

# STYLE | AT LUNCH



## Mirabai Holland

### The right moves

BY RUTH LANDO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX STAFFORD

For fitness, wellness and movement expert Mirabai Holland, exercising and eating right have nothing to do with deprivation or drudgery and everything to do with pleasure and ease.

"My methodology, my Moving Free® technique is very different from a lot of what I see out there," the trained dancer says of her marriage of fluid movement with a precise understanding of the workings of the human body. "Because it takes the science and the anatomy and the kinesiology and combines them with the movement aspect, which is very natural."

Mirabai has earned an international reputation as a teacher and consultant to organizations, corporations and individuals battling everything from cancer to osteoporosis, heart disease, arthritis and diabetes, with exercise that "feels good on your body." Fitness shouldn't feel like a task, she avers, "something that you have to get up and

do every day just because you've been told that's what you have to do." The goal is "to understand that this can really feel good. This is something that is important for your life, but it should be joyous. It shouldn't be a drag."

From the beach outside her Longboat Key condo, the former director of fitness and wellness at New York's famed 92nd Street Y, merchant on Shop NBC, syndicated columnist and creator of dozens of best-selling online home exercise DVDs, eases her way gently through targeted mobility, resistance training and aerobic workouts devised over four decades in the fitness industry. Mirabai's mantra is clear: No matter what our age or physical condition, whether we're children or aging boomers, we can prevent disease and prolong our wellness by being mobile. We need to incorporate cardio, strength and flexibility into our daily routines. What makes Mirabai's approach so different is its emphasis on natural, slow, dynamic movement.

It doesn't hurt that this visibly happy teacher is

such a non-threatening, uplifting person. At 61, the lean and youthful woman clearly loves what she does. And she's been very successful at it. Mirabai immerses herself in nature's beauty in three enviable locations: her homes in Crested Butte, Colo., Ridgefield, N.J., and Longboat Key.

Even her name conveys radiance. In her early 20s, when she was a spiritual young woman dancing and writing poetry, she came across the writings of a Medieval princess and Hindu devotee of Krishna called Mirabai. She liked the flow of the name and found that it suited her much better than hers, which was Wendy Sue! As Mirabai Holland, she has lived a journey to become her true self. Once a chubby youngster who hated her ballet classes, Mirabai says she was the object of teasing until she went away to summer camp at age 13 and everything changed. Eating a low-calorie diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables and discovering swimming helped her shed 20 pounds, while she also grew taller. A high school gym teacher in Chicago also helped her find freedom of movement and personal expression through modern dance. While earning a teaching degree at the University of Denver, Mirabai developed choreography that inspired children to express themselves creatively in a hospital setting. This helped form her lifelong vision of uniting dance movements with inner healing and preventative health.

She pursued further training at the Boston Conservatory of Music, but realized she was

not interested in regimented dance forms. At age 23, Mirabai opened her own dance/exercise studio in Cambridge, Mass., where she perfected her techniques for non-dancers, customizing each student's movement for their unique body alignment. She also began performing one-woman shows. By 1978, Mirabai was pursuing a master's degree at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and strengthening her scientific knowledge of anatomy, physiology and movement.

She had a breakthrough while on a grad school vacation visiting her father in Sarasota. Recuperating from knee replacement surgery and suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, he was frustrated with his physical therapy. Mirabai put her dad into a warm pool and devised range-of-motion exercises that addressed his total body, not just the muscles around the new knee. After her father's successful rehabilitation, she became a consultant for the National Arthritis Foundation in Atlanta and helped perfect the PACE (People With Arthritis Can Exercise) program, training physical therapists in her creative methods.

Mirabai has always been ahead of the curve. In the early '80s, before women knew about the importance of weight-bearing and resistance exercise for bone health as they age, she studied the racquet arms of professional tennis players and wrote a paper linking exercise with osteoporosis prevention. She rode the burgeoning aerobics trend and began making a name for herself as a fitness consultant, teacher and trainer, including spending three years in Indonesia opening a spa, lecturing and filling her increasingly popular classes. In 1993, Mirabai was wooed by the 92nd Street Y in New York, where she continued to create programs for a long list of national health, wellness and disease prevention institutions.

Her unique brand of wellness has been featured on the "Today" show, "Good Morning America" and the "CBS Nightly News," among others. Mirabai has professional certifications from the American Council on Exercise (where she judged aspiring instructors on the Examination Committee), the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Academy of Health and Fitness Professionals.

At her age, Mirabai knows she is far from immune to the weight gain and plummeting metabolism that befalls women. She is careful to watch her portions, eat fresh, healthy foods and exercise regularly. The day we met for lunch, she had already taken a four-mile walk with her husband and had been swimming for half an hour. The love of her life is an Emmy-winning TV producer and writer. They met when Mirabai was in her 40s and judging Reebok's Aerobic Championships. Her husband composes and performs all the music on her exercise DVDs as well as doing the shooting and editing. Two or three times a week, she performs her own choreography and workouts, always developing and recording new regimens. For most of her career, Mirabai has taught 10 to 15 classes each week, so she truly practices what she preaches.

Projects on the drawing board include corporate fitness programs; a chair series for people with limited mobility; a better back video for those with chronic back pain; and a cancer exercise protocol. Mirabai is in negotiations with PBS for a TV show, and is exploring opportunities in new media. "I want to be there on everyone's iPad," she says. "And I also want to keep on teaching."

To that end, Mirabai teamed up with the Sarasota Ballet during May's Osteoporosis Month and began teaching her Skeletal Fitness®-A Workout For Your Bones classes locally, endorsed by the National Osteoporosis Foundation. She is also offering her signature Moving Free® Anti-Aging Mind/Body Technique at the ballet's Studio 20 in Pineapple Square.

"I'm that bridge," she says. "Anyone that has limited mobility, anyone that has a special health need, anyone that's been inactive and needs to find their path, I'm the one for them." And she vows never to retire. "I'm going to die with my boots on. Or my ballet shoes. Or my sneakers! Even if I become immobilized at some point, I will still be teaching and passing on this information."

#### WHERE WE ATE:

Harry's Continental Kitchen.

#### WHAT WE ATE:

Poached eggs (no Benedict sauce; no English muffins), sautéed vegetables and one bite each of cheesy grits.

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