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DEGENERES

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SHE DOES EVERY
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up close with...ellen degeneres

“how I stay strong and centered”

She says yes to yoga, no to sweets, and never to meat. But the real reason **Ellen DeGeneres** looks so amazing at age 52: supreme confidence.

BY JENNIFER WEINER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW ECCLES

USED TO BE, THERE WAS A TEMPLATE FOR HOLLYWOOD'S GIRL NEXT DOOR. She was blond-haired and blue-eyed, friendly and open, funny but not sarcastic, smart but never intimidating, cute instead of sexy, and prepared to slip out of the spotlight once she reached a certain age. Say, 30.

Maybe it's a function of how our world has evolved, or maybe it's simply because of her humor, hard work, likability, and supreme comfort in her own skin, but give Ellen DeGeneres credit for taking the Girl Next Door into 2.0 territory. Like her forerunners, Ellen is frank, friendly, and funny, but with an irreverent edge. She has the requisite crystal blue eyes and blond hair, but she sports a short do and a wardrobe of men's vests and ties that Doris Day would have immediately handed off to her brother. Her tastes are simple—*Airplane!* the movie, Woody Allen's early films, the music of Michael Jackson and Chris Daughtry, and Adam Lambert's rendition of "Ring of Fire." But she can also talk earnestly



“Yoga,” says Ellen, “is what keeps my energy up but my mind calm”

up close with...

and at length about how to “breathe into” your problems, or about how the suffering in slaughterhouses and her love for animals prompted her to give up meat.

FOREVER YOUNG

At age 52, when Hollywood is over and done with the majority of its sweethearts, Ellen is hip, hot, and healthy. With a vegan diet, a dedication to yoga, a vocabulary salted with self-help buzzwords, and, lest we forget, a wife instead of a husband, Ellen embodies the modern version of everyone’s neighbor and friend. She is the one whose house you’d most like to drop by to catch up on the gossip, dish about reality TV, or borrow a cup of sugar. Well, maybe not sugar. At the moment, Ellen’s in search of an energy boost and has embarked on a “sugar fast” that has her going without refined or processed foods. “No cake, no cookies, no candy,” she says.

She talks about retiring and doing nothing (who doesn’t dream about that?) but currently works what amounts to two full-time jobs: hosting her own daily talk show and judging *American Idol*. But instead of doing it, à la Ginger Rogers, backward and in heels, she’s doing it headfirst, in cuffed jeans and lace-up basketball sneakers.

The truth is, we each have the power to shift things, to change things.

If Ellen had a mantra, it would be “Stay true to yourself.”

“I think I read somewhere that courage isn’t about doing something you’re not scared of. Courage is doing something in spite of the fact that you *are* scared of it,” she says, in an interview at the Warner Bros. Studio in Burbank, California, where her talk show is filmed. And for years she’s been pushing herself out of her comfort zone. For example, coming out “was a scary thing, but it was the right thing for me to do. I knew it was my truth.”

While the truth may set you free, it doesn’t guarantee happily ever after. In 1998, just a year after she was on the cover of *Time* announcing that “yep,” she was gay, her first TV show (the sitcom *Ellen*) was canceled. Two years later, Ellen was in the spotlight again after splitting with her girlfriend, actress Anne Heche. A lot of people offered Ellen their support, but she got plenty of backlash too. “When I came to Hollywood, my whole motivation was to be loved and appreciated, which is the stupidest thing in the world,” says Ellen wryly. “You think, ‘If I’m famous, everyone will love me.’ The truth



“This is more of my abs than anyone has ever seen!” says Ellen.

is, when you're famous, some people will love you and some people will hate you for the exact same thing."

EMBRACING CHANGE

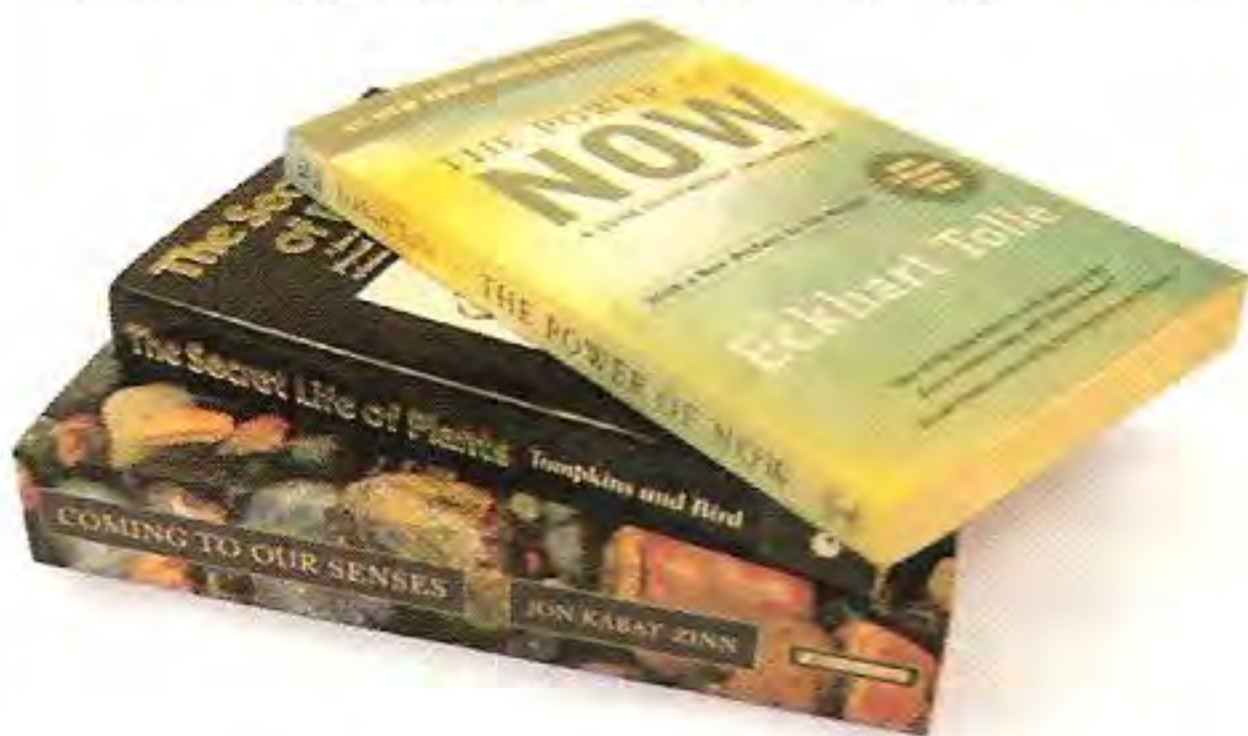
Today the scale definitely tilts toward love. After the stand-up, the sitcom, and the gossip, Ellen is secure in the role she was born to play—herself. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, in its seventh year, is a huge hit. Ellen has been called Oprah's heir apparent and is one of the faces of CoverGirl. "It's the most flattering thing, but I didn't look at that as, 'Oh, my God, only pretty girls get that!' I thought it was another opportunity to be a great example, to be 52 years old, representing what some women look like."

If moms are inspired to buy Ellen-endorsed cosmetics, their kids will soon be rocking out to Ellen-approved tunes. As the fourth judge on *American Idol*, she's quickly established herself as an antidote to her predecessor, eighties pop star Paula Abdul. Looking like a puckish Peter Pan, with her hair tousled just so and a giant cup of vitaminwater zero nearby (she's their spokeswoman too), Ellen's opinionated but kind, fair but firm, and she has a strong sense of empathy for the wannabes.

"I want to be honest, and I want to be compassionate. Just

what's on Ellen's nightstand?

An avid bookworm, Ellen prefers books that teach you something. She's reading these books—right before bed every night—now.



The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment
by Eckhart Tolle

The Secret Life of Plants
by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird

Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness
by Jon Kabat-Zinn

doing Hollywood week [where the number of contestants was winnowed from 181 to 24], it was so hard to say to some of them that they weren't good enough. They think they are, and I know what that's like. I'd audition to be on *Letterman* or *Carson*, and I wouldn't get it, and I'd realize I was so nervous, I just wasn't ready. That's the one thing I bring to that panel. I know what it feels like to be onstage trying to please an audience—and to be rejected."

In the grand *Idol* tradition of "we'll find out...after the break," Ellen is willing to let contestants squirm before delivering the verdict. But there's one kind of suffering she won't stand for. Should Simon tell a competitor that she'd be terrific if she'd only lose some weight, "I guarantee I'll have something to say

about that," promises Ellen, a steely note slipping into her voice. After all, where is it written that pop stars have to be model-pretty and thin? "It's just like everything. It's a collective consciousness. We're like sheep, we think, 'Well, that's the way it is.' We get used to Simon saying something nasty or a comic making mean-spirited jokes at someone's expense. And the truth is, we each have the power to shift things, to change things."

THE POWER OF EXERCISE

Among the changes Ellen's made in her own life: love and marriage. She still sounds deep in the honeymoon phase when she talks about her bride, actress Portia de Rossi. "She loves me no matter what," says Ellen. "Whenever I feel bad about myself, or if I'm in a period where I'm

up close with...ellen degeneres

not working out, she's constantly telling me that she doesn't notice, that I look beautiful. She'll say, 'I think you could gain 10 more pounds.' She would rather have me heavier than thinner, and she really hates that I ever doubt myself. She loves how I look. She wants me to be happy and never think about it."

The couple work out together, although their routine is different from the way Ellen used to exercise. Growing up, "I was very much a tomboy. I loved sports, running around, playing tennis. I learned golf in high school because my mother remarried and we moved [from Louisiana] to a really small town in Texas. I had no friends, so I learned to play golf, because you can do that by yourself."

These days, exercise for Ellen is as much about slowing down and unplugging from a crazy, two-job lifestyle as it is about staying fit. "I first started doing power yoga in L.A., which really makes no sense. Power yoga? It's the opposite of what it should be. Yoga should calm you down!" she says. Now she starts her mornings with a yoga session with her teacher—"a yogi, not a yoga instructor," Ellen clarifies, and it's to her enormous credit that she can make this distinction without sounding obnoxious—who has recently returned from

India. "He's so amazing," she says. "His energy is so calming. For someone like me, who loves to sweat and push herself, it's a challenge to slow down, to sit, to breathe and hold poses."

Yoga runs anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half. Breakfast the day of our interview was "a bok choy rice stir-fry thing." Work begins at 11, with meetings and interviews, hair and makeup, and then Ellen will do a quick run-through and check the monologue. The show shoots at 4, and sometimes there are meetings afterward. In the middle of the day, she'll have "fresh veggie juice, a little snack of something." Dinner's always light—"I don't like eating too heavy at night"—and by 10, Ellen's in bed with a book, usually self-help. "I like to read books that challenge you, that open your eyes and make you look in different directions, maybe see someone else's side," she says. (See what's currently on Ellen's nightstand, page 61.) "I like the books that make you realize we're all connected."

EATING FOR ENERGY

That kind of reading, and thinking, led Ellen to adopt her current vegan diet. "It's so weird," says Ellen. "Food used to be really important to me. I loved steak, I loved hamburgers, I loved all that stuff." But now she treats

food as fuel instead of reward and shakes her head regretfully over the ghosts of cheeseburgers past. "I can't believe how irresponsible I was, eating what I ate," she says.

As a teenager, she gained a lot of weight. After her mom's divorce and the move, "all I did was eat. Cheeseburgers, fried chicken, fried things... and then some things happened in my life, and, as a lot of young girls do, I put on weight as a barrier, as protection, to keep people

For someone like me, it's a challenge to slow down, to breathe and hold poses.

away. I was always dieting, always struggling, always trying to lose it," she says. "Diets don't work. It has to be a way of life."

Her approach to eating may sound rigid—"no animals, no dairy, nothing processed; a lot of soup, veggies, rice, beans, legumes"—but Ellen sees it as a way of being good to herself. "I want to be on my toes; I want to have energy. And as much as the diet seems like a sacrifice, it's helping me." Her plan is to stick with it through *Idol*'s run—"in the summer, maybe I'll relax a bit."


LIVING LIFE TO THE MAX

Making choices about food and fitness because of the way they make you feel, as opposed to the way they make you look, is a luxury for women in Hollywood. Ellen acknowledges she's been lucky to have avoided the pressure to transform, via diet or surgery, into a thinner, prettier version of herself.

"Either I wasn't that stereotypical beautiful girl or they just gave up on me," she deadpans. "I was just funny. That's what I was. I never thought I was supposed to dress a certain way or be a certain size. I never put that pressure on myself, and no one ever put it on me." Which, she says, is how it should be. Choices about food "should never come from a place of depriving yourself. They should come from a place of nurturing and being good to your body. It shouldn't ever be, 'I can't' or 'I shouldn't.'"

Ellen knows that with money for personal chefs and at-home yoga gurus, she has built-in benefits that many women—who struggle to find the right balance between living a healthy lifestyle and juggling their obligations—don't. But one thing Ellen does share with women everywhere: the ability to find the motivation to be proactive about your health, to take that first step. "It's





hard, but you have to make time to take care of yourself. Only after you're taking care of yourself can you take care of other business," she says. "You have to ask yourself what it is you need to do while you're here. We are all here to do something."

For now, Ellen's confident she's on the right path. "I think I'm really happy, and it seems that people get a lot of joy from the show, which is nice to know." And in the

future? All she can do is laugh. "Ten years ago, I don't think I could have imagined where I'd be right now. Ten years ago, I was out of a job, I hadn't started the show, I was a totally different person. So 10 years from now? I think I will retire relatively young and try to spend my life doing...not much of anything. I want to just trust whatever's coming to me, that if it feels good to me, I'm going to do it. Right now, I think I'm absolutely where I'm supposed to be." ❄

"For me, food has become more about supporting what your body is doing for you every second of the day"