

‘I rise at 5.30am. My local park turns out to be closed til 7.30...’

Photography: GLEN MINIKIN



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by Caroline Phillips

THE BOOK: Food Food Food (digital download £16, *theranchmalibu.com*).

THE SPA: With outposts in Malibu, Italy and New York's (not yet open) Hudson Valley, The Ranch offers transformational and immersive wellness programmes in lavish nature-drenched locations beloved by A-listers such as Brooke Shields and Elle Macpherson. The Ranch Italy, which opened last year, has a 4.0 programme for four nights costing from £4,800 for a single room.

BARRING a lottery win, a trip to The Ranch is out of my reach. So I'm having a bargain-basement bash at it by trying to follow the fitness schedule from the Italian Ranch (nabbed off the website, er, free of charge) with meals from the cookery book at home.

'The next best thing to having our Ranch chefs in your kitchen,' the blurb promises. A three-star Michelin one at that.

I'm very healthy. I walk, swim and can still zip up my size 12 jeans, just. But, doing things The Ranch way, as its website details, I would be offered expensive blood tests to uncover any hidden conditions. Waiting 13th in the phone queue for my NHS GP surgery, I feel guilty about being one of the worried well — so jettison having any diagnostics. The cookbook tells me to exclude alcohol, caffeine, soy, processed sugars, sweeteners, dairy and gluten, so next on my list is a withdrawal headache.

Shopping for my DIY retreat is a nightmare. According to Food Food Food, I need plant-based meals of organic, local, seasonal

ingredients. My local Tesco doesn't stock organic so I rush to Waitrose. After splashing out £114.34 I still can't source many important ingredients.

Then I tear around Planet Organic hunting down tomatillos (Mexican husk tomatoes), cauliflower flour (a substitute for amaranth, was it?) and sorghum flour (even the assistant has to look it up). I cheat and buy Planet Organic's granola, saving over £14 on the one on sale direct from The Ranch. But there's no 'caviar' — The Ranch's coarse black sea salt from the Pacific Ocean with activated lava charcoal (£13.25 plus delivery).

A further £171.26 later, I start cooking. The Ranch's plant-based cookbook uses goats to denote recipe difficulty: one goat means it's simple. There should be a herd on most pages. The recipes are in American cup measurements and Fahrenheit, which requires some Pythagorean calculations. The Ranch rules say you're not meant to cook days in advance, as it must be 'freshly prepared'. And no meals or snacks are repeated, to boost nutritional gains.

I'm buckling at the prospect of cooking 14 different meals. My younger daughter Ella's nicked the (essential) coconut oil. She's removing her make-up with it. Frazzled, I sink into bed at midnight. According to the programme I should be tucked up by 8pm.

Which would have been wise, given I rise as instructed at 5.30am to fit in stretches and breakfast before my daily four-

Best foot forward: Caroline walking with daughter Ella

hour 'mountain hike'. Visitors to The Ranch purr about the social aspect of these treks. If the definition of a good friend is someone who will walk with you at that time, I have none. It's pitch black as I set out. My local park turns out to be closed until 7.30am when normal people get up. I trudge the grey streets, inhaling exhaust fumes. Who needs forested canopies, meadows and medieval villages?

I am delighted to have a nap at the prescribed 1pm, then do a bit of yoga on Zoom to tick off the afternoon activity (2pm-6pm is earmarked for strength classes, yoga and massage) before dinner and an early curfew at 7pm-8pm.

NEXT day, breathing oxygen-rich air and chatting animatedly, I walk among trees with Ella — until she leaves. Two hours early. It's challenging as her left arm is my substitute Alpine-mountain walking pole.

Back home, I'm desperate to bolt down lunch and jump into bed for my Ranch-ordered nap. But the cashews need to soak for two hours. So I wolf down a homemade (think almond flour and coconut sugar) banana blueberry breakfast muffin.

That afternoon I try a core

strength class, as a nod to The Ranch's afternoon fitness schedule, but mine is plucked at random from YouTube. The teacher powers through exercises that don't so much get my abs burning as self-immolating.

I'm resurrected on Zoom by Francesca Quaradeghini — sublime yoga teacher to a roster of A-listers — who has decided to 'give back' by offering by-donation classes. An hour and £3 later, it's time for my daily massage with a top masseuse — AKA me. I roll my spiky physio balls under my feet, then fall into bed.

Mostly, I find myself cooking, exhausted, at 10pm. A regime boasting this many pulses, grains and Brussels sprouts is such a duvet-lifter that I could start wholesaling natural gas to China. And I don't quite log The Ranch's 60 miles of hiking, more like 31.

There's plenty, though, to recommend it. I feel upbeat from so much exercise. My veggie lasagne with cashew 'ricotta' is a triumph. I don't have cravings or feel hungry — and without wheat and meat, I'm more energised. The Ranch focus is on fat loss not weight, which I like because I've gained 1kg. Muscle, I console myself.

Would I do it again? Yes, downwind of my neighbours on a remote-island holiday and with one of my daughters cooking.

and dry. Josephine felt the same. She found her face is a lot less puffy too. Added to which, she lost almost nine pounds during the week.

I didn't do quite as well. I lost five pounds, and I am going to keep incorporating some Vivamayr tweaks into my life on a permanent basis, such as chewing as much as possible. 'Wouldn't it

just be easier to buy some bigger trousers?' my husband asks me when I tell him about my week. I'm too busy chewing to respond.

■ *HELENA is the author of The Viva Mayr Diet published by HarperCollins, £12.99.*

■ *ALWAYS consult your doctor before making dietary or exercise changes.*

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