

“How I conquer anything with a smile”

Host of Food Network's *Ten Dollar Dinners* and mom of four **Melissa d'Arabian, 41**, reveals the four-point philosophy that has helped her achieve her dreams

“Sure, I can get stressed and feel overwhelmed,” admits Melissa d'Arabian in an exclusive interview with FIRST. “Like in the first couple days of filming *The Next Food Network Star*.” Who could blame the mom of four daughters (Valentine, 4, Charlotte, 3, and twins Margaux and Océane, 2) for being flustered while her fellow contestants ridiculed her abilities on national television? Yet Melissa held her own in the fifth season of the competition—and won top honors with her smile intact. “Every day for me is really about gratitude,” explains the Anaheim, California, native of how she copes. “If I can stay in a place where I’m feeling grateful for everything I have, it’s hard for me to get too down.” It’s that attitude that’s eased heartaches like losing her mother to suicide when Melissa was just 20. “My faith is a huge part of getting me through the good days, bad days, stressful days,” she says. Here, Melissa shares her recipe for success.

1 Scan for signals sent from above

“At 32 I was living in Santa Monica and working for Disney,” Melissa recalls. “One of my business units was Euro Disney, and I would fly out there once a quarter. One day the CFO there offered me a fantastic job. But I thought, *What if I do this and spend two years in Europe? If I really want to get married and have kids, I’m probably going to be putting my career in front of that.* So I turned down the job and they came back to me with a more attractive offer. But I still thought, *I’m not going to put aside what I want in life for a little more money.* It wasn’t until they came around

a third time that I started saying, *Okay, at a certain point you have to wonder, is God sort of beckoning you? Is God saying, ‘Hey, hey, dummy?’* It reminded me of this story, where a huge rainstorm comes and this guy who had so much faith in God is stuck in his house. A rowboat comes and the man in the boat says, ‘Hop on—I’ll rescue you,’ but the guy says, ‘Oh no, I have faith in God.’ Then a helicopter comes: ‘I’ll rescue you.’ ‘No, no, no, I have faith in God.’ And in the end, the guy dies and goes to heaven and says to God, ‘Well, I thought... I had faith in you!’ And God’s like, ‘What are you talking about? I sent you a rowboat, I sent you a helicopter.’ So you know what? If I didn’t take the opportunity to go to France, I pictured God saying, ‘What are you talking about? I came back to you with several offers. I did the best I could with the worldly people I have at my disposal, and you said no.’ So I went. And that’s where I met my husband.”

2 Reframe the game into one you can win

“When I first arrived on the set of *The Next Food Network Star*, I was a bit overwhelmed by the amazing résumés of the people around me,” admits Melissa, who—despite not having formal culinary training—applied for the reality show by submitting a video on how to make homemade yogurt. “But for me the key was to focus on what I do bring to the table. I call that playing a game I can win. If the game is ‘Who’s the very best cook?’ or ‘Who has the best knife skills?’ I’m not going to win. It’s going to be very hard for me to convince the world that I have better knife skills than someone who’s been to culinary school and has been cooking professionally for 15 years. A game I can win: I have four kids and a husband. I’ve lived abroad. I’ve been a career woman. I’ve been a working parent. I’ve been a stay-at-home mom. I can bring

all those experiences to the table. So if the game is ‘Who can get the food on the table when there are four screaming kids?’ that’s a game I win. My game may not be the one that they ultimately decide makes sense for the show. That’s okay. At least I’ve won in that game.”

3 Tease out the wants from the needs

“With *The Next Food Network Star*, the further I got, the more I wanted to win,” acknowledges Melissa. “But interestingly, the further I got along in the process, the less I *needed* to win. Because I said, ‘I’m going to keep doing what I’m doing and God can do with it what He wants. It’s just out of my hands.’ Where I get peace is really trusting in God’s path for me. And the reason I can have that faith is because I’ve seen it in action in my own life. That’s the good news about being 41—there are all these things that have happened, events that I didn’t understand fully at the time, but I can now look back and say, *Oh, I can see why that happened.* So in current circumstances that don’t appeal to me, I’m much better about saying, *Huh, it is going to be very interesting to see how God is working this into my life.*”

4 Be open to unlocking your true gifts

“I pray every day, right when I get out of bed, which realigns me with turning it all over to God,” says Melissa. “But during *The Next Food Network Star*, I never once prayed, *Let me win.* I focused on praying that I just be more open and aware of His will for me...to give me the strength to access the gifts given to me. I don’t believe in God as the Santa Claus model of *Please, God, let me have this, this and this...* though I get wanting to do that, so it’s not meant to be a criticism. But for me it’s *Keep me open. Help me access my strengths so I can do what You want with the day.* ☘

MELISSA'S TOP 10 MONEY-SAVING TIPS

“I know what it’s like to budget—where it’s not just *I’d like to save money*, but it’s *I’m not sure how I’m going to make ends meet*,” says Melissa. “That’s a really stressful place to be, so if I can make somebody’s life a little less stressful, that’s huge.” Her strategies:

- 1 Opt for grade B maple syrup.** It works just as well in recipes as the “real” stuff and costs about \$2 less.
- 2 Soak dried beans in water overnight.** A bag of dried beans can be up to 70 percent cheaper than the canned version.
- 3 Submerge the whites of scallions in water.** The greens will grow back for a steady supply.
- 4 Stock up when chicken is on sale.** Each cut (thighs, breasts, etc.) goes on sale every six weeks and can be frozen and used as needed.
- 5 Use herb “leftovers” in sauces.** Tie the stems you’d usually toss (like parsley) and add to sauces. Then fish them out after cooking.
- 6 Repurpose onions, celery leaves and carrot scraps.** Store them in a freezer bag to mix with leftover chicken pieces and bones to make homemade stock as needed.
- 7 Cook with canned salmon.** It’s 75 percent cheaper than fresh wild salmon and tastes the same when used in recipes like salmon cakes.
- 8 Buy 5- to 10-pound potato bags on sale.** If there aren’t big bags on sale, it’s cheaper to just buy the loose potatoes you need for the day and check back for sale bags.
- 9 Look for ground beef in 5-pound packages.** Divide into six “one-poundish” portions to freeze. You’ll get an extra meal out of the pack.
- 10 Choose smaller heads of cabbage.** The larger ones can be heavier and pricier, and you’ll only use half the head for recipes like slaw.

Delicious on a dime

“Everyone knows how to serve frozen pizza for six bucks,” says Melissa, whose Food Network show *Ten Dollar Dinners* kicks off its second season in January 2010. “What people need this show for is, ‘How do I do interesting and new recipes?’ If it’s not good enough for dinner parties, then it doesn’t belong on my show.”