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chef rediscovers  
life's value after  
deep sorrow

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# Cooking up Joy

## Food Network chef rediscovers life's value after deep sorrow

by LORI ARNOLD

**H**er mom's home phone rang busy. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Melissa d'Arabian had just returned to the University of Vermont after having spent the weekend in Washington D.C. with her single mother who worked as a doctor. The two had shopped for a formal dress that Melissa, then 20 and a junior studying political science, needed for a sorority event. They ended the shopping spree with dinner.

"It was a very typical college daughter-mom thing to do," d'Arabian said. "I remember when I found the dress that I loved, it was more expensive than what our budget was. I remember my mom said, 'Oh, well, if you lend it to me whenever I want to wear it, then it's sort of like getting two dresses for the price of one, so maybe we can double the budget.'"

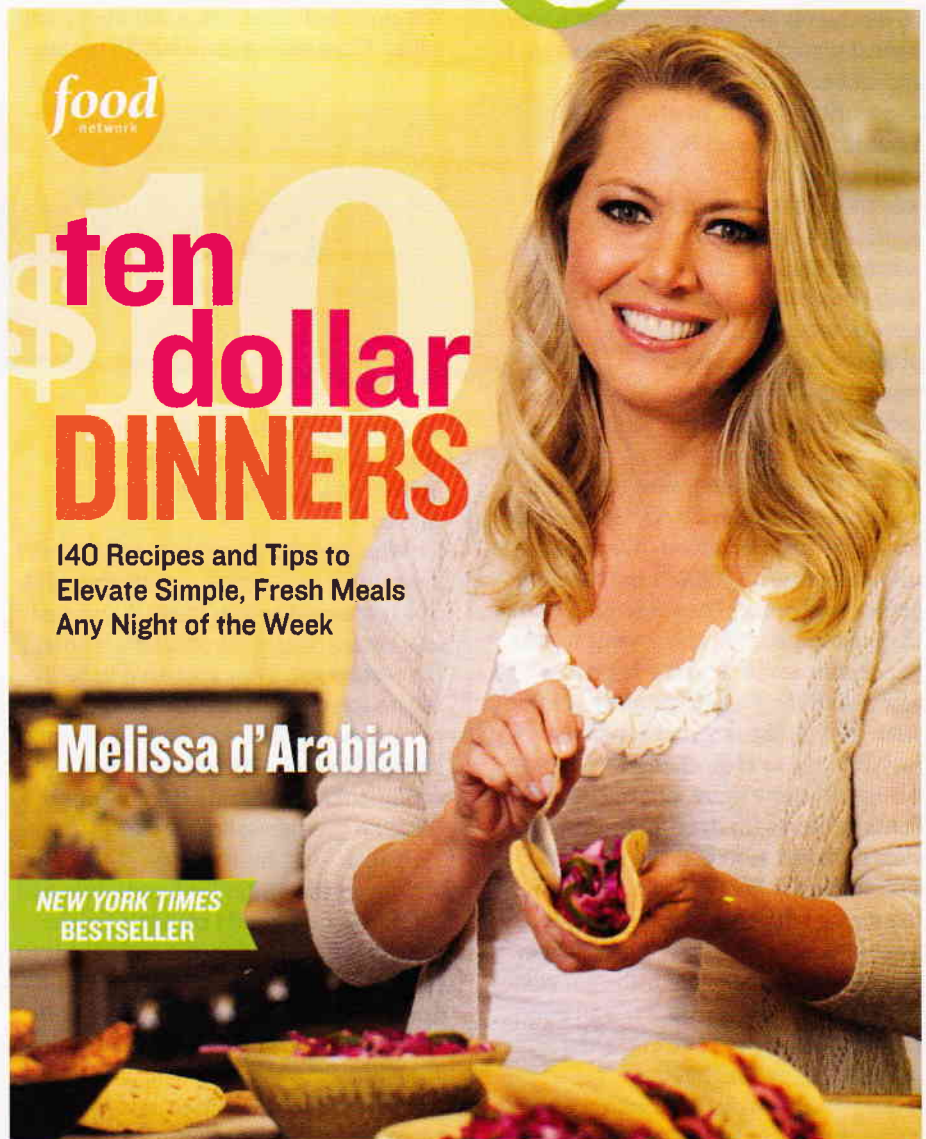
A few days later, Melissa needed money for a test-prepping course to get into graduate school. She picked up the phone to try her mother again.

The phone kept ringing busy. Beep. Beep. Beep.

On her way out the door to meet up with friends, Melissa tried her mom one last time. This time it rang.

An unfamiliar male voice came over the phone. He identified himself as a member of the Montgomery County Police Department.

Melissa d'Arabian, host of the Food Network's "Ten Dollar Dinners" still uses frugal cooking tips to feed her family, even though she's become a celebrity chef and best-selling cookbook author.





Melissa d'Arabian's cookbook, "Ten Dollar Dinners: 140 Recipes and Tips to Elevate Simple, Fresh Meals Any Night of the Week" [pictured on facing page], became a New York Times best-seller. One of those recipes is this Sole, Zucchini, and Tomato Napoleon with Tomato-Caper Crudo.

"We had a very short and simple conversation," she said. "It's one that I play in my head over and over again, less often now, but I can play it over and over in my head, word for word, note for note and yet I've never repeated it out loud in 25 years."

The gist of the conversation was this: her mother had died by suicide.

"I couldn't figure that out," she said of her mother's desperate act. "We had gone through so much. She had put herself through college. We were broke, on food stamps. She put herself through medical school and raised two young girls as a single parent. What was she thinking when she finally became a doctor and became successful—and became a success according to the world's definition of success?"

D'Arabian also couldn't reconcile their final weekend together.

"I remember thinking later, 'Why would you plan on wearing my dress if you were going to die a few days later?'"

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At 45, and having now lived longer than her mother, d'Arabian is a celebrity chef on the Food Network. She hosts her own show, "Ten Dollar Dinners," and uses her public platform to promote suicide prevention, minister to and encourage women, and share her insights on her Christian faith.

It was a long journey to get to this place.

"My mom's death took its toll on me financially, logistically, but mostly it took a toll on me spiritually," she said. "You want to talk about a winter. A winter is not feeling connected to God and not feeling His presence.

"It's not even about me 'feeling' be-

cause one thing I learned over the years: Me not feeling God doesn't mean that He's not there. I'm imperfect. Knowing that God is there does not depend upon me feeling Him. That's what I've learned."

Now a resident of Coronado, d'Arabian said she was raised in the church and spent several of her teen years at First United Methodist Church of San Diego when her mother worked at Balboa Hospital. While in San Diego she also attended a private Christian school. But by the time she entered college, like most 18-year-olds trying to assert their independence, most of her spiritual influences had slipped away. The loss of her mother accentuated that void, ushering in a decade-long crisis of faith.

"I couldn't reconcile 'why,' and I couldn't reconcile what that meant in terms of my faith," she said.

"My mom's suicide catapulted me into a new reality. I would not characterize that as, 'Oh, I immediately lost my faith.' I think in some ways it was a sort of catalyst for a slippery slope of being farther and farther away from my faith."

As time passed she found herself chasing the same things that ultimately failed to bring her own mother happiness.

"Of all that things that ultimately turned out to be meaningless to her—the career, the money, the success—in a weird twist of irony those were the very things that I clung to, not because God wasn't there, but because I turned away. *That* is a winter.

"I think I thought, maybe, I could squeeze something out of those things that my mom had been unable to do. I would do it, but I would do it better."

Although she was enjoying an active social life and good money after earning

her MBA from Georgetown University, her soul was famished. She likened it to the frog in hot water.

"It's hard to ignore boiling water, right?" she said. "It's hard to ignore the bubbles when they are all around you, but that's what it took. I kept looking around and seeing bubbles and saying, 'Wait a second. I'm not doing what I think I should be doing. I don't think that what I'm doing is God's best for me.' It kind of took 10 years for the pot to boil. It was a pretty big pot."

Eventually the teachings of her youth came back into focus.

"I felt like my life didn't match my compass more and more," she said. "And when there is a delta between my compass and what my gut says, and my life choices, that's a very uncomfortable place to be. The good news is that discomfort can be the very thing that brings us back down on our knees and at Jesus' feet."

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After recalibrating her life, d'Arabian was able to move beyond the deep-seated grief and uncertainty that defined most of her 20s.

"I learned that God is this dynamic God that works from the inside out. He didn't just create us in Genesis," she said demonstratively washing her hands "and then went on His merry way."

After working in corporate finance for Disney in Southern California, she accepted a post with Euro Disney where she met her future husband, Philippe. They have four children: Valentine, a third-grader, Charlotte, a second-grader, and first-grade twins Margaux and Océane.

"I raise my four young daughters as an honor to be their mentor, their guide



Potato-Bacon Torte, left, and Classic Apple Tart, right, are two of the 140 recipes in d'Arabian's cookbook.



on this path called life," she said. "My girls are a big part of my faith. They are a big part of how God has blessed me and how I give back to Him with gratitude and joy every day."

That gratitude and joy comes from a life anchored on something much greater than the material confines of self.

"I live with purpose," she said. "I find my value in places other than the outside. I trust that God sees something that I don't see in me and I'm learning to trust God's vision for me and vision of me and view of me, more and more.

I stopped comparing my insides with other people's outsides."

That vision, she said, is not Pollyanna in scope, but is grounded in the certainty that life can be hard, disappointments are real, and pain is a given.

"I've come to believe in the depths of my soul that joy is an inside job," she said. "Today I have enough joy to house the sorrow. It doesn't mean that life doesn't happen. It doesn't mean that life doesn't have its winters, but I have enough joy to house the sorrow, and I can be full of joy and yet sorrowful at the same time."

As she reaches out to others, particularly to women, d'Arabian said her goal is to help people see beyond the earthly limitations of this world.

"Wildly celebrated success fixes *nothing* important," she said. "That took me 10 years to realize. Unfortunately, my mom never realized that. Yet I will tell you that my mom was an extraordinary woman and her death does not define her. And one thing I know, that in the world of redemption it's Jesus plus nothing. It is Jesus plus nothing else. No other conditions." 🍌

Melissa d'Arabian is honorary chair of Taste of the Nation San Diego, a Sept. 14 benefit for the Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign, to be held at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront.





## Spinach and Cheese-Stuffed Chicken with Lemon Butter

Recipe by MELISSA D'ARABIAN  
from her book, "Ten Dollar Dinners"

Fancy-looking stuffed chicken is actually a last-minute pantry supper at my house. I'm a huge fan of frozen spinach and consider it a must-have freezer item because it's so easy to add to a soup or pasta dish, to make into a side dish with garlic and lemon, or to turn into creamed spinach. The idea for this dish came from a few string cheese nubs in the fridge and a package of frozen spinach. To add a nice creaminess, I use cream cheese, another must-have ingredient in the fridge.

Serves: 4

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 23 minutes

8 ounces thawed frozen chopped spinach (about half a 1-pound bag)

1/4 pound (4 ounces) sliced, shredded, or chunks of cheese, such as cheddar, mozzarella, provolone, or Swiss

2 tablespoons cream cheese

Zest and juice of 1 lemon

1 garlic clove, roughly chopped

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

4 6- to 8-ounce boneless, skinless chicken breasts, rinsed and patted dry

2 tablespoons canola or olive oil

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small pieces



ALL RECIPE PHOTOS BY BEN FINK

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Place the thawed spinach in a paper towel, squeeze out the excess liquid, and transfer the spinach to the bowl of a food processor. Add the cheese, cream cheese, lemon zest, garlic, and 1/2 teaspoon of the salt. Pulse until the cheese is broken up into small pieces and everything is nicely mixed, about five 3-second pulses. Set aside.

Place the flour in a shallow baking dish and set aside. Place your palm flat on top of a chicken breast and, using a sharp paring knife and starting about 1/2 inch from the tip, make a long slit in the side of the chicken, working the knife about three quarters of the way through to the other side, but not cutting through the breast completely, to make a good-sized pocket. Repeat with the remaining 3 breasts and then stuff each with a few tablespoons of the spin-

ach stuffing.

Thread 2 to 3 toothpicks (or shortened wood skewers) from top to bottom through the edge of the pocket to fasten it shut. Season with the remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and then roll the breasts through the flour, lifting out and gently tapping each one to knock off extra flour.

Heat the oil in a large oven-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken breasts, smooth side down, and cook until browned, 4 to 5 minutes. Use tongs to turn over the breasts and brown on the other side, about 3 minutes more. Drizzle the lemon juice over the chicken and sprinkle the butter pieces over the chicken. Place the chicken in the oven until cooked through and firm to the touch, about 15 minutes. Serve drizzled with the sauce from the pan.

# Show and tell

## Melissa d'Arabian: Setting boundaries to keep life balanced

by LORI ARNOLD

Growing up in a single-parent home, Melissa d'Arabian became as adept with the scissors as the spatula when it came to the kitchen. That's because her mother, working her way through medical school, augmented the family's limited income by training her two daughters to become coupon warriors.

"I knew we were poor but what I didn't know was that not everybody was poor," she said. "That's the piece I didn't get."

Despite the tight budget, the family relished Taco Tuesdays and Fish Fridays, as the dining room became the family's anchor.

"The daily dinner table did build my prowess in saving money," she said. "My mom was very, very proud of inexpensive dinners. She was a smart cook."

While d'Arabian, a celebrity chef on the Food Network, inherited her mother's penchant for budget cooking, she wasn't too eager to emulate her actual cooking.

"My mom was not the best cook," she said, an all-too-knowing chuckle bubbling up. "But my mom did develop a love of food because she did a lot of entertaining. She always liked having the house with people in it. She always wanted to have her friends over so she taught me the love of entertaining and that—that—was where I developed the love for food."

One of the family's trademarks was their annual mother-daughter holiday tea. It began with sisters inviting their girlfriends over for cookies, hot cocoa and songs around the piano. The event grew over time, becoming the one time they would splurge, although they clipped coupons year-round, baking cookies in advance and freezing them for the holiday party.

"I never got the sense we were short-changing anybody because we didn't have a fancy buffet," she said. "It was about the people coming over and the joy in that."

D'Arabian's knack for cost-friendly cooking prompted her to make an online video on how to make homemade yogurt, which ultimately landed her a spot on season five of *The Next Food Network Star*, an annual summer reality TV competition that pits chefs and cooks against each other with the winner snagging a pilot show on the culinary channel.

Her competition included two restaurateurs, a restaurant consultant, two personal chefs, an executive chef, apprentice chef, executive sous chef and a sales manager.

The competition was intense and, at times, mean-spirited as d'Arabian discovered after several of the contestants mocked her lack of experience on camera. The personal attack, she said, was hurtful.

"We are human. I can't control everybody else, but I can control how I deal with them," she said. "I really do try to have my value come from God. When I pray, when I am reading Scripture, when I am trying to take responsibility for my own spirituality, then I can find my value there."

### Underdog wins

Another way to ease some of the criticism, she discovered, was by winning, which she did in stunning fashion, eclipsing professional chefs with far more experience. Shortly after her 2009 win, d'Arabian debuted her show "Ten Dollar Dinners." Still a network staple, the show focuses on providing family-friendly recipes that can feed four people for under \$10. It's a cooking philosophy she still embraces.



Melissa d'Arabian and her husband, Philippe, have four children: Valentine, Charlotte, and twins Margaux and Océane.





PHOTO BY KRISTEN VINCENT PHOTOGRAPHY

“I went from being a stay-at-home mom to a working parent and that has been a huge adjustment, but it’s an adjustment that a lot of people do,” she said.

In addition to taping her own show in New York, d’Arabian has also appeared on other Food Network programs, including “Chopped,” “The Best Thing I Ever Made,” “Guy’s Grocery Games” and the “Food Network Challenge.”

Her 2012 cookbook, “Ten Dollar Dinners: 140 Recipes and Tips to Elevate Simple, Fresh Meals Any Night of the Week,” became a *New York Times* best-seller.

She admits her new career can be logistically challenging.

“I’m clear on what my priorities are, and I say no to things,” she said, even as she attempted to get on a standby flight out of Pittsburgh to make one of her daughter’s concerts.

To maintain relative order in her life, d’Arabian said she is a student of compartmentalizing. When she is working, she is at work. When her girls come home in the afternoon, the office light goes off

and her focus is on being Mommy.

“I have no problem disappointing people, including my kids,” she said. “I think my kids would love it if I just never, ever traveled but I think there is a loving way to disappoint people. I want to raise daughters who know that they can disappoint people. I don’t want to raise daughters who say yes to everything that comes their direction, because I think there is something to be said for discernment and choosing what’s important and being clear on what you say yes to and what you say no to. I mean that in terms of career-wise, but I also mean that in terms of lifestyle choices.”

### Setting priorities

It is amazing, however, just how many times d’Arabian has been able to say yes. She is a board member with Coronado SAFE, which works to develop and sustain healthy, responsible youth, and is an advisory board member for Act One, a training program for Christians pursuing entertainment careers. She is also pursuing a certificate in Theology and Ministry with Princeton Theological Seminary.

D’Arabian is honorary chair of Taste of the Nation San Diego, a Sept. 14 benefit for the Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry campaign, to be held at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront.

She is also group leader for her weekly Bible study, a room mom and one of the leaders for a daughter’s Daisy troop.

“I also want to be very clear that just because I work a lot, my kids know in their gut of guts that they are the highest priority,” she said. “I never get on an airplane that takes me away from my kids unless I feel like it’s advancing our personal life mission and what I want to accomplish on this earth before I leave it.”

That philosophy is part of the message she likes to share when she is asked to keynote at various events across the country.

“I really believe that as moms, as women, as Christians, we really have to know what our deepest yeses in our hearts are, and what we can say no to. I believe a fast ‘no’ is way better than a slow ‘maybe.’ ■

Learn more at [www.foodnetwork.com/chefs/melissa-darabian.html](http://www.foodnetwork.com/chefs/melissa-darabian.html).