

Frankly, Bethenny

THIS CHEF, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR AND TV STAR PUTS THE "REAL" IN REALITY.



Bethenny Frankel is not bashful. She is, well, frank. The outspoken best-selling author and reality TV star of Bravo's *Real Housewives of New York City* and runner-up on NBC's *The Apprentice: Martha Stewart* has become a symbol of the modern single woman: driven, successful, ready to leave the baggage behind, and striving for balance and love.

Don't let her diminutive stature fool you. She more than compensates for it with her brash, take-it-or-leave-it personality, and it's no schtick. What some see as snarkiness is more a thoughtful determination that keeps her seemingly right on track—far from the childhood drama of the racetracks she grew up on. (Her father and stepfather were both horse trainers.)

Bethenny, 38, has made it no secret that her upbringing, part of which was in Fort Lauderdale, introduced her to the complexities of adult vices like drinking, gambling, bulimia and smoking. She faced body image issues early, carrying them with her into her adult life. "I grew up in a very extreme, bulimic, crazy household. I never made myself throw up in my life, but I always had food noise, and I think that is part of having an eating disorder."

This food noise, or obsessive mania, dominated Bethenny's relationships with food, herself and others. "I had been on every diet my entire life and always obsessed. I would always know what I was eating and try to control the situation," she says. "I would go on a vacation and be frantic if they didn't have skim milk or Equal, was obsessed with oil and afraid of avocado, and would never eat pasta. And I was always 20 pounds heavier than what I am now." The irony was that as a trained natural foods chef, Bethenny was surrounded by food daily. "I just was terrified of food."

BLAME IT ON ITALY

There is an old saying in Italy that goes, "An empty stomach cannot reason." Little surprise that Bethenny's path to a healthy relationship with food began there during a trip a few years ago. "My friend had given me a list of restaurants that Mario Batali had told him about. I was a chef, and yet I was still obsessing. It was that fact," she says. "It was like, 'Are you kidding me? You're going to go to Italy and not taste everything? No. I am going back home and my jeans are going to be the same as when I came, and this is not going to be the trip to Italy where the last day I eat my gelato, come home and want to shoot myself.' So I was done. I was done with the food noise."

But silencing the manic self-talk of "eat this, don't eat that, you're good, you're bad" at the root of obsessive, disordered eating requires

more than just a realization. It requires stepping outside of a comfort zone of controlled safety. "You say, 'Oh, I'm allergic to this, I can't have this, I'm on a fast, I'm a vegan, whatever the hell the bullshit is that week. And when you leave that safe space, that's when you feel like you're going to shift. You don't trust," Bethenny says. "It's the moment of eating a **prima piatta of pasta and not finishing it but tasting it. I allowed myself to have pasta and I survived...** The moment is trusting yourself and jumping in the pool."

THINNING OUT

The light bulb revelation began a process of self-evolution that eventually bore *Naturally Thin: Unleashing the Skinny Girl*, a *New York Times* Best Seller. "It's like working out. You start to feel stronger, and you start to realize that it works and you're okay. Because I know mania. I was the mania," she says, adding that writing the book was a total catharsis. "I found the key that opens up the lock."

Naturally Thin is a palatable discussion on the psychology of healthy, fun eating, not a diet regimen. Instead of meal plans, the book provides a toolbox (and rules) to make healthy decisions. "First I say **eat real food. Eat to the best of your abilities. And eat ingredients you can pronounce. Then you have to realize that food is not your best friend or your enemy.**" Rather, our diets are like bank accounts. Choose items that are worth the investment, and stop eating when food loses its appeal, she advises.

The most important take-home message, according to Bethenny, is that nothing is forbidden. "If you say to yourself, 'It's okay to have one piece of pizza or one cookie,' you aren't going to be so mad at yourself that you go to such a dark emotional space where you say you hate yourself. No one ever got fat on a piece of pizza and a cookie. No one."

HAPPY DAYS

Today, Bethenny controls the volume on her food noise. The anxiety is gone—and she's loving food and life. "I am a fun person, but it's also become fun to not be annoyed that you have to go out to dinner and have anxiety. There is zero noise about going to a restaurant, a vacation, anywhere."

What is key to her success is accepting that you won't always have balance. "I think that the same thing with food is true with life. You cannot make decisions out of fear," she says. "I'm saying to women, 'Don't settle. Don't listen to your friends that tell you you're supposed to be doing this, you're supposed to be doing that.' You're supposed to be doing what you really think you're supposed to be doing, even if you're 36 and broke and still pursuing your dream... I am reaping the rewards because I made truthful decisions from my gut."

BETHENNY ON... WHAT MEN DO BETTER THAN WOMEN REGARDING THEIR HEALTH

"They don't obsess, and they don't do extremes. And men are more regular than women. They eat. They go to the bathroom. Because they're not obsessed, and that is a big part of being healthy."

Pink dress by Fendi available at Neiman Marcus, Coral Gables. Shoes by Yves Saint Laurent available Neiman Marcus, Coral Gables.

