

Learn to LIVE the BELLA FIGURA!

Kamin Mohammadi on how self-care the Italian way can make you happier, healthier – and even improve your love life



Ten years ago, I was stuck in a rut. It was a glamorous rut, but a rut nonetheless. I had my dream job in publishing and a fast-paced life in London. But it did not make me happy. Worse still, it actively made me unwell: I piled on pounds of inexplicable weight in spite of all the detoxes I did, my face erupted in acne, and I was permanently tired.

Then life gave me a break. Armed with a redundancy package, a one-way ticket and not knowing a word of Italian, I went to stay in a friend's flat in Florence for a few weeks. That was ten years ago. I am still here because I fell in love: first with Italian tomatoes, then the Italian lifestyle and,

finally, an Italian man – a photographer named Bernardo, whom I married last year. I'm 48 now, working as a writer, and happier than I've ever been.

As well as the extraordinary beauty, the golden light and the delicious food, what struck me when I first arrived in Florence was the way the Italians lived. They stopped to say hello on the street. They chatted with the greengrocer as they shopped. They didn't drink from plastic bottles of water on the street, nor did I ever spot a takeaway coffee cup: they popped into a café and drank standing at the bar, talking to other customers. They took their time. They were, I learnt, making *la bella figura* – a concept that demands that everything be as beautiful as possible, permeating all aspects of life.

So I emulated them, measuring out my steps to force myself to abandon my habit of rushing. I learnt to enjoy street-corner chats, I stood tall and looked up. I ate without counting calories and rediscovered the excitement of fresh

seasonal produce. And the joy, which characterises the Italian attitude to life, started to seep into me, as surely as the weight fell off.

With the right know-how, it's easy to bring *la bella figura* into your life – wherever you live. Here's how...

Take it slow

When I first arrived in Florence and my unhappiness was palpable, I was advised to "let the beauty heal you". I think it did. But I would never have noticed all the beauty had I not learnt first to slow down. I discovered there's practically nothing that can't be improved by taking more time – even climbing the stairs deliberately instead of running has been proven to lose you an extra pound a month. Don't eat or drink on the go – pause, go into a café and take a minute to drink a glass of water. Seek out nature, be it a city park or a tree on your street. And regularly, consciously, contemplate beauty – a painting, a wide blue sky or exquisite music. Do this >>

live your best life

quietly and without any purpose other than your own pleasure.

Drink olive oil

When I arrived in Florence looking haggard, my skin pockmarked with acne scars, I was advised to copy Sophia Loren and take four tablespoons of oil a day. Within two weeks, the change was obvious – my skin was plump and smooth as if retouched by an expert graphic designer. My eyes sparkled, my hair was full and shiny. As if to drive the point home, I suddenly stopped being invisible to Italian men! Go for cold-pressed, single-estate extra virgin, and check how good it is by shaking the bottle – the more bubbles, the better.

Don't go to the gym

Forget the image of the old Italian lady in black with a broad girth. Italian women are some of the slimmest in Europe and yet, I have never seen one jogging along the Arno river in Florence. They simply seize any opportunity to get moving. In the city, they walk or ride their bikes. In their tall palazzos they climb the stairs instead of taking the lift. At the seaside, they walk the length of



Kamin, 48, now lives just outside Florence



the beach thigh-high in water while chatting to a girlfriend, toning their thighs and sharing laughs at the same time. They have taught me to find a form of exercise that I love and bring it into my daily routine – for me, that's long walks that lift my spirits and help me notice the tiny beauties of the day.

How to eat and not put on weight

The *bella figura* way is not a diet. It is about abundance, not deprivation. Natural, fresh and wholefoods are key – and even better if picked up in a market. The real Italian diet will surprise you. As a lover of coffee, I was gratified to learn that real coffee made from good

beans has more antioxidants in it than green tea, and the simple combination of pasta with homemade tomato sauce gives the exact right combination of good fats (from olive oil) and lycopene (from tomatoes) to make it a superfood! Italians take pleasure in their food. Living in Florence, I learnt it was possible to cook, lay a table and sit down with friends to share a meal in the same hour that it had taken me to gobble a sandwich mindlessly in front of my computer.

Seek connection

Don't be fooled by the remote connection offered by social media. We humans need genuine contact with others, and loneliness has been proven to be worse for health than smoking. Go back to doing things together, even if it's just a stroll in the park. The Italian way of life – with its squares thronging with all the generations and the *passaggiata* (a leisurely evening stroll) – is perfect for this.

Love yourself

Living *la dolce vita* is about extracting the best out of life, no matter what your overriding concerns are. Once you have learnt to slow down, you'll notice those small moments that make life special. Nurture and protect yourself; everything else will follow. **w&h**

Bella Figura: How to Live, Love and Eat the Italian Way by Kamin Mohammadi (Bloomsbury) is out now.



Style has nothing to do with fashion

The Italian women we idolise – Monica Bellucci (top), Gina Lollobrigida (bottom) – have style no matter what they're wearing. As Sophia Loren (middle) says: "Nothing makes a woman more beautiful than the belief that she is beautiful." I remember seeing two sprightly old ladies when I first arrived in Florence who patrolled the street every morning, arms linked, visiting each of the shops – the butcher, the greengrocer – before arriving at the café for their cappuccinos. Their cheeks were always powdered, their lipstick always on,



So take out those earrings, shoes or the special dress that you love, and wear them; bring the things that make you feel beautiful into your every day – Italian women are never knowingly underdressed. Since moving to Italy, I've also experienced the transformative effect of shorter hair. Having worn it long for as long as I could remember, a few months in, and broken-hearted from a failed relationship, my hairdresser literally cut that man right out of my hair. I instantly felt lighter – and have never looked back.

Kamin in her thirties
Above: Kamin today