


Eating a diet of raw food isn't a religion, and the raw-food style of living is not fanaticism. (In fact, Rod, I occasionally eat a juicy veggie burger — soy free of course — and it doesn't negate the benefits of my mostly raw diet.) The main point here is how Rod appreciates the beauty and pleasure of healthily prepared food and the messages — both subtle and overt — behind it.

As you turn the pages of *Raw Food for Real People*, you will see that his recipes are not complicated or time-consuming, and they use ingredients that can be found everywhere. While some

foods may be new to you, most will be familiar ingredients that are being combined to give maximum nutritional value. Rod's recipes take food preparation from merely being time-consuming to being creative and offering maximum taste. Who doesn't appreciate the aroma of fresh herbs and the experience of heavenly food that is pleasing to the senses? Rod is revealing the next evolution in raw food, and the possibilities are limitless. I invite you to enter a delectable adventure in raw dining. You'll see how your whole personhood will shine with a new glow of radiant health — inside and out.

— **Michael Bernard Beckwith**

author of Spiritual Liberation: Fulfilling Your Soul's Potential



INTRODUCTION

Okay, I have three confessions to make up front.

CONFESSION ONE: First off, I have to admit that being a raw-food chef is easy. No, really. It's like *Dumb and Dumber* easy. I have experience with cuisines from around the world, and I can tell you that raw-food cuisine is the easiest ever.

The truth is that if you can cut an apple in half, you are a raw-food chef. And if you can slice a cube that apple, you qualify as a gourmet raw-food chef. So congratulations, chef, you have already graduated!

Oh, sorry — I'm supposed to say something here about the sacred and esoteric nature of raw-food preparation. About how we raw-food chefs meditate at least twelve hours per day and exercise by walking miles over flaming coals or large bodies of water.

But the truth is that most of what we do when preparing raw food is simple. In fact, it's best when it is simple. Let the food speak for itself. Plus, it's even easier to digest when it's simple. One could even argue that the whole idea of the raw-food movement is getting back to a simple and natural diet. Avoid adding too many cups of ego to your recipes. Simple dishes can still be incredibly elegant, delicious, nutritious, and artful.

What I am going to show you in this book is how to simply, deliciously, and nutritiously incorporate raw-food preparation into your life.

No, you don't have to take notes. Remember, it's simple. Our ancestors have been preparing food this way for millions of years—since long before blenders, food processors, and juicers entered our kitchens.

CONFESSION TWO: I didn't cure myself of a myriad of diseases, ailments, and degenerative conditions with raw food. I know, what a letdown. The truth is, I've always been healthy. I'm just much healthier and more vital when I eat raw food.

I have, however, witnessed firsthand the power of raw food to restore and enhance health. I've seen so-called incurable diseases vanish when friends abandoned cooked and highly processed foods in favor of healthier raw meals — including Leaf Organics foods. I can tell you I feel pretty good about that.

CONFESSION THREE: Since I discovered raw-food cuisine in 1996, I haven't always eaten a 100 percent raw-food diet. Sure, I did spend many of those years eating a purely raw-food diet, but there have been times when I chose to eat other foods as well. Perhaps it was emotional eating, or just enjoying

different foods and cuisines. Perhaps it was to join in social situations. But whatever the reason, the point is, it's okay.

Adopting a raw-food diet is not about judging others or ourselves. It's not about good or bad. It's about things that work for us and things that don't. I have found consistently over the years that the more raw foods I eat, the better I feel and look—and I'm still pretty attached to feeling and looking good!

Conversely, I have found that the more cooked foods I eat, the worse I feel and look. It's that simple. There is a consequence to everything we do, and the consequences of poor eating can manifest themselves quickly.

My last name is Rotondi, which means “the round ones” in Italian. If I still ate the standard American diet, I know I would be grossly overweight and struggling with health challenges such as diabetes, which runs in my family. So while I didn't cure myself of any major illnesses, I attribute my good health and relatively youthful appearance to a diet predominantly made up of raw foods.

Next, I'll address two fundamental food choices that I believe are an integral part of the raw-food diet and lifestyle.

ORGANIC FOOD

As I see it, we have a choice. We can choose foods that have been treated with herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides and that may include genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and who knows what other kinds of chemicals, preservatives, and stabilizers; I call this slow suicide. Or we can choose unadulterated real foods from nature. To me, the choice of organic foods is integral to conscious eating and raw-food cuisine. A raw-food lifestyle is about eating pure food from nature and giving ourselves the best food possible. While the cost for organic products is a little higher, I view it as money I won't have to spend on visits to my doctor.

When we choose organic foods, not only are we keeping our own internal environment clean, but we also are being mindful of the global environment. Look at the extra money you spend on organic as a kind of tax to protect the future of our planet, because right now we are seriously polluting the land, water, and air with conventional agricultural practices. Every bite counts, both for our bodies and for the planetary body.

I feel so strongly about this that I would rather eat organic cooked foods than conventional raw foods. I just don't want to support the chemical agriculture system or put those chemicals in my body.

A VEGAN DIET

While there are raw foodists who include raw meats and dairy in their diets, the vast majority are vegans. If you haven't heard, there is a lot of new data pointing to the incredible health benefits of a vegan diet. Check out *The China Study* by Dr. T. Colin Campbell. It's a book about possibly the most comprehensive study of human nutrition ever undertaken, which concluded that, in Dr. Campbell's words, “People who ate the most animal-based foods got the most chronic disease. . . . People who ate the most plant-based foods were the healthiest and tended to avoid chronic disease. These results could not be ignored.”*

According to the American Diabetes Association, vegetarian diets are associated with a reduced risk for obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, colorectal cancer, lung cancer, and kidney disease. Additionally, virtually every health organization in existence advocates eating more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Then there is the idea of not killing other sentient beings in order to eat. It's a nice feeling to finish

a delicious, nutritious, and satisfying meal knowing that no animal had to give its life for it — not mention the fact that the vast majority of animals raised for consumption are born, bred, and killed in miserable conditions.

Or how about the fact that the livestock industry is one of the biggest polluters of all and is right at the top of the list of industries that contribute to global warming? Did you know that the single most effective thing any individual can do to minimize their negative effect on global warming is to eat less or no meat?

Here are a few of my favorite quotes about this.

“Nothing will benefit human health and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.” — **Albert Einstein**

“The greatness of a nation and its moral process can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” — **Mohandas Gandhi**

“Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.” — **Albert Schweitzer**

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

Many of us in this culture have lost our relationship with food. The only relationship many kids growing up today have with food is going to a drive-through or popping a package into the microwave.

This is a relatively new phenomenon. During the first half of the twentieth century — only a couple of generations ago — household vegetable gardens were commonplace, and many families raised animals for meat or milk. My paternal grandfather fed his family of thirteen children largely out of the garden his family tended and with the animals they raised.

To them, food wasn't an abstraction or simply a means of satisfying hunger. It was something they had an intimate relationship with long before it hit the dining room table. And right up to his last day, my grandfather used to love walking down to the garden, picking some ripe peppers and tomatoes, grabbing some freshly laid eggs from the hen coop, and coming back to the kitchen to cook up a scrambled egg, pepper, and tomato sandwich with some thick Italian bread.

I remember doing this with him, and I understood the great pleasure he got from it. Then he would show me his biceps and make them jump for me, and he'd say if I wanted to be strong I should eat good food from the garden, too. I'm not exactly sure how the couple of beers he would enjoy with the sandwich figured in, but I did understand the joy he felt in his relationship with and love of the Earth and its bounty.

While we don't all have the land or the time to grow a large garden, there are ways we can grow more of our food ourselves at home. One of the things we have done at our home was to pull up some of our lawn to make room for more vegetable garden space. We now grow greens such as arugula and herbs such as basil and oregano instead of grass.

Herb gardens are pretty easy to grow just about anywhere — even a large pot or window box will do fine. You can grow them from seed or buy seedlings at most garden supply stores. It's really fun to be able to run out to the herb garden to cut a few leaves of basil or pull up some spring onions when making a recipe.



Sprouts are another really easy thing to grow. Later in the book I will teach you how to sprout legumes such as chickpeas and lentils as well as a host of seeds, nuts, and grains. One nice thing to try sprouting at home is sunflower seeds. They're super easy! Just put some seeds in some soil in your garden, pot, or window box, or even in an old wheatgrass tray, water them regularly, and in a matter of a few days you will have your own sunflower greens. These are ready when about 3 to 4 inches long, and they can be cut and added to a wrap or salad, or just eaten as is. They are very nutritious and can even be juiced.

One pot of sunflower seeds we were sprouting went unharvested for too long and we ended up with small sunflower plants. We transplanted them to the garden and are growing the whole plants, which are beautiful, and now we look forward to harvesting the seeds. What fun!

Of course, the other advantage of growing your own veggies, herbs, sprouts, and greens at home is the knowledge that your food is secure and nutritious. In this day and age, with scares about food security abounding, it's nice to know exactly what's been done to your food before it hits your plate.

My three-year-old daughter loves growing things. She is learning where food comes from and about the relationship between the Earth and ourselves. She loves to go out and pick some greens and then come back and lovingly make a salad with me or her mom. Who knows? One day she might take her grandchild out to the garden to pick veggies together and tell stories about her dad's grandfather who did the same thing to feed a family of thirteen children during the Great Depression.

Oh yeah, and did I mention you can also save a lot of money by growing your own stuff at home? Seeds are cheap!

One of the things I love about raw-food cuisine is that it develops this relationship with food. Ingredients don't come out of a microwavable package; they come out of the garden or from the farmers' market or the organic produce section of the local health-food store.

As we've seen, raw food is more than just a cuisine — it's a lifestyle. It involves a more holistic way of looking at the world and our relationship to it. We see nature, and ourselves in it—nature is not something to be overcome but something to work with. And once you start seeing food this way, it won't be long before you see everything this way.

NOTES ABOUT THE RECIPES

The recipes in chapters 7 through 13 of this book will get you on your way to becoming an accomplished raw-food chef. We cover all the bases—breakfast, appetizers, salads, soups, main courses, and desserts, plus the important raw-food practice of dehydration.

Please note that all the ingredients you use should be raw and preferably organic as well. Also, it's important to note that recipes for raw-food dishes tend to be more flexible than normal cooked-food recipes. This is because produce is almost always the main ingredient in raw-food recipes, and produce varies from season to season and region to region. Water content changes, as do size, taste, and so on. So to follow a recipe blindly really doesn't work. It's always important to consider all the

variables and to adjust accordingly. If you are making a mousse and it's too runny, add more nuts. ~~you are making a dressing and it is too thick, add more liquid. Dehydration especially will vary~~ depending on ingredients and environment. Things are going to dehydrate much faster on a dry, hot summer day than on a rainy, cold day. I suggest you use the recipes in this book as guides only - don't give up your own discernment and creativity.



* See the book's website, <http://www.thechinastudy.com/about.html> (accessed June 4, 2009).



When I first discovered raw food in the 1990s, virtually no one had heard of a raw- or living-food diet. We were considered extremists, which I always found ironic considering we eat unadulterated unprocessed foods from nature, whereas the standard American diet, what I call the “SAD” diet, is very far removed indeed from nature. Who’s the extremist?

But all over the world, people are waking up to conscious eating, and the time to get back to real food is now.

I discovered raw and living foods in Greenwich Village in New York City in 1996. I was taking consciousness workshops back when the word *consciousness* wasn’t used in every other sentence. The leaders of these workshops were eating raw food in order to “raise their vibrations,” get clearer, and not be subject to food jags. I thought I would give it a try.

I soon found myself coming home with bags of beautiful fresh organic produce, seeds, nuts, and fruits I would use to prepare incredible meals and drinks. This led to a revelation. I was sitting down to one such meal—a dandelion-greens salad with pine nuts and pomegranate dressing — when it occurred to me that I was eating the food of the gods. I mean, when the gods get together for dinner, don’t think they do drive-through burgers. It is a cornucopia of vibrant, colorful, and life-filled fresh foods that I see the gods eating — and that realization really changed my relationship to food.

As the years passed, I searched for restaurants where I could eat the healthy foods I had discovered. I’d walk and drive around my surrounding neighborhoods looking for a truly healthy restaurant, but I always came back disappointed. I found some restaurants presenting themselves as healthy, but they offered little more than the same old thing repackaged. I couldn’t find a single one that was really healthy and delicious from the ground up. And I knew very well that I wasn’t the only one out there looking.

LA FAMIGLIA

Like virtually everyone out there, I have had family members and friends get sick and in some cases die from a myriad of degenerative diseases. On average, fifteen hundred Americans die every day from cancer. We have an epidemic level of obesity and diabetes in this country. And heart disease is accepted as a part of life. When I realized that food was the main culprit behind all this, I knew I was going to do something about it. I finally decided I would step into the breach and bring people what they were looking for — delicious, healthy food that is affordable and convenient.

I had a culinarily advantaged upbringing — I come from a predominantly Italian American family (with some Native American, Irish, and French thrown in). Food is central to our family culture. It

not only the reason we gather; it's also a passion. Everyone in my family cooks, not just the women. ~~My father is an incredible baker, a genius with breads, pies, and pretty much anything else he puts his mind to.~~ Some of my earliest childhood memories are of our family gathered together in the kitchen.

My dad used to enlist me, my sister, Joy, and my brothers, John and James, every holiday season to help him make pies. The oldest kids would help with peeling apples (competing for the longest apple-peel strip), and the younger kids would mix the sugar and spices.

I learned important lessons about food from my dad. Because he is an engineer, he would break down the important factors in any recipe and explain (at length!) both the aesthetic considerations and the hard science behind his techniques and methods. I remember while I was working in Jerusalem for the UN, I asked my dad to send me his recipe for apple pie, because I wanted to get it exactly right. He wrote me back with a multipage treatise about apple pies. I can still make a beautiful classic apple pie, but one of my favorite culinary validations was when my dad tried my raw apple pie at Leaf and loved it.

I also was lucky enough to be exposed to other cuisines because of family connections. When I was ten years old, my mom arranged for my sister and me to spend a summer in Mexico with family friends. Then I spent my twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth summers in Rome, where my grandfather was the U.S. ambassador.

Because my family has a strong work ethic, we all had jobs, and mine was to help with food service. I was trained in formal food presentation and assisted with dinners, cocktail parties, and so on. And I became close with the head chef at the ambassador's villa, Dino, one of the best chefs in Italy. I used to hang out in the kitchen, learning about cooking and having fun with food and friends.

Of course, we used to eat pretty well those summers. The whole family would plan the menu for the next week. In the early mornings, I used to go to the local open-air markets with my grandmother, who was very hands-on in managing the embassy's hospitality. She always tried to get the best and freshest ingredients at the best prices. She was big on not wasting anything. In a way, I think she was a true conservationist. Today everyone is going green. Back in my grandmother's day, it was just considered common sense. One of her favorite sayings was "Waste not, want not." As I write, she is ninety-seven and still going strong.

Which leads me to introduce one of my favorite culinary skills—resourcefulness. My grandmother always said cooks are measured by what they can do with leftovers. The great ones can create delicious meals without a recipe, using the limited ingredients at hand. I always feel that resourcefulness challenge with raw foods, since this cuisine is in the process of being reinvented, or at least rediscovered, and the foods and ingredients one can use are limited compared to those in other cuisines. The resourcefulness and inventiveness required of a raw-food chef is partly why raw food appeals so strongly to me.

When my sister, Joy, and her then-husband were living on a sailboat in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, she invited me, my girlfriend at the time, and my parents to join them for a week. We had a great time sailing around the islands. And we created a contest. Every day a different couple would make lunch and dinner. At the end of the week we voted for the best chef pair, and despite the tough competition, my team won. That's pretty serious validation. I think we won because of our resourcefulness and creativity.

The only time I had greater validation was when I entered a culinary contest in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Every summer they hold the Marblehead Culinary Arts Festival, a black-tie food competition among all the prestigious restaurants in the region. It's held outside in an old fort overlooking the harbor full of sailboats, and judged by five-star chefs from Boston's most celebrated

restaurants. When they announced I had won both best of show and best theme, I was too shocked to say anything.

Another really great culinary validation came when I made homemade gnocchi for my nan (grandmother), and she said it was the best she had ever tasted. How good is that? We have a special family technique for making gnocchi, and it is still one of my favorite things to make for (and teach) people I really like. Yes, I know, it's not raw, but it is part of my culture and family tradition, and people really love it!

My sister is arguably the most knowledgeable chef in the family. She knows everything about food. In fact, she used to own and run a business called Foodies.com, which offered lots of interesting information about food.

To give you an idea of the kind of culinary culture I grew up in: when my siblings and I were teenagers coming home from a late night and wanting a midnight snack, we would typically cook up sauce from scratch and make pasta. No Hot Pockets for us!

FRENCH HIGHS

My culinary vistas matured greatly when I was sixteen and my family moved to Paris. Those teenage years in Paris were critical to my culinary education. The French love their food and take great pride in it. I was enthralled enough to sign up for French cooking courses at a local school. I learned how to make *pintade aux choux* (guinea fowl with cabbage) and a proper chocolate mousse, how to reduce sauce, and much more.

My cousins, who happened to be living in Paris at the same time, love to tell the story of how they invited them over for a meal during a weekend that my parents were away. They said they were expecting peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches but instead got a four-course gourmet French meal.

I loved all parts of the experience — even going to the local markets and bargaining for the best ingredients. Getting people I like together to share a meal is still one of my very favorite things to do.

Also, Paris is a very cosmopolitan city, with cuisines from all over the world. I received an amazing education in Algerian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and other world cuisines. My siblings and I used to make weekend excursions to little hole-in-the-wall restaurants throughout the city. For a couple of bucks per person, one could find an incredible variety of great meals.

FOREIGN INTRIGUES

After returning to the States to go to college and then to graduate school, I volunteered for a year of grassroots development work with an American nonprofit agency. I spent a few months working around Morocco, and then one year in Tunisia. Naturally I learned all about Moroccan tagines (clay pot dishes) and about the differences between the two countries' couscous. I also learned all about beekeeping while managing projects teaching subsistence farmers how to use modern beekeeping methods. I had some incredible meals in the most rustic and pastoral of settings. I even completed the fasting month of Ramadan, breaking the day's fast every evening with friends and colleagues.

In Jerusalem, where I lived and worked for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for six years, I greatly enjoyed the Palestinian cuisine. With strong influences from Lebanon, Egypt, and the Bedouin culture, Palestinian cuisine is wonderfully delicious. I learned to make many dishes, hosted numerous dinner parties, and was invited to countless feasts in both the most sophisticated and simple environs.

It was in Jerusalem that I first became a vegetarian. My brother James came for a visit, and we took an eight-day trip to Egypt and back on my Honda XRV 650 African Twin motorcycle. Arabi

cuisine includes wonderful vegetarian dishes, and we tried everything, including a sublime meal in a restaurant serving Nabatean food on the banks of the Nile in Aswan, where the Arab and African worlds meld.

At the UNDP, my job as program management officer was to help develop private business and agriculture in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. I worked with many food-related businesses, including a citrus-processing facility in Gaza; irrigation, beekeeping, and cottage-industry food-processing projects; a chick hatchery; and the tourism industry. I was welcomed into homes and institutions without reserve. I still feel incredibly grateful for the hospitality I received and the insights I gained during this time of service.

It wasn't an easy job. Economic development work is never easy. And when it is done under military occupation and in the midst of an *intifadah* (a popular uprising), economic development is incredibly challenging. Under these trying circumstances, I saw some of the best and worst in human nature.

THE RAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL'S BACK

Eventually I decided to experience firsthand the challenges and rewards of building a business in the third world. I had led the setup of the first business development center in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, trained many business consultants, and assisted numerous Palestinian businesses. But I had never owned my own business.

I had never experienced the challenge of making payroll or starting an enterprise from scratch, and I hadn't faced the specific hurdles entrepreneurs in economically and politically challenged areas must deal with. I decided to strike out on my own and "take a walk in the shoes" of the small businessmen and -women I had worked with as a UN program management officer. My business wouldn't be located in Gaza or the West Bank, however, but rather in a nearby area I had come to love.

I traded in my three-piece suit for a swimsuit and opened a scuba diving shop and resort in the Sinai. Yes, the Sinai — that wilderness where Moses wandered for forty years. Having been there and enjoyed the spectacular beauty of the Sinai, I imagined that Moses and the Israelites weren't really lost — they loved the area and were reluctant to leave!

Leaving Jerusalem, my home of six years, I loaded up my 1973 Land Rover Series 3 long beach which I had rescued from the Samarian desert, with all my belongings and moved to a little Bedouin village called Dahab — Arabic for "gold" — nestled on a palm tree-lined bay on the Red Sea. Dahab had no paved roads, phones, or electricity when I arrived. It was a favorite stopover for backpackers and travelers, and I loved it. During the six years I worked for the UN in Jerusalem, I estimate I took at least fifty short trips to the Sinai — mostly to Dahab, where I practiced free diving and scuba diving.

The first thing I did after moving to Dahab was to take a scuba diving-instructor course. Next I partnered with an Austrian friend who was in the midst of establishing a diving center at a spectacular dive site. That's how the Canyon Dive Club was born — only the third diving center in Dahab, and the first to be owned by non-Egyptians. In the next years I went on to establish the Fantasea Dive Club, Club Red Divers, and Dive Zone.

We were the pioneers of Camel Diving Safaris, leading groups of tourists by camel up and down the Sinai coast to virgin dive sites. These were amazing trips that left indelible impressions on all who participated. Imagine riding up the coast on a camel with your own Bedouin guide with no signs of civilization — just rocky mountains to one side and the deep blue of the Red Sea to the other. W

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