

Sky

A Line in the Sand

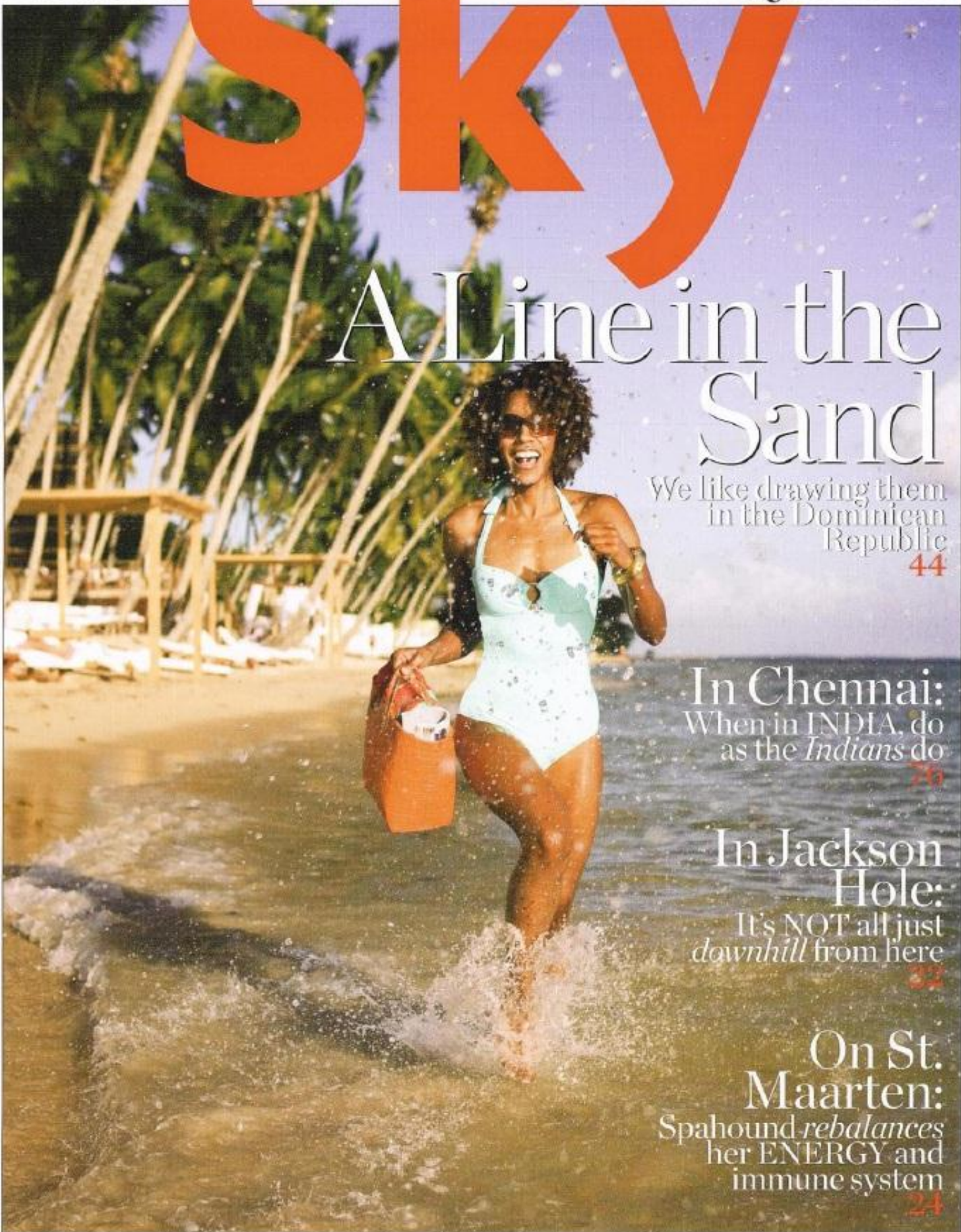
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FAST FOOD FIX

THAT'S THE TITLE OF CHEF DEVIN ALEXANDER'S NEW BOOK, AND SKY SENIOR EDITOR WAYNETTE

GOODSON COULDN'T WAIT TO GET INTO THE KITCHEN AND TEST ALEXANDER'S 75 RECIPES FOR VERSIONS OF FAST-FOOD DISHES THAT NOT ONLY ARE BETTER FOR YOU, BUT CUT HALF THE FAT AND CALORIES. COULD SHE REALLY MAKE HER FAVORITE FAST-FOOD DISHES AT HOME? WOULD THEY TASTE AS GOOD?

AS FOR ALEXANDER'S FAST-FOOD CREDENTIALS, SHE WRITES, "DRESSED IN THEIR BEST ON SUNDAY MORNINGS, MOST CATHOLIC TEENAGERS OF MY GENERATION WENT TO CHURCH. I WENT TO WENDY'S."



THOUGHT LEADER

FAST FOOD IS TO AMERICA what pastry is to France, what pasta is to Italy. Fast food is part of what makes us American; it's part of our culture. Who can't remember attending at least one birthday party at a fast-food restaurant? Some of my fondest childhood memories are of swinging on the playground at a Hardee's, and I celebrated my eighth birthday at a Pizza Inn. As a teen I worked the cash register at a Wendy's, and one of my first dates with my husband was at a McDonald's. I'm not ashamed to admit all of this to millions of *Sky* readers because, well, I'm an American, and fast food is part of our daily lives.

The pioneers of the fast-food industry embody values that we as Americans hold dear: entrepreneurship, persistence and success in the face of extreme adversity. (Cue "The Star-Spangled Banner.") When he was 12 years old, Dave Thomas left home, got a room at the YMCA and started working at a restaurant. At age 15, he dropped out of school to be a busboy and a cook, and in 1969 he opened his own restaurant in Columbus, Ohio—Wendy's Old-Fashioned Hamburgers. William Rosenberg dropped out of school at age 14 and took odd jobs, like driving an ice cream truck and delivering telegrams for Western Union, before he opened a small doughnut shop in Boston in 1948 called Dunkin' Donuts. And the rascally Harland Sanders dropped out of school at the age of 12 and

parents love to barrel through the drive-thrus, dole out the Happy Meals, and see that everyone is happy, happy, happy.

Talk with some baby boomers and they'll tell you that they're proud to be a part of a generation that started something so integral to the American lifestyle and economy. . . .

[*Loud, scratching sound*] Now let's stop "The Star-Spangled Banner," because the times, they are a-changin'.

America is the fattest nation in the world. (Mississippi, where 30 percent of adults are obese, is the fattest state.) Nearly 127 million Americans are either overweight or obese. That's nearly 65 percent of all U.S. adults. Since 1980, the total number of overweight children in the United States has doubled, while the number of overweight adolescents has tripled.

About one in four Americans visits a fast-food restaurant every day. It's a ritual that has transformed our geography, workforce, pop culture and, most of all, diet, in just a blink of historical time—from the 1950s until today. In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food, whereas in 2001, we upped the ante to \$110 billion. We spend more on fast food than on college, on computers or software or new cars, or on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos and music combined.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

Is it even possible to be thin, stay healthy and eat our beloved Big Macs, too? Enter chef Devin Alexander and her new book, *Fast Food Fix: 75+ Amazing Recipe Makeovers of Your Fast Food Restaurant Favorites* (Rodale, \$14.95). Alexander is the

owner and executive chef of Café Renée Catering in Los Angeles. A reformed fast-food junkie, she has lost 55 pounds and kept the weight off through specializing in flavorful, low-fat cuisine.

We decide to put her book to the test. Could we really cook "fast food," with half the calories and fat, that still tasted like our favorites?

My husband, Scott, is thrilled when I bring home the book and tell him to pick three recipes. "Oooooohhhh, buddy, the Jack in the Box Bacon Ultimate Cheeseburger!" he exclaims. "But it's got 500 calories and 54 grams of fat! No way!"

"No, sweetie," I explain, "that's Devin's recipe. Look at the original fat content on the opposite page."

"One thousand and ninety-four calories and 77 grams of fat!!! And that's not even including fries and a Coke!" he says incredulously. Scott finally settles on a Pizza Hut Meat Lover's Hand-Tossed Style Pizza, an Arby's Chicken Cordon Bleu Sandwich and a Taco Bell Beef Soft Taco Supreme.

Armed with a list of items that normally would never make it into our kitchen (ground sage, extra-lean ham steak, active dry yeast, bread flour), I hit the grocery store. An hour later, my bill comes to \$70 for three dishes—that's right, \$70! But



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worked at every job from tending mules to delivering babies as a part-time obstetrician (sans medical degree) before developing his "secret recipe" at the age of 65. The first Kentucky Fried Chicken opened in 1952 near Salt Lake City.

Most of this cheeky entrepreneurship blossomed in the 1950s, a time when working-class families couldn't often afford to take their children to restaurants—until Richard and Maurice McDonald introduced the 15-cent hamburger in Southern California. Fast-forward a half-century, and today's

I'm still optimistic: If the dishes turn out to be as delicious as the real thing, only with lower sodium, more nutrients and half the fat, then the super-sized bill will be worth it.

• **Pizza Hut Meat Lover's Hand-Tossed Style Pizza**—It takes 3½ hours for me to prepare this, because you make all the toppings, the sauce and the dough separately. Scott's verdict: "Wow, it looks just like a Pizza Hut pizza! But it's a lot easier to dial seven digits—" and he rattles off Domino's number from memory. While the sauce was much sweeter than the real thing, the toppings and the crust were just right. Original recipe (two large slices): 560 calories, 26 grams of fat. Alexander's recipe shaves off 168 calories, 16 grams of fat.

• **Arby's Chicken Cordon Bleu Sandwich**—This is easier than the pizza; you simply season the chicken, dip it in egg white and bake it. Then top with lean ham and low-fat Swiss cheese, place on toasted hamburger bun, and voilà! Scott's verdict: "This doesn't taste anything like the Arby's sandwich, but I think I like it better." Original recipe: 570 calories, 29 grams of fat. Alexander's recipe shaves off 182 calories, 20 grams of fat.

• **Taco Bell Beef Soft Taco Supreme**—I cheat and buy the Taco Bell seasoning packet, rather than making it from scratch. And while it's a pain that every recipe makes only one serving, it helps with correct portion sizes. For example, one 7-inch flour tortilla gets 3 tablespoons of meat mixture and 1 tablespoon of light sour cream. Scott's verdict: "Wow, it tastes just like it!" He scarfs down the first in 10 seconds flat and then has four more. Original recipe: 260 calories, 14 grams of fat per taco. Alexander's recipe shaves off 31 calories, 10 grams of fat.

FROM FAST FOOD TO FIT FOOD

During my interview with Alexander, she makes me feel less guilty about using the Taco Bell seasoning, saying that I added a lot of extra sodium, but not extra fat and calories. But what about how long it took me to make the pizza, how high my grocery bill was, and how the Arby's sandwich just didn't taste like, well, Arby's?

"Yes, these recipes take a little time," Alexander admits. "But in a lot of cases, they don't [take more than getting fast food], because by the time you throw all the stuff and all the kids in the car, and you go down to the drive-thru and you wait in line and wait in traffic, it's not as quick as people think." Besides, she adds, "I had to spend two-and-a-half hours on the Stairmaster after I ate a Big Mac to feel OK about myself."

As a high school freshman, Alexander weighed over 175 pounds—quite a lot for her small, 5-foot-6-inch frame. She ate fast food three or four times a week. But her love affair with fast food ended at a 1987 summer camp, when the crush of her life went for her roommate instead. Alexander watched heart-



broken as he fed her french fries after a James Taylor concert. So Alexander swore off fast food and lost 25 pounds. By starting an exercise plan, she lost 30 more, and she's kept it off by eschewing all fast food and exercising a half-hour five times a week.

Her new book is her way for people to get a fast-food fix, only a healthier one. "I couldn't diet, I couldn't lose weight, I just couldn't do it," Alexander recalls. "I was cranky all the time, feeling like I couldn't eat what I wanted to, and it really was upsetting to me and it made me resentful. . . . But this whole style [of low-fat fast food] gave me the freedom to still eat what I love eating. . . . If I'm really craving pizza, I know that I can go home and make it myself."

So just what makes fast food so fatty? "A lot of restaurants use lard or grease on the buns," Alexander says. "In the end you can't even taste it with all the other flavors, but it racks up the calories." In one of her most dramatic recipe transformations, she took 729 calories and 75 grams of fat from a Steak 'n Shake Frisco Melt. The oil on the buns alone apparently accounts for 30 grams of fat. "They have this drum that has butter, or lard, or something, and it basically rolls around and the bread rolls around in there and then goes onto the grill," she says. (The original sandwich has 1,173 calories and 93 grams of fat.)

OTHER FAST-FOOD CULPRITS are fatty cuts of meat and deep-frying. All of her recipes recommend the leanest cuts, and "faux frying," or baking, like with the Arby's Chicken Cordon Bleu. But she isn't stingy with servings—all the portion sizes in her book are the same as, or bigger than, the original recipes. "I wanted them to taste absolutely as dead-on as possible, but I also did take a few liberties, like with the Subway Meatball Marinara," she says. "I just didn't think it had enough meatballs in it. I'm an Italian, and I'm a meat lover, so I made them bigger, and I still cut over 200 calories and 14 grams of fat."

And Alexander indulges in her faux favorites—that Subway meatball sandwich, McDonald's french fries, Starbucks' Pumpkin Pound Cake and Mocha Frappuccino, Cinnabon rolls, and El Pollo Loco Macaroni and Cheese—three or four times a week, just like back in the good ol' days.

Sure, it's more expensive than the two-for-one sausage-biscuit special, but where do you want to pay: at the grocery store, or at the doctor's office?

"Cooking should be a part of a family tradition, and I think that it's really hard for people to be healthy in general without cooking at home," Alexander says. "Even in the finest restaurants, you don't know what you're eating—and half the time, I think you'd be shocked."

Sky Senior Editor Waynette Goodson now has it her way by eating two (lean) all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame-seed bun—without the lard.