

Mario Mendias Building A Fit Nation, One Meal at a Time

By Courtenay Verret



Photo by Brian Fitzsimmons

As a personal trainer, Mario Mendias saw the same scenarios play out with his clients on a daily basis: They would commit to following a fitness program, drag themselves to the gym five days a week, but ultimately become discouraged by their lack of results. The time constraints of their busy lives rendered them unable to cook healthy meals for themselves, and their energy levels were low. Mendias believed that the problem lay with what his clients were eating—too much of the wrong kinds of foods—but his lack of nutritional expertise left him guessing at solutions.

When a client called him out for being nutritionally ignorant, Mendias began to research in earnest what truly constitutes a healthy diet. His self-study led to a business idea that resulted in My Fit Foods—an exploding chain of stores that sells healthy, prepared meals with scores of customers who have improved the quality of their lives through food and fitness. Mendias' route to personal trainer

and successful business owner was a circuitous, and sometimes unlikely, one. Born in Marfa, Texas, he grew up outside of Los Angeles in Culver City, California. When he was 12 years old, his next-door neighbor, a personal trainer, sparked his interest in health and fitness. "He told me he helped people get into shape," said Mendias. "He said, 'People who are overweight, or have diabetes, or want to build muscle; I help them get fit and moving again.'" The conversation made Mendias think about his own grandparents: both of them were overweight, and one of them suffered with diabetes. "As a 12-year-old, I thought [being a personal trainer] was really cool. I thought it was a good job, and that thought stuck with me over the next decade." Mendias' unexpected first step toward this professional aspiration was the United States Marine Corps, where he quickly learned that his physical fitness could use some improvement. "When I started in the Marine Corps, I was slow," he said. "I almost didn't

make it in." He was soon whipped into shape, however, and it wasn't long before he had cut his three-mile run time almost in half and had more than quadrupled the number of pull-ups he could do in one set. Mendias ended his military career at the age of 23 and found a job making minimum wage as a tire boy in Santa Monica. He eventually worked his way up to mechanic and made the decision to move back to Texas, settling in Houston.

Fight for Survival

It was a life-or-death struggle on December 10, 2000, that caused Mendias to re-evaluate... everything. While attending a party with a friend, he suddenly found himself involved in an altercation with a group of gang members who had crashed the event. Out of respect for his host and bolstered by his self-proclaimed "Marine confidence," he escorted one of the unruly gang members outside, who—unbeknownst to Mendias—was carrying a gun. The situation

immediately escalated. “[He] shot me three times,” Mendias said. “The other three times he missed. I’ve never been in a life or death situation like that, but suddenly I’m on the street wrestling with a guy with a gun that is trying to kill me. It was a fight for survival.” Mendias managed to knock out his attacker and was taken to the hospital where he was treated for his gunshot wounds. Miraculously, he survived.

As he recovered in the hospital, he had plenty of time for reflection. As one might expect, the experience had profoundly affected him—as had the words of the man in the hospital bed next to him. “[He was] talking about regrets he had in life,” Mendias said. “I don’t really have any family members, at least not close ones. I was in a new city with one friend, and it was a pretty lonely time in my life. I made a pact with myself that I didn’t want to have regrets in my life.

”Rather than return to his job as a mechanic, once he was discharged from the hospital, Mendias walked into a 24-Hour Fitness gym, determined to get a job as a personal trainer. He walked out instead as a floor instructor, “Which is basically the janitor, which is basically a trainer in training,” Mendias laughed. “Once again, I was back down to minimum wage, but at least I was following my heart.” Within four months, however, he was promoted to personal trainer, and within four more months he was promoted to fitness manager, eventually running eight different gyms. After spending time with his clients, Mendias began to notice that some of them were not getting the results they wanted because they were not making the necessary changes to their diets. “People are trying to work out all the time. I think it’s so important,” he said. “But, if you’re not eating right, it doesn’t matter how hard you work out. After

all, you can be a fit, fat person.” Knowing that diet accounts for nearly 80 percent of weight loss, Mendias began making—with the best of intentions—nutritional suggestions to his clients. After recommending what he calls a “bad diet” to a client who was diabetic, he was told he was “ignorant” when it came to nutrition. “It really embarrassed me, and I felt terrible that I couldn’t get my clients the results they deserved,” he said.

Using his embarrassment as motivation, Mendias began to self-educate, reading more than 50 books on diet and nutrition in a six-month period. “I read books like *Sugar Busters*, *From Fat to Fit*, *Ultra Metabolism*, and *Body for Life*,” he said. Mendias learned from his reading that portion control is only part of the story when it comes to weight loss: “It’s not just calories in versus calories out,” he explained. “The type of calories you put in can affect whether you [exercise] further, faster, and with less fatigue. Eating right taps your true potential. The greatest athlete is probably sitting on the couch and will never even know because they’re not fueling their body the right way and getting the energy their body needs to be active.” According to Mendias, the food we eat can affect everything from the hormones we produce to inflammation in our bodies. “If the body is in an inflamed state, you’re going to suffer from disease,” he said. “You’re going to accumulate more body fat; you won’t feel good. When you take away wheat, gluten, soy, and dairy, the body is not in an inflamed state.” Knowing that most processed and fast food—staples of the standard American diet—is full of sugar, triggers allergies, and causes inflammation, Mendias learned which lean proteins, grains, and spices would reduce inflammation and promote good health. Mendias also changed his opinion about

fats, after learning that so-called “healthy” oils lose their beneficial properties when heated past their smoke point. He explained that olive oil, for example, has a smoke point of 250 degrees—well below the average cooking temperature for most food preparation. He began to research which healthy fats have higher smoke points, and experimented cooking with macadamia, sunflower, and coconut oil. Rounding out Mendias’ newfound nutritional knowledge was the importance of strategic eating—knowing how much to eat at what times during the day. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” he asserted. “After all, you’ve been fasting for eight hours. I’ve never seen anyone take a long [road] trip without filling up first. The same thing goes for your body. Mendias explained that properly fueling at the beginning of the day and eating less at night will help the body function more optimally, reducing cravings and promoting weight loss. “If you start out with a strong breakfast, strong morning snack, and strong lunch, you’re not going to crave such a big snack in the afternoon and at 9 p.m. at night,” he said. Mendias used a triangle diagram to illustrate his point: A smiling, inverted triangle—wide at the top, slender at the bottom—represents both the ideal daily intake of food and the body’s resulting physical state. A frowning, right-side up triangle—small at the top and wider at the bottom—represents the exact opposite.

*Edited by Madie Leon Riley
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