



(Above) Valley Presbyterian Hospital offers expectant parents a spacious setting to welcome their new addition to the family. (Right page) Doulas, like Margie Lery (pictured at far right), provide parents with medical assistance in the birthing process.

# Hey Baby

*Doulas, progressive medical facilities and prenatal yoga instructors offer rich, innovative alternatives for getting you from here to maternity.*

By Elyse Glickman



For Baby Boomers, the birthing experience most likely involved Mother's frequent visits to the baby doctor, persuading Dad to attend the neighborhood Lamaze class and lots of heart-to-heart talks about what would happen once the baby arrived. Now, fast forward to the present where modern-day moms- and dads-to-be are moving into the nesting and parenting phases of their lives with what seems by comparison limitless possibilities—right down to Baby Gap, educational toys and preschool programs that are as intricate and individualized as a college curriculum.

In preparation for childbirth and new parenthood, more moms-to-be are placing an emphasis on total wellness than ever before—from diet to fitness to emotional well-being. While many impending parents may

choose the same options their parents did, others are shopping around for the latest professionals, places and experiences they feel will make them most prepared for the arrival of their 21st-century babies.

Several local hospitals are modernizing motherhood to full effect by upgrading their maternity wards to include sleek room designs, classes and procedures to ensure parents are prepared for every single concern that crosses their paths through the entire maternity process.

Valley Presbyterian Hospital's all-encompassing facilities for new mothers include large, airy rooms located in the new patient tower (opened in 2004), VIP suite rooms for mothers willing to spend a little extra on a more deluxe room, a private online Baby Board to view the newborn's photographs, a state-of-



the-art 32-bed neonatal intensive care unit and an impeccably trained staff on hand to teach new parents and siblings a variety of practical and adaptive skills. Valley Presbyterian's program is designed to provide for the entire family—beyond the mother and baby—to ensure the baby's arrival will be as seamless as possible. Valley Presbyterian can also provide for mothers who require additional care and attention.

"When you compare our outcomes to the national standards, Valley Presbyterian Hospital's Maternity Service is always in the highest bracket for good outcomes," says Phyllis Bushart, Valley Presbyterian Hospital's chief operating officer. "We service a number of maternity centers throughout the community and have a perinatology clinic for women with high-risk pregnancies. It's not uncommon, for example, for gestational diabetes to occur during a woman's pregnancy. [In this case] we have a diabetes educator who is very involved in the perinatology clinic and regularly sees those expectant mothers. Our Level II Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, meanwhile, takes care of newborns with special medical needs and allows them to stay close to their mothers."

At Providence St. Joseph Medical Center (with locations in Burbank and Mission

Hills), the BabyWise program boasts a group of LDR (Labor/Delivery/Recovery) suites with home-like surroundings as well as state-of-the-art monitoring and delivery capabilities. Personalizing this experience all the more is their Mother/Baby Care Program, which offers coaching and allows mothers to keep their newborn by their sides as often as they like. On the prenatal end, Providence St. Joseph offers breakthrough 3-D ultrasound technology that allows parents and physicians to see a baby in multi-dimensional clarity long before he/she is born. This hospital also uses the Internet to maximum advantage, with a virtual tour of the women's centers on their website and an online web nursery that allows family and friends to see the baby's first pictures on his or her own webpage. Education is also a major part of the "package" it offers new mothers.

"Twenty to 30 years ago, childbirth preparation classes were mandatory for partners to be a part of the delivery," notes Rosanne Morrison, director of Women's Services for Providence Health System San Fernando and Santa Clarita Valleys Service Area, as she discusses the sweeping changes in the way new parents are educated at St. Joseph. "[Our] classes are primarily taught by non-RN educators, presenting informa-

tion from a much less clinical viewpoint and are the most extensive of any program in the area. A patient who understands the delivery process will become a better advocate for her own well-being. Our postpartum support groups answer further questions as well as provide important information to siblings and fathers that will enable them to 'practice' before the baby arrives and feel more confident in their new roles."

Morrison observes that with information so much more accessible via the Internet, new moms come prepared with questions and, often, have birth plans in mind. They seek information that pertains more toward "managed" labor, epidurals and other medical interventions. Fewer are interested in natural childbirth, and in postpartum, they appear less intuitive and rely on what they learned, expecting events to unfold in expected scenarios. To remedy this and bring the entire family into the process, the staff goes beyond education and into inclusion, via rooming (fathers, infants and siblings permitted more time in the mother's room), which is intended to bond the new or growing family even in the midst of technology.

While information-packed educational programs, stylish facilities, specialists and high-technology equipment put a definitive modern spin on the hospital experience, many modern mothers are looking to more traditional, old-fashioned ways to prepare for the birth and create warm, loving surroundings for the baby's arrival. These are major reasons why highly trained doulas for both the pre- and post-natal phases are sought after for their wealth of services and knowledge.

According to the professional doula organization DONA International, numerous clinical studies have found that a doula's presence at birth results in shorter labors with fewer complications, less of a need for labor-inducing drugs and fewer requests for pain medication and epidurals. There is also less of an incidence of

cesareans. Furthermore, babies born with doulas present tend to have shorter hospital stays with fewer admissions to special care nurseries, and breastfeeding is more easily assimilated in the postpartum period. Postpartum doulas, meanwhile, do whatever a mother needs to help her best care for her new baby. They share information and knowledge about baby care with parents, as well as instruct siblings and partners to "mother the mother."

"I feel that pregnancy and birth are normal, natural occurrences and not something to be treated like an illness," says Margie Levy, a certified doula since January 2002. "I have the privilege of helping women achieve the type of birth they want, providing comfort emotionally and physically, giving information on various decisions they may face and being present for a birth."

So why hire a doula when you have the benefits of a medical center with a prolific roster of services like Providence St. Joseph or Valley Presbyterian? "This is your body," says Levy. "The decision of how to labor and give birth is yours. Women are often led to believe that they do not have options in how to give birth to their own children. There are many different ways to give birth. Educate yourself so that you can choose the type of birth that is right for you."

Levy assists mothers-to-be by offering such pre- and postpartum skills and services as hypnosis and Reiki, massage, aromatherapy, the birth ball, breathing, alternate positioning, application of heat and cold, hydrotherapy and music. Her approach to birthing assistance is calm and supportive, working alongside the laboring couple clients as well as the medical staff.

Levy's clients heartily endorse her skills. "If I could only pack you and take you home with me, [especially with] the massage, encouragement and your knowledge on birthing and the hospital system," said Wendy Berg in a postpartum note. "I am most appreciative of your helping us stick to the birth plan as closely as

we could, asking for the birthing room and informing us every step of the way." Fellow new mother Julia Grant echoes the praise in another note: "I truly appreciated your availability to answer questions during the last few months of pregnancy, your amazing sacrum massage and physical endurance to go for hours and your level of experience and confidence throughout the entire labor."

Mary J. Miller, an ob-gyn nurse practitioner serving the West Valley and Ventura County and founder of The Happiest Baby on the Block, is also a highly specialized practitioner that helps expectant parents to navigate the maternity process. She offers clients a wide range of services, including childbirth education taught in the privacy of your home. She's also a certified instructor of infant massage and distributes such useful products for new moms as birth balls, SwaddleMe slings and Earth Mama Angel Baby products.

Yoga is now more popular than ever in Southern California, and because so many women have followed the exercise, meditation and even nutritional aspects of it for years, they want to work their practice into their pre- and post-natal lifestyles. While many pre-natal yoga DVDs and books abound, it is possible to customize and maintain the safety of the practice by taking regular classes with a knowledgeable teacher who can assist you with adapting the exercises and routines to the way your body changes. After your baby's birth, there are many mother-and-baby classes intended to assist in bonding and help mommy get back into shape.

"When I was pregnant and tried all these different pre-natal classes, I found the classes just focused on the yoga," recalls Angel City pre-and post-natal yoga instructor Ronni Rice. "I try to bring a sense of community to my classes. Not only do we focus on yoga poses, but we also do a lot of talking and sharing at the beginning of class. Beyond that, I have put together a resource center in the studio, where women can research pediatricians, doulas and resources recommended by other mothers. I apply my own experience to prepare women for yoga as well as for the physical birth, helping them through aches and pains, getting oxygen to flow more efficiently—especially around the uterus—and giving the baby more space to grow. We also do easy inversions to get blood to flow, which helps relieve cramping and sciatic nerve pain. Squats, meanwhile, prepare the body for labor, as do hip openers."

Six to eight weeks after the birth, Rice encourages students to return to the Studio City yoga studio to start a post-natal prac-

tice, which helps the mother regain her energy and get the hormones rebalanced. She says she also finds that it's a good arena for young mothers to get support from others going through similar life changes. There are also added benefits for the child as well. "A woman gives a child a gift, exercising in front of him," says Rice. "What the kids often get is a parent who is more centered, rested, calm and energetic."

Though all the options can seem overwhelming at first, a little research can point you toward the services and service providers that are right for you and your family. Think of it as being prepared by stocking your inner nursery as well as the physical one in your home. **VM**





# valley

magazine

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## ON THE HOME FRONT

Our annual Home & Remodeling Guide examines the local housing market, remodeling trends and how homeowners are going green.

## Human Trafficking

Is the slave trade still thriving today?

jamie lee CURTIS

Working to raise funds for breast cancer research is just one of the passions of this actress, mother, author and philanthropist.

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# The Not-So-Extreme Makeover: Home Edition

*Even if you love your home as it is, there are smart, subtle and savvy improvements you can make to ensure it will remain desirable (and marketable) in the future.*

by Elyse Glickman



Whether your home was a fixer-upper or ready-to-entertain from the day you closed escrow, there is the ultimate reality that, like your car and other assets, maintenance and upgrades are a way of life. However, there are many small, easy changes and add-ons to keep the value, stylishness and comfort level of your home high—and your worries minimal.

Magdi Abu, owner of Van Nuys-based Fix-4-Less, says he and his team have noticed that since the mid-'90s, the practice of home improvement has grown along with the values of the homes themselves, and savvy homeowners are taking the notion of "protecting one's investment" seriously. However, Abu points out that many improvements, no matter how minor, need to be approached with the same amount of care and consideration that went into buying the home, as home improvements are investments in their own right.

"Everybody wants to do something special for his or her home, whether it is installing a new granite kitchen countertop or upgrading the master bathroom," Abu says. "Remodeling a home, however, can be a costly mistake if it is not done right. But thanks to the amount of information on cable television and [other media], the do-it-yourself

(Above) Bamboo flooring from Bamboo Hardwoods creates a clean-looking environment in the kitchen. (At left) Fix-4-Less can redo your kitchen (and other parts of your home) with its practical, affordable remodeling skills. (Right page) Sorelle Fine Arts transforms homes with their painting mastery.





trend has helped educate consumers on doing home improvements smarter and cheaper. If the improvements are done wisely, you could think of your home as sort of a savings account that will grow as long as the value of your home grows."

Fix-4-Less conducts aesthetic and practical improvements in equal measure, and Abu points out that while improvements help maintain the health of the home, they also benefit the health of those living in it. Among the examples he points out are optimum ventilation, effective cooling and heating and proper lighting. One way to address these concerns is through the selection of windows. His company, for example, offers energy-saving dual-glazed or insulated windows and doors that reduce the amount of air escaping while minimizing the impact of outside noise and cutting the homeowner's electric bill by as much as 25 percent.

"Today, it is amazing how many products are available to consumers directly for home improvement purposes that also add comfort, beauty and sophistication to the home," Abu says. "However, even with products at your fingertips, we know from experience that having the right contractors do your job professionally and assure you that your job will be done on time, makes the transition process more pleasant. I have heard a lot of horror stories about customers that have been scammed by being cheated on prices or the contractors taking advantage by dragging on the time a job is completed. Be sure you come in educated when you meet with well-established, licensed and insured contractors, so both you and they know the kind of work you want done."

In line with Abu's advice, contacting the Contractor's State License Board at (800) 321-CSLB or visiting their website ([www.cslb.ca.gov](http://www.cslb.ca.gov)) is a great way to educate yourself on standards the state has set for contractors. It can also provide you with information needed to ask the right questions and scope out any possible signs of fraud. The CSLB, operating under the umbrella of the California Department of Consumer Affairs, licenses and regulates California's 300,000 contractors

and investigates more than 20,000 complaints against contractors annually. Their website and literature (like their "What You Should Know Before You Hire a Contractor") offers comprehensive information on contractor's licenses, bond status, workers' compensation and any pending or prior legal actions.

"Your home is the single most important investment you will make in your life," says Rick Lopes, CSLB spokesperson. "It's important that you spend time researching your contractors before spending your money. A contractor performing a service worth \$500 or more in material and labor as a whole is required to have a state license, and no licensed contractor will request a down payment of anything more than 10 percent or \$1,000 (whichever is less). No matter what some service providers will tell you, there is no such thing as a 'handyman' license, and you can't be too careful about who you let into your house and around your kids. Also, some unlicensed contractors may not provide workers' comp, meaning the homeowner could be sued in the event of an accident."

Once you finalize plans for practical improvements, you may find yourself inspired by the aesthetics of your favorite hotel lounges, restaurants or clubs. If so, you may want to see a specialist interior designer. Although some are best known for their public clients, much of their business is focused on home improvements, especially for people who do love to entertain or have specific needs for their home offices. Tracie Butler of Tracie Butler Interior Designs is not only the designer behind the interiors of hot spots like Shag Nightclub and Parc Restaurant, but an enterprising stylist who has brought the "destination venue" into many homes in the Valley.

"Not only should your designer provide you with a home that showcases your style and personality, he or she should also bring the value of your home up considerably in price via renovations and improvements," Butler notes. "An interior designer has the resources to save you a considerable amount of money on certain services and goods

[thanks to their trade discount], as well as time and energy by knowing exactly what will look great in your home and where to buy it."

Butler points out that such goods and services as heating and air conditioning, updated plumbing and state-of-the-art audio video systems can upgrade your home's value and conserve energy. Even with the endless possibilities at a designer's fingertips, she cautions that good communication is key to getting the improvements you want or actually need.

For Valleyites considering upgrading their home's flooring, bamboo has become a popular option. "Bamboo flooring, in general, has a high perceived value, and it is environmentally friendly," notes Doug Lewis, president of Bamboo Hardwoods. "It's a fantastic 'green' product. The floors are great for dry humidity, perfect for Southern California/Valley homes."

Lewis explains that bamboo matures in about three years and can be harvested for flooring faster than any other conventional woods. Also, because bamboo is like an ever-green plant, it is incredibly efficient with water and mineral consumption. There is also a cleanliness appeal, as the flooring's uniform square edges makes it clean and less susceptible to collecting dust between the edges, as compared to the beveled edges on traditional wood.

"This floor is engineered with a rubber wood core, which will not expand and contract with weather conditions, as compared to solid floors," Lewis explains, referring to his hardwood flooring. "This particular floor is the hardest bamboo variety around, which means the results will be extremely low maintenance. It is less susceptible to dents and scratches, so you never have to refinish, saving you more money, time and hassle."

Windows and doors are another popular home improvement that can add to a home's value. "Technology in the window and door industry is evolving rapidly," affirms Jason Jannopoulos of Pella Window's Encino showroom. "While wood windows once required routine scraping and painting, now they are virtually maintenance free. Pella offers state-of-the-art dual- and triple-pane glazing systems with clear glass, colored glass and even spectrally selective glass that blocks the harmful ultraviolet and infrared rays that cause solar heat gain and cause fabric, flooring and furnishings to fade. As I live in the Valley and know it gets hot, needing to run the A/C all day long in the summer is a major issue. Installation of better windows, along with Pella's patented installation, remedies the problem."

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and finishes, Sorelle Fine Arts can make cabinetry look like new.

"Many times, we painted over an outdated finish on the cabinets, changed the knobs, and it was like a brand new kitchen," points out Cristina Capitanio (who owns Sorelle with her sister and fellow artist Laura). The duo have transformed the Calabasas home of football great Eric Dickerson, as well as kitchens in Tarzana, Encino and Studio City.

To come up with the perfect "look" that complements their clients' homes, the Capitanios meet with the clients and take digital pictures of their home. They then return with ideas for different areas of the house that may vary from a faux finish to murals, which can be done on walls, fireplaces, cabinetry, furniture, outdoor patios, swimming pools and practically any other area that could use some visual upgrading with their refined painting skills and non-toxic paints.

"Even just painting a trompe l'oeil on the doors of the cabinet gives the illusion that each panel is three dimensional (moldings and trims) as opposed to flat. It could make an immense difference, going from cheap to fancy. Sometimes just adding a faux finish on the walls or a little painted detail makes the room go from ordinary to unique."

Finally, improvement need not stop on the main dwelling itself. Mark Loberg of PremierGarage notes that many homeowners are taking the extra step of remodeling their garages not to be spare bedrooms, but in effect, better garages that work into a Southern California lifestyle. He also notes that more and more homes are being built with car garages large enough to accommodate six to eight cars. His mission, therefore, is to create a space that satisfies "an owner's personal fulfillment."

The room and storage area in a recent client's garage, for example, now features more than 68 linear feet of cabinets finished in the optional Windswept Bronze, highlighted by more than 36 feet of custom Teakwood Butcher-Block style countertops and a Fine Chip PremierOne Plus floor coating system. The cost for the completed six-plus car garage project totaled just under \$20 per square foot. Other enhancements the owner made to this garage included extensive automated lighting and audio/video systems, a unique Asko washer/dryer combo unit, under-counter refrigerator and central heating and air conditioning.

While improving your home may be about maintenance and upgrading the value of your residence, it's also about adding to your enjoyment of your house. It is comforting to know that thanks to these different remodeling and home improvement options, boosting your quality of life with selective home improvements—and some careful planning—has never been easier. **VM**





# School of Thought

Faced with more options, programs, teaching methods and school choices than ever before, parents must navigate the ever-changing education system today to ensure their children's schooling will truly make the grade.

By Elyse Glickman

Nobody ever said choosing a school was easy. There are as many kinds of schools as there are types of children, and finding the right school for the right child can prove to be a test for parents that rivals the magnitude of the SATs. Families from all walks of life must weigh the options between public and private education, and among private institutions, which programs are the best fit for each child. But just as high schoolers are advised to approach the college entrance exams by breaking the whole thing down into sections, parents should consider pinpointing the best school—public or private—in a similar manner.

Although many Valley families can afford admission to a prestigious private school, some parents may be surprised to learn that the Valley's public and charter schools are among the best in the country. For example, El Camino Real High School won the 2007 U.S. Academic Decathlon Competition, and Taft High School has also taken the national title in recent years. But whether parents opt to enroll their children in public or private school, what's important is taking an active role in the educational process to ensure

each child receives the best education possible.

An advocate of public schools, special education attorney and parent Ann Wexler points out that Los Angeles is full of parents who have rallied around their neighborhood public school. "It's not just about the magnet or charter schools," says Wexler. "It's about showing up because you live in the [area] of the school, and you want to make a difference. For those of us who choose to go public for our children, we do it for a variety of reasons. We believe in public education and know LAUSD offers better salary and benefits to teachers. There is an excellent curriculum based on the California State Content Standards, and public schools have to be accountable and reveal their testing data."

Being close to home, having the opportunity to volunteer frequently, maintaining contact with friends and neighbors and encouraging kids to get involved in the community are all a part of the public schooling system, says Wexler. She also says that she and many of her fellow parents opted for public school because they wanted their children to experience diversity and not be surrounded by excessively pampered or privileged kids they might



encounter at an exclusive private school. And then there is the all-encompassing benefit: the education is free.

"We know that even private schools fall victim to educational fads, like 'whole language,'" Wexler continues. "LAUSD, however, uses a research-based reading program, thus accounting for fast-rising elementary scores [we're starting to see this in middle school as kids progress through grades]. Public schools by law must teach special education students, and some private schools may exclude them. By being involved in our local school as parents, we teach our children that we don't run from our community's challenges, but rather act as leaders and help make things better."

Valley resident and acclaimed writer/radio personality Sandra Tsing Loh, in fact, is so committed to the effectiveness of public education that a major portion of her website is devoted to helping fellow LAUSD parents navigate the educational system and find easy, constructive ways to constantly stay involved. With the help of other committed parents, she also writes the regular "Ask A Magnet Yenta" advice column for [www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com).

"In our local public schools, we are experiencing a parental attitude shift from 'consumer,' as in 'What can the school do for me?' to 'citizen' as in 'What tools can I bring to the community of this school?'" she says. "In this way, fairly small numbers of parents have been able to surprisingly quickly transform undesirable schools to desirable ones, while saving some half a million dollars in K-12 tuition in the process."

About two years ago, Tsing Loh began trying to place her daughter in a good kindergarten. Tsing Loh covered much of the Valley, hitting open houses, paying a variety of deposits and having her daughter take an astonishing number of entrance tests. However, when she at last explored the options offered by public schools, she found that finding the best place for her daughter could be a lot simpler.

"In general, I think parents today are inside a fear bubble," Tsing Loh observes. "They have a lot of fears about public schools, even though they haven't taken the time to visit some of them. It is understandable that when you are a parent of a young child, you are often sleep-deprived and worry about doing every single thing right from the moment babies come out of the womb. But if people could get themselves a simple set of tools and some basic knowledge about the schools out there, they could save time and money."

Shortly after her educational researching experience, Tsing Loh was inspired to provide a public service to prospective LAUSD parents, which she modeled after such user-friendly informational websites as Wikipedia. Her intention with her initial guide (which can be found at [www.sandratsingloh.com](http://www.sandratsingloh.com)) was to provide an information-packed guide for parents free of jargon and overwhelming academic phrasing.

"I found out by talking to other parents that if

they had more information right at their fingertips, it would take away a lot of the apprehension about learning about LAUSD's programs," notes Tsing Loh. "One of the functions of what we do is to help these parents find communities, as well as find schools, rather than buy into a community as you would a private school. Most fear rhetoric about education is directed at parents by people trying to sell them something. What I ultimately hope to achieve is to provide information to parents for free so they can build better communities themselves."

While Tsing Loh notes that there are some excellent private schools out there, she has found that in public schools, the standards, working conditions and benefits they receive lend to a solid learning environment, thanks in part to better-informed parents.

"While some people rail at the unions for keeping teacher pay and benefits up at a certain level, it's good for teachers, and in turn, for kids," she says. "One mandate for public schools in L.A. is that kids should be reading by the end of kindergarten, and standards overall are more stringent than they used to be academically than at private schools. There is a lot of inaccurate information spread, especially as many parents turn to these virtually unreadable government websites or speak to parents on random park benches. We will have parents who come across older residents reflecting back on 20 years ago, who claim a public school may not be good. Yet they are often unaware of how much the school itself has changed with the times, thanks in part to the involvement of current parents and teachers. Armed with the correct information, a whole neighborhood can change in three to five years. You cannot assume anything until you've taken the time to walk in and see a school for yourself."

Alisa Wolf, M.Ed.-SPED, executive director/founder of Actors for Autism, believes many public and charter schools have the capacity to truly and effectively serve a diverse population of students. "Charter schools give families an opportunity to pick the school most suitable for their child's educational well-being," says Wolf. "Teachers choose to create and work at schools where they directly shape the best working and learning

environment for their students and themselves. Likewise, charter sponsors choose to authorize schools that are likely to best serve the needs of the students in a particular community. They are judged on how well they meet the student achievement goals, which are established by their charter contract. Charter schools must also show that they can perform according to rigorous fiscal and managerial standards. And while charter schools must adhere to the same major laws and regulations as all other public schools, they are freed from red tape that often diverts a school's energy and resources away from educational excellence."


Beyond the basic core academic school programs, charter schools have coordinated extra services that fit the community's needs, such as dropout prevention programs, adult education programs, day care needs and charters that work with children who want to go to college. Additionally, Wolf points out that students with disabilities can benefit from organized integration experiences. Such interactions can also reduce non-disabled students' fear of students with severe disabilities and promote understanding.

"According to a major study from the National Center for Education Statistics, public school teachers tend to be more qualified than their independent school counterparts in terms of education and experience," says Wolf. "They're more likely to have a master's degree and to have logged more hours pursuing in-service study—learning, for example, how to use computers in the classroom. Students spend more time [three more hours per week] studying core subjects than private school students."

Wolf also adds that public schools can sponsor more activities, such as extra-curricular sports and clubs, academic support and often have better supplies and learning tools.

It is important to take into account, however, that it does take some work and luck to get your child into a charter school. "Charters have parental 'buy-in,' as do magnet schools," explains active parent Angel Zobel-Rodriguez. "Most charters are blind lotteries—names in a hat, sometimes literally. While a school down the street takes kids from the neighborhood without parents necessarily considering where they're

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putting their kids, the charter and magnet parents are already more active because they sought out the schools—either because of test scores, special programs or whatever. More active parents are the key component in the equation. You hear about teachers, you hear about students, but it's the parents at home enforcing what's being asked of them at school."

Zobel-Rodriguez considers herself a "satisfied customer" with the San Fernando Valley's LAUSD schools, which she says have played to her son's academic strengths and career interest in multi-media. "I think of public schools as the norm, and the kids at public schools better reflect the kids in the neighborhood," affirms Zobel-Rodriguez. "I really don't want to worry about my kindergartner stressing out over testing and whether she's doing well enough to get into Harvard or Yale. I know there are more options within LAUSD, so what is a good fit at 6, I can re-examine when she hits junior high and high school."

And while Taft and El Camino Real have been praised in the news, Zobel-Rodriguez states that there are additional schools that deserve equal accolades. "Aside from the fact that their AcaDeca teams made the national news, does anyone know what their other programs are like?" she asks. "Some parents go by buzz alone, and that's crazy. As I see it, families have to put a little extra sweat equity into the entire school and college process, but the education the kids get is just as quality at many of the private schools. My son's college choices are no different than his friends at other private schools. And his SAT scores are the same as well. By not shelling out the money for the private schools, I've been able to be home with my kids, attend every water polo match and actively help at the schools, with my son's college search and my daughter's kindergarten art program."

### Private School Primer

While many parents dedicate time and hard work to bolstering the effectiveness of their child's public school experience, others view private schools as a good investment. Many private institutions heavily promote their specialized programs and services that they feel will make for a cus-

tomized educational path for the right children. Because of the money and time involved, it is recommended that parents consult information from the National Association of Independent Schools when deciding on the school that is right for their child. These informative resources focus on how to choose the best public, charter or private school for a child, according to Myra A. McGovern, NAIS's director of public information.

Individual attention, small classes, teacher excellence and higher academic standards are what parents are seeking out for their children when they consider private schools. But according to McGovern, the main motive for families looking into independent private schools can be summarized in one word: Quality. Based on studies conducted by NAIS, private school students do twice as much homework as their counterparts, watch only two-thirds as much television, are significantly more likely to participate in varsity or intramural sports and are more likely to agree that students and teachers get along well, discipline is fair, and teaching is good.

McGovern notes that there are hundreds of private schools programs to choose from, even when you confine your search to the San Fernando Valley. "Some are progressive, while others more traditional or serve a varying range of students in terms of abilities and interests," she notes. "Some schools offer special programs such as intensified instruction in the fine and performing arts, experiential learning projects or travel abroad seminars. Many schools excel at rigorous intellectual preparation, while others are dedicated to average learners or students with learning disabilities." Before booking appointments with a school or several schools, McGovern suggests you determine your child's "ideal" educational community, based on a variety of criteria, including:

- Size of student body
- Traditional vs. progressive curriculum and teaching approaches
- Special programs (arts, sports, computers)
- Is a diverse school community important to you and your family?
- Does your child have special needs or interests?

- Is the school accredited and by whom?
- What is the school's mission and does its philosophy appeal to you?
- Does the school have a special or particular educational focus?
- Is the environment competitive yet nurturing?
- Where is the school located and what are your transportation options?
- For high schools, what are the graduation requirements? What percentage of students enter colleges and what kind of colleges do they attend?

McGovern says that this is just the first step, and you can amend the list as you move through the selection process and peruse a variety of catalogues. "Compare each school's literature with the items on your list," she advises. "Eliminate any school that doesn't meet a fundamental requirement. For instance, if your child wishes to study Japanese but the school doesn't offer this course, you may need to look further. In short, choosing the right school is likely the most important single decision you might make in terms of setting the proper path and direction for your child's life. A little preparation and research on the part of parents will go miles toward making the ultimate destination clear at the exit ramp."

Coach Adelaide Zindler, author of The "Frizzamy" Principle series and pre-school and family life coach, meanwhile, suggests you take the process a step further by consulting an expert on education. "This kind of caution can be valuable in finding the right school for our children," she notes. "Once we've assessed our child's strengths and growth areas, we are then ready to begin the search for the program they'll strive in. Whatever setting you select for your child's learning, let it be a place where you also feel safe and connected, because your involvement will be the most powerful indicator of your child's success."

Zindler notes that, based on what she's observed with her Southern California clients, school choice impacts a child's outlook and attitude toward education dramatically throughout his or her life. She suggests you define the search based on your child's emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual state of being. Zindler also has her own list of criteria to look into:

- Take the official school tours, but also stop by unannounced to get a real feel for what the school is about.
- Speak with parents whose children attend the schools you are considering, as well graduates (and parents of graduates) who have moved on.
- If you are moving to a new school, see if your child can try it out for a week. Or, arrange to have your child shadow a friend for the day.
- Attend a parent's meeting. See what matters to the parents and what their involvement with the school is. This experience can speak volumes.

Stacy DeBroff, author of *"The Mom Book, 4,278 Tips for Moms!"* and founder of [www.momcentralconsulting.com](http://www.momcentralconsulting.com), has formulated useful tips for parents considering private, public and charter schools. "You need to get a feel for the core values and approaches to education of every school you consider," she advises. "You need to look for more than just quality. You need a school that suits your child's abilities and temperament, and an environment that nurtures his strengths and offers help for his or her weaknesses. Every school has its own 'personality,' and this personality is a critical thing to consider when determining if your child will be happy there. Spend a day there and meet the teachers and students. Have your child spend time there as well to see if he thinks he will be happy."

DeBroff advises giving literature and videos from specialized schools a good looking over before any decisions are made. "Excellent schools will claim to be a great alternative for some kids, but not the answer for every child," she continues. "Get a feel for the school to see if its vibe matches your expectations. Investigate methods the school has for helping your child if he encounters educational, emotional or behavioral problems. Check on the amount of student participation in the classrooms, the graduation level, quality of the faculty and financial status of the school you choose."

With so much to consider, picking the best school for your child is a pass-fail project in every sense of the term. Like your child, to make the grade, you'll need to do your research and homework—but you will get exactly what you put into it. **VM**



# Gym Dandy

*Experts flex their muscles in demonstrating how to set up a fitness room in your home.*

**By Elyse Glickman**

For most health-conscious Southern Californians, exercising has become a part of their daily routine. While a gym membership may be the way to go for many, a home gym makes better sense for others. For fitness seekers with busy work schedules or a hectic family life that doesn't allow for regular gym visits, the home gym has the potential of being as vital a room in the home as the kitchen. And, it allows for a convenient, distraction-free environment for working out.

One thing A-list gym designers understand is that a sexy, airy and vibrant workout environment can be a big, decisive incentive in terms of getting people to stick to their exercise routine. However, home fitness rooms often have a tendency to be just plain drab, dominated by big, blocky machines collecting dust that seemed like a great purchase at the time. For this reason, fitness experts insist you should put as much thought and care into outfitting your home fitness room as you would your kitchen or bathroom. After all, would you buy a stove or sink as impulsively as a DVD or ab-buster from an infomercial?

Burbank-based trainer and fitness equipment designer Mark Harigian is all about transforming essential fitness machines and weights into tactile, tangible workouts for the body, mind and soul. While a Harigian "original" may run upwards of \$100,000, his home gyms are designed to create a space that aesthetically works into the rest of the home and adds value to the property. The trainer also carefully plans equipment designs to specifically tailor his home gyms to the individual fitness and health needs of prospective users.

"Even when people are committed to fitness, the most common mistake is space allotment," Harigian says. "In terms of my demographic—people who can afford the best in their homes—they may give me a wish list and then ask me to do an evaluation after the fact. Before designating the space, you need to do an honest evaluation of yourself thoroughly. Ask yourself what your interests in life are, as well as your personal and fitness goals, and then move forward to design the workout, the choice of equipment and the room around those things that will enhance your life. Instead of cramming your fitness room with tons of equipment, you're better off investing in one piece of equipment that will address your goals, limitations and individual



needs. Also, if you do yoga or Pilates, be sure to allot space for that as well."

Harigian recommends fans instead of air conditioning (to keep temperature neutral) and as much natural lighting as possible, but he advises against carpeting, noting that flying fibers from carpets will shorten the life of cardio equipment. "You'll want something easy to mop up, such as a natural organic cork made from a kind of bark that has a nice smell to it," he suggests. "Because it insulates, it makes for an environment where you will not get echoing sounds from your machines. Cork is also ideal for the Valley. Given that the Valley experiences more extremes in temperature change than the other side of the hill, cork will withstand changeable weather conditions better."

As far as colors and design, Harigian simply suggests having the home gym blend in with other rooms in your house. And while mirrors are vital in his opinion, he suggests only putting mirrors on one wall, as two facing mirrored walls can create an "infinity" effect that can be distracting. However one mirrored wall will help keep you aware of what you're doing to ensure the biomechanics of your workout will be correct. "Without a mirror, your thoughts may wander and your posture on an elliptical machine may go off," he adds. "If you have a television, you want to have the screen directly in front of your field of vision on the machine, not looking up."

Harigian isn't in favor of buying equipment off the rack as one would buy a workout outfit. "When you do shop for equipment, it is better for you to consult a trainer, even if it requires some kind of small investment," he says emphatically. "Even asking your doctor may not be an ideal solution, as some doctors themselves may not workout and may not know what pieces of equipment are out on the market. I recommend shopping with a trainer until you find somebody well versed on the different brands and types of equipment that are out there. Develop an exercise plan with this professional first so you can buy something that specifically fits with what you want to achieve. I can tell you what the best piece of equipment is from a physiology point of view, but it won't be the answer for everybody."

Television host and one-time Studio City resident Michelle Harris ("Alive and Well with Michelle Harris," AmericanLife TV Network), agrees that a fitness space must be a carefully thought-out place where you would want to spend your time. "Flooring is definitely preferable over carpeting," she advises. "Wood floors are best for those doing yoga and Pilates workouts or concrete floors for heavy machinery. And if you outfit your room for yoga or Pilates, the decor should reflect the atmosphere. Consider the use of vibrant but soothing colors, wisely placed scented candles and accessories, perhaps an Asian style to create the kind of ambience that will make you feel relaxed right from the

start. If you go for equipment, avoid the pitfall of just throwing gear into a room without planning it out. It shouldn't be the catch-all room, which is not attractive and will not motivate you to work out."

Like Harigian, Harris also advises you consult a trainer before beginning a workout plan and design for a home gym. She also has her own recommendations for equipment that allows for a certain amount of versatility. "If you are not experienced working out in a gym, by all means have a trainer work with you and establish your fitness goals before you buy anything for your gym," she says. "It is also advisable to have a trainer come to your home, since they can adjust to an individual's work or parenting schedule. If you are new to yoga, though there are great workout videos available, hire a trainer who can really train you and spot you to ensure your positioning is correct and you are doing the workout safely."

Harris says that in addition to having a high-quality treadmill to provide for a great health club kind of experience, you should also consider a mini trampoline, as well as interactive video games that can bring the entire family into the workout.

"Mini trampolines offer a great overall strength workout as well as cardiovascular exercise," she says. "It is a piece of equipment the whole family can enjoy, as you can also take it outside. There are also new interactive video games that encourage movement and work with Playstations and other game systems. There's one particularly good game where several players can literally run with Jackie Chan through the streets of Hong Kong, as well as virtual reality stationary bikes that simulate a ride through a variety of environments. Or bike games where the faster you pedal affects the outcome of the game."

While Harris is a strong advocate of family fitness, she points out you should take safety precautions to prevent accidents and injuries. She believes having a home gym enables children to observe and learn the parents' fitness habits, though she points out that kids should always be supervised in the gym.

Safety and motivation also extend to what you wear, even to your own gym, and Harris says that even if you are working out in the privacy of your home, you and your family should still do the workouts with the proper shoes and clothing. "The right clothing and carefully chosen equipment will bring the health club workout home in a way that is meaningful to everybody in the family," she sums up. "Now is a great time to bring a gym into your home."

Joe Alter, president and CEO of Smooth Fitness and EvoFitness, available locally at Ben's Foothill Fitness, believes home gyms owners should select fewer pieces of equipment wisely and be sure that the equipment will be conducive to helping an individual stick to his or



her daily workout. "If you are planning a gym, try to give yourself enough space for the pieces of equipment," Alter suggests. "While it is good to install a stereo system or TV on the wall, you should also have your treadmill or elliptical looking out toward the outside, and whenever possible, have sliding doors to allow air in, as well as provide a nice view. Also, make it the kind of room you and your partner [or even your family] can enjoy together. People often find they get more use out of their gym when they work out with a partner."

Alter acknowledges that those who buy equipment to suit individual needs will possibly need to buy from a variety of different manufacturers. When this is the case, he cautions that you should be mindful that different pieces should have similar colors or finishing so they complement each other. "You want the equipment to be the same kind of neutral, smoky gray used in the health clubs, or a pleasant brushed aluminum," he says. "As various companies make different types of equipment, you may end up getting different brands, but you should still choose the finishes, so everything looks like it goes together."

Aesthetics notwithstanding, Alter notes that many of his California clients are among his most up-to-date customers. "This summer, we launched The Agile DMP Motion Trainer, which goes far beyond the average elliptical," he

says. "Beyond the traditional cardio-based elliptical workout, it also tones, burns calories and exercises key muscle groups based on the different ways you use it. It is also ideal for a family situation, where different people have different fitness needs, and there are built-in safety guards, so children cannot hurt themselves when the machine is not in use."

Simi Valley-based Out-Fit ([www.fitmyhome.com](http://www.fitmyhome.com)), devised by founder Chris Fisher, creates state-of-the-art, in-home gyms that are customized for individual clients. For those seeking one-stop shopping for a specifically customized home gym, Out-Fit offers a prolific full spectrum of services, including in-home consultation, custom room layout, collaboration with contractors and architects, equipment and flooring selection, professional delivery and installation, equipment orientation with a certified trainer and routine maintenance for the life of the equipment.

Fisher's team has built the company's reputation by matching clients with the equipment that will best suit their fitness needs and goals. This hands-on approach has yielded an impressive portfolio of innovative private gyms for an array of clients, including former Disney executive Michael Ovitz and actor Hank Azaria. Encino resident Kevin James (CBS-TV's "King of Queens") is the most recent client to have a customized gym designed under Fisher's astute

eye. "Kevin is an avid practitioner of mixed martial arts [MMA] and needed a fitness center that would both support his training and fit the design of his home," he says. "Out-Fit worked closely with Kevin to choose some of the best equipment in the industry, including a Woodway treadmill, the most impact-absorbent machine on the market; the Espresso S2 stationary bike, which uses the latest in virtual reality technology to provide an interactive workout; and the Pro 1 from SciFit for a comprehensive upper body cardio workout."

"Strength training is key for MMA, especially core strength. For this reason, Out-Fit installed two dedicated abdominal machines by Cybex. Kevin also wanted a large variety of free weights, including both dumbbells and barbells. Because the room did not offer much wall space, Out-Fit had a custom freestanding three-tier rack built to store all of the weights. Out-Fit recently added a Vortex Pro Trainer, the most advanced crossover machine in the industry, to round out the strength equipment."

The home gym is truly what you make of it, as is any kind of fitness plan. "Fitness is a science, not a complicated science, but a science," affirms Harigian. "When you second-guess yourself, often because you didn't buy the right things, you don't give 100 percent. You need to know the program and machines are ideal for you before you go out and buy." **VM**





Get This Party Started!



# *'If you're going to throw a Yuletide bash, why not make it a real "A-List" affair? With some expert tips, it's easier than you think!*

By Elyse Glickman

These days, holiday entertaining involves so much more than putting out fresh-baked cookies and milk. We've all flipped through the party pages of *"InStyle"* or watched Martha Stewart effortlessly whip up a picture-perfect holiday meal, but who has the money, time and ability to throw such an elaborate gathering? The truth of the matter is that imagination and careful planning are the real keys to the success and impact of any holiday gathering. In fact, with a little bit of guidance from some of the Southland's best party planners, you'll have everything you need to create the kind of party your guests will regard as the gift (in terms of enduring memories, cooler talk, etc.) that keeps on giving.

According to Tom Budas, one of the principals of An Original Occasion, the ultimate secret to a successful gathering is to keep the party real. "A home party is so much more warm and personal," Budas explains. "It shows that the hosts really care about their guests by putting a lot of thought into entertaining, as opposed to just booking a restaurant and having people show up. There's more spontaneity in parties held in private spaces. Overall, you will have more fun and a better event at home...and when it's over, you can just go up and go to bed."

"Holidays are about home, family, warmth and hospitality," points out Andrea Michaels of Extraordinary Events. "Doing an event at home reflects caring and personal attention, and it's not just 'one more party' that guests attend. As hosts, you want to make the people in your life feel like stars [sans paparazzi]. With that in mind, celebrities do a lot of lovely things we can all copy. Organic, thoughtful menus. Pet parties. Children's parties. High teas. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination."

When it comes to creating a festive holiday décor, elaborate floral arrangements add an air of elegance to any event. "Flowers take the place of décor," says Budas. "A floral look brings bang for the buck, especially when you can take advantage of the many flat surfaces in your house," he says. "We've done Christmas trees decorated with fresh and dried flowers, which are a great alternative to poinsettia trees." Budas also feels that investing in a valet service, especially with L.A.'s citywide parking restrictions, offers guests the ultimate gift—peace of mind.

Shay Watson of Aesthetica Events suggests a shopping spree to the local vintage stores before your party for some truly unique decorations. "You don't have to go all out, but you can find some fun ornaments and items from as far back as the early 1900s or as recent as the '80s," she says. "You can have a lot of fun with these, and they are definitely conversation pieces."

One thing most of the pros agree upon, especially if your event of choice involves several dozen guests, is that you should not risk taking on every aspect of planning and preparation yourself. "You're a host, not a servant," cautions Budas. "This idea goes beyond catering. You'll also need somebody

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to bus the house and refresh entertaining areas.”

While Michaels feels there are times when preparing the food yourself can be an asset, especially if you are passionate about cooking, hiring a catering staff frees you up to be the host. For example, for a small dinner party, you might serve something you have prepared, but have it presented by a professional staff, who can also pour wine and mix drinks. For a larger buffet or food stations, she recommends having the food served and presented professionally and beautifully. Watson, meanwhile, shares the sentiment, advising the hosts to have someone help greet the guests, such as a spouse or friend, and prepare foods in advance before the guests arrive.

Once your logistics and help are in place, however, many party hosts still feel an obligation to deliver the “wow” factor. While that bit of party pizzazz is in the eye of the beholder, creativity in any form is essential for your holiday gathering’s success. Budas feels one shouldn’t be too traditional, and he suggests avoiding the red and green color scheme.

“Try a winter wonderland theme, done in white from florals to linens,” he advises. “If you have the budget, use spotlights around the house or a snowflake projection on the garage, as this can be easily and inexpensively acquired from the Internet. Also, know who your guests are and represent ALL winter holidays, including Hanukkah and Kwanza. Address cultural differences with joy. Also, be sure to stay away from

paper and plastic. Glass and china are better for the environment and make a statement that you care about the environment and the guests.”

“If money is not an issue, have snow put in your front yard,” Watson suggests. “It creates a uniquely winter feel that we don’t get much of in LA. It can be fun for kids, too! We are lucky with the weather, so you can do things outside and not be too cold... roasting chestnuts, drinking a hot beverage. Bonfires and blankets can be fun for outdoors, too! Just make sure you let your guests know ahead of time, so they can dress appropriately.”

Michaels excels at developing theme parties, from a swing-music-themed party for older guests to an MTV-themed fete or “American Idol”-style karaoke party for teens. However, her favorite events involve reaching out to others. Her giving-focused party ideas include a tree-decorating party where the tree is donated to a senior citizens home, having guests write to soldiers serving overseas, staging a party at a homeless shelter and bringing items kids could wrap and keep for themselves, with some entertainment and good food.

Before you have a party, however, people need to know about it. “This is where a carefully thought-out invitation comes to play. Budas advises that instead of relying on boxed cards from the local pharmacy, there are two ways you should go with the invite—customized and professionally done or handmade. “You are competing with other holiday parties, so the invite bet-

ter reel them in,” he stresses. One of the best invites he recalls, for example, was a rock in a box that invited guests to “rock and roll all night.”

Watson, meanwhile, points out that a local paper supply store offers a wealth of inspirational elements and materials that can enable you to piece together invitations that are distinctly you. Michaels, meanwhile, notes that there are also superb invitation companies that offer such can’t-miss elements as an original poem to accompany the invite with clues and hints about the party’s whereabouts and themes, a holiday ornament with the invitation or a champagne glass that says, “Fill me at....”

All told, however, Michaels insists you should never lose sight of the party’s most important elements—you and your guests. “The biggest mistake people make is getting too elaborate and thus spending all their time worrying about what someone else should be worried about,” she says. “If you are going to do it yourself, then relax. No one cares if one course is a bit late or you run out of something if they are having a good social time without your anxiety. It does not need to be fancy. People need to really think about who their guests are and what makes them happy, not what will impress them. I also think that sometimes people forget that parties, especially at holiday time, are times where people want to talk to each other and exchange meaningful conversations rather than listen to loud music or be entertained constantly.” VM

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# Wide Open Spaces

Professional organizers and design experts offer sleek, sensible suggestions on how to prevent the things you own from owning you.

By Elyse Glickman

With the New Year comes those annual resolutions, and for many, organizing or reorganizing your home is often involved. While the prospect of rethinking the way you store your stuff can be daunting, there are experts you can turn to and home improvements you can do in order to make the decluttering process, well, more organized. After all, the one thing you cannot have too much of is information...

As there is never any shame in asking an expert, a great place to start the process is OrganizingLA ([www.organizingla.com](http://www.organizingla.com)), a consulting firm specializing in home and office organizing projects. Under the watch of owner John Trosko, clients not only determine what needs to be tossed or stored, but why they hold on to too much in the first place.

"Organizing is more than just a neatly folded towel or a stack of papers or shopping for containers," Trosko point out. "Understanding why you accumulate will help you wipe out clutter. It's easier to pile up items instead of taking the time to make a decision to retain or discard. In our work-every-minute world, mass consumption society, people do not realize the amount of time lost to simply locating paperwork, tools, gadgets, addresses, DVDs, flashlights, keys or photographs. Just think about the last time you looked for that warranty or receipt in order to repair or return something. According to a recent *'Newsweek'* article, the average American spends 55 minutes a day—roughly 12 weeks a year—looking for things they know they own but can't find."

Sometimes practical solutions, in fact, are right at our front door. Founders of Valley-based organizations practiced at the art of decluttering, including Expert Organizers (886-9635; [www.expertorganizers.org](http://www.expertorganizers.org)), Closet Crafters (889-1342) and In Perfect Order, (438-7364; [www.inperfectorder.com](http://www.inperfectorder.com)), will also tell you that the problem stems much deeper than the physical objects themselves.

Laura McHolm, director of marketing for Chatsworth-based NorthStar Moving Corporation, asserts clutter is as much an environmental problem as it is a personal one. "I really see [decluttering] as an outgrowth of the green



Designer Christopher Lowell's "Seven Layers of Organization" teaches readers how to declutter everything from children's rooms to the home office.

trend, and people are giving serious thought to whether or not they really need all of this stuff," McHolm asserts. "I also think people need to seriously look at how they really live, as opposed to the fantasy life they may have imagined when they purchased something. I always recommend they look at each section of their house as a prime piece of real estate. In that process, empty everything out [closets, etc.] into the middle of the room. If you have items you don't use much but cannot get rid of yet, make a pile of those things, and put it in a box or

bag with a date on it. Give yourself a time limit of a month or two—or a year. If you have not gone into that bag by that date, then give it away. Get rid of the fantasy. If you don't remember what's inside the bag or box, you don't need it."

McHolm says for objects such as Grandmother's wedding dress and other heirlooms that don't serve the family on a daily basis, a storage facility is always a good alternative. To keep track of what is stored, use Excel or another database program to inventory what is kept, stored or donated, and know there are many options for divesting what is not needed (eBay, charities, garage sales, thrift stores that accept donations).

Books can also be a helpful resource. Designer Christopher Lowell recently released "Seven Layers of Organization," written expressly to help readers establish an important timeline while guiding them through a step-by-step thought process for time vs. money, space re-allocation and the impetus to make room for a new life free of clutter. Lowell's objective is to help readers understand why the purging process is so hard and how, by changing physical interiors, mental interiors will change along with them.

## The Joy of Letting Go

"My experiences with my clients have led me to a deeper level of understanding of how to help people get organized," says Jessica Duquette, the founder of In Perfect Order. "The journey from chaos to order is a transformative undertaking. Although I am not a therapist, the work we do is therapeutic in nature. It is not uncommon for clients to experience emotional dis-



comfort before, during or after our work. Not only is this normal, but it is a sign that change is happening."

Duquette operates according to the philosophy that it is easier to go with the grain rather than against it. While she recognizes and improves on successful organizational techniques already in place, she also redirects ineffective behaviors. In the process and even before (screening clients to ensure they are ready for such an enormous paradigm shift), she also reveals that much of the clutter stems from an emotional impasse of some sort—usually a mix of grief and rebellion.

She also notes there are simple things one can do before contacting a home organization company. "Pull everything out of the drawers and cabinets, one at a time or all at once, spray it with a fresh scent to change the intention of the room from trash heap to sanctuary," she says. For drawers, she suggests home office desk organizers they sell at Staples to itemize the contents. Also, use a scale of 1 to 10 to determine the value of an object. Only keep it if it scores a 9 or a 10. For a more expensive item, hold it in your hand and close your eyes. If you feel it taking away energy from you, sell or donate it, she suggests.

"Chaos is noise that disturbs your life," Duquette insists. "Your goal is to take that noise out of your life. It also changes your shopping habits...you will only buy things you need, not things that will clutter up your home and ultimately cause chaos. This is when an objective professional organizer or an outsider comes in handy, as they won't bring any emotion or commentary that would color your feelings."

### What Not to Wear

Columnist, author and blogger April Masini ([www.askapril.com](http://www.askapril.com)) advises to start small with the one place you use every single day—the closet—and treat it like a sacred space. "Your closet is a place you go to several times a day to choose what you're going to put on your body, yet it is often a space that is disregarded," says Masini. "As a result, you often enter or look into your closet with a lack of energy. It should be a space that inspires you, not sucks the life out of you."

Masini recommends arranging the closet by seasons, and then by colors. Keep pants in one area, and skirts in another. Invest in good hangers for a variety of garments, from padded ones for delicate blouses to sturdier types for pants and suits. Keep matching accessories (belts, scarves, jewelry and gloves) on the same hangers or nearby the clothes they're worn with. Hang a rack on your closet wall to store belts, scarves and hats. Clear plastic shoe boxes are also great space savers as long as you tape a photo of the shoes onto the end of the box.

"Only after you've organized what you own and actually wear can you decide if, and what, you need to buy," Masini notes. "Mentally review the routine of your life and see what items of clothing

you really lack. Always keep the basic question in mind: What do you really need?"

### Kitchen: Today's Special...or Leftovers?

Regina Leeds (506-7167; [www.reginaleeds.com](http://www.reginaleeds.com)), the Toluca Lake-based author of *"The Zen of Organizing"* (Alpha Press) and *"One Year to an Organized Life: From Your Closets to Your Finances: the Week-by-Week Guide to Getting Completely Organized for Good"* (DaCapo, an imprint of Perseus) notes that the same rules apply in the kitchen as they do in the closet. "If you do not remember when you last used a gadget, give it up" and "Inner peace through outer order." "On a boat, everything better be where it needs to be, because when you need it you need it fast," she explains. "With your limited space, ask yourself how many objects you need to move to get to something. What you use every day in cooking should be front and center. Stuff you use less frequently, like seasonal pieces, can be further back, and things you do not use at all, out."

Because the kitchen is the nerve center of most families' homes, it is also an especially vulnerable spot, notes Vicki Norris of HGTV's "Mission: Organization." "The kitchen almost effortlessly has a way of accumulating papers, mail and a variety of misplaced possessions," she says. "Yet, it happens to be the most popular place in the home to invite guests. Create a plan of attack, including a reference binder to create a permanent home for take-out menus, coupons, gift certificates and commonly reached-for phone numbers. Dedicate real estate for daily drop-offs such as mail and newspapers to be sorted into actionable categories. Strategically place a trash, recycle and shred receptacle—essential tools for eliminating junk and keeping the paper from piling up. Create a communication command center by setting aside a place to take and leave messages, and write notes to family."

### The Cure for Home Office Headaches

Barb Friedman (who has given advice on Dr. Phil and owns Organize IT, a national organization company for businesses) offers practical solutions for keeping the home office under control with a mix of high-tech inventions and common sense.

In the tech area, she suggests you scan receipts, business cards and papers to consolidate all that information onto your home computer. These useful documents are acceptable to the IRS and eliminate the fire hazard of excess paper.

"When working with a professional organizer, use the opportunity to develop a method that works with your personal strengths and dedicate 10-15 minutes a day putting things away," she says.

### The Family Room: The Home's 405 Freeway

According to HGTV's Norris, the family room is the most traffic-congested room in the home, and that can lead to roadway rubbish. She recommends determining the room's focus, de-littering and finding homes for nomadic items such as

backpacks, toys, magazines and everything in between.

"Determine if the room should be an off-ramp of the kitchen or an entertainment hub," explains Norris. "Being intentional helps set boundaries for how many uses the room has. Set up a 'go-elsewhere' basket, so at the end of each day, you can relocate items that don't belong in the family room to their proper place. Also, encourage your family not to be litterbugs. Keep surfaces such as ottomans and tables clear, so you can put up your feet or pull out a board game."

### Garage: A Drive For Order, As Well As Safety

With Southern California being a car culture, it is no surprise garage organization is the fastest growing segment within the \$7 billion home organization sector, according to a recent Peachtree Consulting Survey.

With so much clutter finding its way to the garage, GarageTek ([www.garagetek.com](http://www.garagetek.com)), which has franchises in LA, Orange County and San Diego, recently partnered with the National Safety Council for a year-long safety initiative to develop simple solutions to make the garage a safer, cleaner space for the whole family. Out of this initiative comes the following guidelines by Marc Shuman, the company's founder:

- *Clean Up and Out:* Arrange items you want to keep into separate piles and donate items you no longer need.
- *Mark the Spot:* Hang shelves and keep storage containers labeled.
- *Place Within Arm's Reach:* Keep items you will need for the season in the area you use them, such as shovels near the exit to garage.
- *Use All Available Space:* Once-a-year items, such as holiday decorations and lawn furniture, should be stored out of the way in areas like over the garage door.

In addition, Gladiator GarageWorks ([www.gladiatorgw.com](http://www.gladiatorgw.com)) views the garage as "the final frontier for junk" and poses these suggestions:

- *Clear the Floor:* By installing shelves, baskets, hooks or cabinets, you can uncover valuable space on the garage floor, which can be used for working on hobbies or simply parking your car.
- *Categorize:* Put like items together such as tools, sporting equipment, gardening equipment and holiday decorations. Once you have everything grouped, you can assign certain cabinets, hooks, baskets and shelves for each category based on frequency of use.
- *Decorate:* The garage does not have to be the eyesore of the house. You decorate every room in your home, so why not your garage? This is an area that has been neglected for years and is now becoming the trendy place to hang out. Hang something on the walls, create a place to sit or even put curtains in the windows. **VM**



# Hot Looks for Chilling Out



*SeaPally's goddess mallorn is the talk of the nation.*

This summer, fashion keeps its cool with a mix of polish, simplicity and fun.

By Elyse Glickman



While timely—but not timeless—trends crop up during warmer months, some fashion statements of past years no longer make sense. Tattoo-printed sweats, adornment-laden designer jeans, perforated leather and too-structured sundresses somehow lose their charm when the mercury passes 90 degrees. And, unless you are preparing for finals, other looks like minis, baby doll tops, cut-offs and beachy apparel don't make the most age-appropriate impression.

You can, however, take heart in the fact that this year, warm weather fashion will be less about the "now" and more about the "always." Balance can be found this season through tailored but relaxed silhouettes enlivened with fresh colors, easy neutrals and exotic prints. Additionally, new beauty products hitting stores combine today's technology with the feel-good factor of natural ingredients and sheer color. Many of this season's looks and essentials are truly suited for the Southern California lifestyle.

## They've Got You Covered

This summer, everything old is new again, which means almost anything goes. Every decade of the second half of the last century is represented, from '60s safari style and early '70s prints and lace to late '70s disco glam, '80s neon hues and space '90s basics. However, while every trend is not for every body (think leggings and buggy shift dresses), and "concept" looks lie versatile go-to pieces that can remain for warm seasons to come.

Flare Bob (embraced for their take on the kimono in past years) is keeping up with the times with their runway mod abstract and tribal prints in silhouettes that work for real woman figures. Pink Tartan, meanwhile, also replace the not-so-user-friendly summer staple—the camisole—with more covered up blouses and tunics that are sexy because of what they don't show combined with showy colors and prints.

While dresses are front and center, designer jeans have taken a back seat (no pun intended) to more ladylike looks. Rich & Skinny and Paraiso offer flattering, floaty mother-cut jeans in denim and colored pills that look remarkably polished. For frequent fliers, meanwhile, MiNks bring some of the hottest runway trends—'80s colors and flowing late '70s Halston tailoring—to versatile modal and cotton pieces that probably travel better than we do! Edun, created by Ali Hewson (wife of U2's Bono), not only mixes denim and dressier silk pieces, but also social consciousness with their materials, contributions to charity and support of fledgling communities around the world.

## To Personalize, Accessorize!

While this year's prints are expressive and safari basics are a no-brainer, "statement" accessories finish and customize. However, the season's statements are big, so don't overdo it. Though layering was popular last year, this year, just one or two well-chosen pieces will finish a look effortlessly.

With all the sunscreen and day-to-dinner things you'll need to cart along with you, focus on grown-up, generously-sized bags that are more interesting on the outside than what's inside. Treesje's Asher Bag is a cheerful exam-





Fashionistas can adorn with a Lia Sophia bracelet.

ple of this, but if you're really daring, take advantage of the fact that metallic bags are still huge (figuratively and literally) such as Zina Eva's popular "Bella" bag that goes from day to night with a simple change of strap. California-based Luxe4Luxe and Lockheart handbags also challenge the concept of status bags with unusual shapes and colors that bring a more personalized edge to an outfit.

Sunglasses silhouettes, like handbags, remain large in scale but refined à la Jackie O. A compelling interpretation comes from Emilio Pucci (produced by Marchon Eyewear, which is also launching a sharp Karl Lagerfeld line with attractive men's frames). They are also fun optical illusions—simple and classic on the outside of the

frames with the signature Pucci prints peeking out from the inside. If unisex, simple and architectural is more your style, L.A.-based Beryll (a favorite with Angelina and Brad) needs to be seen.

Lia Sophia ([www.liasophia.com](http://www.liasophia.com)) and Luxe Jewels ([www.luxejewels.com](http://www.luxejewels.com)) are setting trends by replacing the mall with home "jewelry parties" that ensure you'll pick the most flattering pieces. Lia Sophia's solid, substantial pieces (including the '60s mod styles that debuted at the Sundance swap suites) are heirloom quality, while Luxe taps into the versatility of semi-precious beads. On the higher end, Maggie Ferrari's dramatic nature-inspired collars and earrings and FemmeMetal's ([www.femmemetale.net](http://www.femmemetale.net)) stunning silver medallions and pendants are real conversation-starters. If subtlety is more your style, check out L.A. designer Anna Selena ([www.annaselena.com](http://www.annaselena.com)), whose forward-thinking collections include "promise bracelets" (a delicate mix of jewels, pearls and chains winding around the wrist and ring finger).

While the delicate look of strappy sandals is appealing, the active Southern California lifestyle in the summer months demands shoes that cradle and comfort the feet. While comfy shoes can throw the look off, many companies known for comfort (Hush Puppies, Detny, UGG) are reconciling fashion and function. In dressier shoes, wedges, espadrilles and thicker heels are still very much with us, and the up-and-coming line FarylRobin has them in generous supply.

### Following Suit

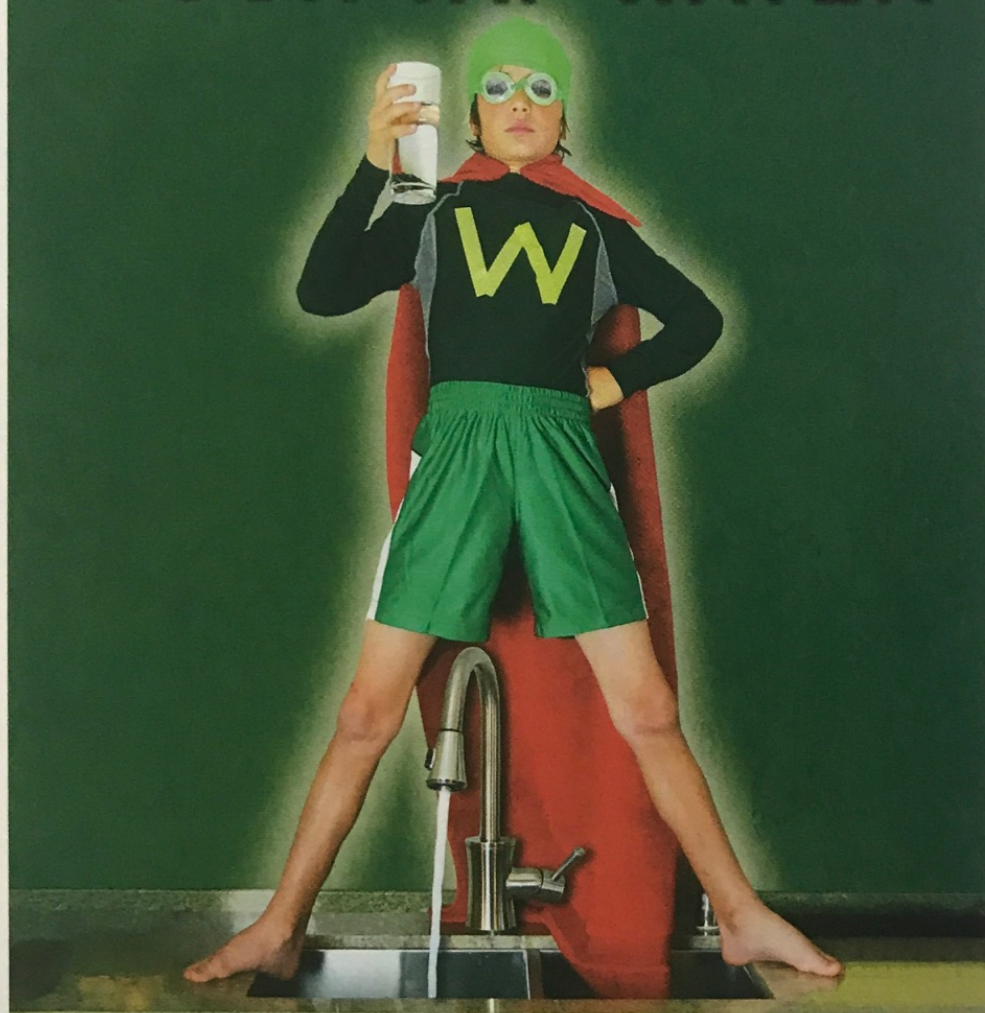
While Australian company SeaFolly is best known for its sassy bikinis, their 2008 collections also feature one-piece and tankinis with trendy neon hues, tribal prints and universally becoming V-neck and halter neck treatments. However, stateside designers, including widely available brands Nautica, Calvin Klein, Anne Cole and Michael Kors, are all about the personalized fit, evidenced by their 2008 collections which are brimming with tankini options and prints that can be mixed and matched to fit every conceivable body type with definitive sex appeal. Prints are brilliant but wearable, shying away from trendy neons in favor of deeper blues and warmer orange and brown tones.

### Sheer Brilliance

For many beauty fanatics, hitting the pharmacy to scout out the latest in European beauty and skin care trends is a must. Thanks to CVS Pharmacy, however, some of the best beauty bets from across the pond are within easy reach, sans the hassle of passports or the sting of the mighty Euro. Select branches (including a Sherman Oaks location) are stocked with Euro-brands such as Boots (U.K.), Lumene (Scandinavia), Lierac and La Roche-Posay (France), as well as American lines such as Christophe Beverly Hills. Another Euro-chic option for one-stop shopping is [www.theorganicpharmacy.com](http://www.theorganicpharmacy.com), stocking everything from beauty creams to vitamins and baby products.

Better department stores, meanwhile, put time-

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honored products like Orlane, Talika and Leonor Greyl within reach. While Orlane's user-friendly Pure Sun Care line shields the skin, Leonor Greyl Huile de Palme protects hair from sun and UV rays as well as the effects of water, wind and dryness.

If it's high-grade spa indulgences you desire, breakout lines Janet League-Katzin's Sphatika ([www.sphatika.com](http://www.sphatika.com)) and Attache ([www.attacheusa.com](http://www.attacheusa.com)) are available online with their own forms of state-of-the-art skin-care.

While Ventura Boulevard teams with great boutique salons, one south-of-Mulholland spot worth the trip is Argyle Salon (8358 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; [310]623-9000), 10 minutes over the hill from Studio City. While the Argyle has its fair share of premium services and products, the real draw—other than Mauricio Ribiero's buzz-worthy cuts and color—is his Brazilian Blowout, which wards off frizz, dryness and color fading that comes with trips to the beach and pool. Though it ranges in price from \$350 to \$550, depending on a client's hair length and texture, Ribiero points out the intense conditioning properties of the treatment, combined with the ensuing low maintenance, makes it worth the investment.

"Just as semi-permanent color is safer for most hair types, the Brazilian Blowout is a safer way to smooth or straighten hair," says Ribiero. "It cuts your daily styling time by 66 percent, and you will enjoy the results long after you leave the salon."

### Underneath It All

A lot of the best offerings of the season, no matter how well tailored, may still leave a not-so-sexy vulnerability to exposure because of flowy fabrics. That problem, however, can easily be fixed with foundations from Spanx and Bali, who have both expanded their collections to resolve every kind of body issue. Though somewhat of an investment, they still cost less than counseling. The concept has, literally, gone from head to toe with specialty insoles, from Dr. Scholl's high tech gel versions to Fragrant Footings by Summer Soles that work particularly well with sandals, absorbing perspiration and cushioning feet.

### Man, Oh Man!

Men have it easy practically every summer, with basics that generally stay the same. However, pieces with a tailored edge or a shot of color can adrenalize and update their wardrobes. Ted Baker, Hugo Boss and Thomas Pink (available throughout the Southland) readily offer looks that make the man rather than the other way around. On the casual side, Reebok, Blue Notch Jeans and Anarchy Jeans successfully update go-to sportswear without costume-y excess (i.e. guys who look like they raided their sons' closets).

Accessories and grooming also punch up men's looks, be they buttoned down or livened up. Large, statement-making timepieces from Croton and Invicta accomplish this with modern takes on chronometer and Russian military cases and thick bands. While many of the skin car lines for women actually work beautifully on men, Zith is a great masculine alternative, with its sharp packaging, effective ingredients and masculine—but subtle—scent. **VM**

### Summer Hair Color: The Layered Approach

You can tell just by watching Dolly Simons flit around Krystal Salon in Studio City that her approach to color is unconventional. Most colorists go into a back room, mix up one tray of color to cover roots, perhaps another for highlights and then apply this methodically. Simons is methodical, too, but there's a touch of madness behind her method.

Working on a client, she'll set out her dual trays then go from station to station collecting the unused color from other clients. She weaves in a half dozen shades, applying complementary tones to different sections of the hair—say caramel and taffy on the top front layers where the sun would hit, copper red just underneath, chocolate brown on the back and deeper layers, a few cinnamon streaks here and there.

Simons calls her technique "fluidity," and the results are dazzling, eye-catching, yet completely natural color from every direction and perspective. For summer, it's a subtle, sophisticated alternative to the usual gold or ashy-blond streaks. "People often say they want to go lighter in the summer," Simons says, "but what they really mean is they want to go brighter, so their hair looks sun-kissed and shiny." *Dolly Simons, Krystal Salon, 12930 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; 505-8492.—Shelley Levitt*

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# Slimming Pickings

*Looking to slim down and shape up? There are many ways to do it, so choose carefully!*

By Elyse Glickman

New Years' resolutions notwithstanding, summer seems to be an optimal time to start a diet and fitness plan. The kids are out of school, the weather is better, and there are more hours of daylight to acclimate to a new lifestyle—trying out new exercise routines and putting changes in our eating habits into place.

However, these days, there are as many diets, nutrition plans and supplements as there are individuals interested in taking one on. With the operative word being "individual," it is important to take a closer look at various plans to see which one will fit you best from the inside out. Ideally, you want your plan to yield results that will be more lasting than the satisfaction of fitting into your old skinny jeans.

Though the three popular diets detailed below have different attributes, one thing they all share is that they offer average people access to expert opinions from physicians and other health professionals. Even with sound medical foundations, however, one size does not fit all when it comes to diet plans. It is good to comparison shop, as elements of all these diets can be customized based on one's weight-loss goals and current health situation.

## Smart Cookies, Smarter Choices

While Smart for Life Weight Management Centers (including the location at 15030 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks; 862-THIN; [www.smartforlife.com](http://www.smartforlife.com)) are still building name recognition around the country, its more familiar and whimsically named diet plan, "The Cookie Program," has certainly gotten attention and even raised a few eyebrows.

A diet where you eat cookies six times a day? It does sound too good to be true at first. However, the cookies are actually high-density, super-food meal replacements. And while the diet itself does not permit milk with these cookies (or fruit during the initial phase), the plan is accompanied with a complete health analysis, a comprehensive battery of medical tests with a Cedars-Sinai doctor, blood tests and some very thorough and customized coaching from center director Lori Merritt and her team. Furthermore, there are also specially selected supplements, a supermarket cheat sheet and even a little bit of tough love from diet counselors.

However, according to Merritt, some discipline and sacrifice in the beginning leads to improved health results that are both instant and long lasting, in the forms of better eating habits and a smarter all-around lifestyle.

"The result of this diet, in fact, is a quick fix, as people can lose between 12 and 15 pounds per month," notes Merritt. "This keeps them motivated to continue, as they lose weight every week. When a client completes the tests, I speak to him or her one on one and coach about nutrition...how to eat, what to eat, when to eat and sampling products we sell that will make their foods even better. No matter how busy their lifestyle is, we strive to help clients learn to prepare healthy meals at home and order wisely from menus when they go out to eat...the whole thing. There are no group meetings. It is all about the individual."

The warm, bubbly Merritt works in a cheerful environment amid shelves of the magic cookies (offered in classic flavors such as oatmeal and chocolate chip and savory flavors like Garden Pizza) and low-calorie artisan condiments by local producers Vivi's, Galeo's and Smart for Life. Once you've committed to the program and completed the tests, she offers you the good news and the bad news. The bad news first: no dairy, no fruit (due to high sugar content) and no "white" (rice, bread, potatoes) foods during the "cookie" phase. The good news: you get to enjoy a sensible, delicious dinner every night with restaurant-sized portions of protein (fish, chicken, tofu, egg whites, Boca burgers) and green vegetables, made all the more restaurant-like with the addition of their array of astonishingly tasty condiments.

"Hilfd, Virtuoso Vegetarian" provides healthy vegetarian recipes for those striving to eat more healthy.



As for what happens during the day, Merritt insists staying on target couldn't be easier. "The cookies are 80 calories and need to be consumed with water but have the nutrients of a balanced meal, thanks to the amino acids (proteins), which makes up for the fruit not allowed at the initial stages," she explains. "You enjoy six cookies a day, with your first cookie consumed 90 minutes after you wake up with water, coffee or ice tea. This kick starts your metabolism. Ninety minutes later, you eat another cookie with liquid, and another 90 minutes, later, spacing them out evenly throughout the day. Doing this helps keep blood sugar elevated and normal, keeping your body in a fat-burning zone. That's why this diet burns fat without muscle loss."

After the target weight loss has been met, Merritt and her team coach clients (a nearly equal number of men and women, by the way) into the maintenance phase, where certain fruits, fatter fish (salmon and sea bass) and other healthy foods can be worked back in with moderation. Better still, you may actually no longer crave unhealthy fare. "I always tell my clients, 'You know what wine, bread, fries, etc., taste like. You can see it with your eyes, so you don't need to put it in your mouth,'" Merritt says.

## NutriSystem: Star-Powered Slimming

With many celebrities swearing by the plan and food (including Valley resident Jillian Barberie Reynolds, former Encino resident Tori Spelling, Marie Osmond, Tony Orlando, Dan Marino and Larry The Cable Guy), NutriSystem, Inc., has become a household name. Dieters pick the right NutriSystem plan for their age, gender and health situation, and results are bound to follow. Surf NutriSystem's website, and you'll see celebrities and regular folks mix freely on the before-and-after results photo pages.

That said, this time-tested company has made numerous improvements to its offerings. Most recently, NutriSystem Advanced replaced NutriSystem Nourish as the company's core weight-loss program with products and procedures based on latest advances in dietary science. Furthermore, the food itself has generated a buzz, as it also tastes better than earlier generations of NutriSystem cuisine. New proprietary and heart-healthy ingredients found in the new selections include OmegaSol (a patent-pending combination of heart-healthy soluble fibers and Omega-3 fatty acids that promote a healthy heart during weight loss) and NutriSol (a blend of soluble fibers naturally present in oats, fruits and whole grains that control appetite).

The appeal of NutriSystem's more modern "holistic approach" and seven specific plans (Women's Program, Men's Program, Women's Diabetic Program, Men's Diabetic Program, Women's Silver Program, Men's Silver Program, and Vegetarian Program) is evident. However, to make each plan in the program



Blueberry pancakes are on the Nutri-System plan.

more effective and well-rounded for the individual, there

is also a personalized Results Kit package that includes a Mindset Makeover (a paradigm-shifting behavior guide intended to help dieters keep the lost weight off) as well as fitness DVDs developed by fitness experts Leslie Sansone and Vaughn Hebrun. This dieter's toolbox is completed with a customized meal planner, online community access information, a Quick Start Guide and more. The icing on this proverbial cake is that the program has no membership fees and includes free online and telephone counseling.

## A BalanceD Approach

Back East, elements health clubs are jazzing up the diet and fitness world with high tech women's fitness clubs whose exercise plans are so customized that an exact workout can be programmed into a personal "smart card" based on current measurements, weight loss objectives and fitness goals. For multi-tasking women who need to plan their lives carefully, it is an idea whose time has come. However, elements' Los Angeles debut is timed for mid-year 2009.

In the interim, California women can get with the program through its affiliate online portal, BalanceD ([www.balanceyourelements.com](http://www.balanceyourelements.com)), which offers a prolific online diet program, custom meal planning, nutrition and diet coaching, as well as a supportive diet community, expert advice and tips and related retail

products. A lifetime membership and access to all this professional advice, as well as do-it-at-home custom fitness programs that should keep you busy until the elements clubs open in Southern California, is \$99.

BalanceD's biggest selling point is the high-tech "element" that can deliver specifically tailored meal and exercise plans by inputting all your measurements. With the personal details figured in, the program indicates how many calories a day you should be taking in to lose/gain weight. From there, you can choose from a special diet (i.e. heart healthy, diabetic), a pre-constructed meal plan (that can be customized), or the capability to build a meal plan from scratch. Once the plan is selected, there's also a button at the bottom of the screen to print a shopping list.

"Because each individual has unique fitness and lifestyle goals, BalanceD and elements' approach to diet and fitness is a more modern and efficient way busy 25-65 year old women can have their needs met and attain their personal health goals," says Dr. Fabian Lopez. "elements is a one-stop location for health, fitness, and diet needs within a community, especially in Southern California where diet and fitness is an integral part of the lifestyle. Our members enjoy a high rate of success because the customized diet is combined with a proven exercise program. All elements branded health clubs use the same proprietary operating software, as well as our proprietary intranet based and hands-on training and diet modules to ensure consistency with our offerings nationwide. We look forward to the time when Southern California women can experience the entire program, but are confident the availability of BalanceD will get them off to a good, healthy start." VM

## Serving Style to the Hilt

If you want to entertain healthier this summer, look to Switzerland for inspiration. Granted, Switzerland is best known for cheese and chocolates, but it is also home to Hiltl, the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the West. The gorgeous coffee table tome "*Hiltl, Virtuoso Vegetarian*," by Rolf Hiltl with Helmut Schattauer and Sven Zyschka, offers recipes and sexy photos of the hottest—and coolest—healthy meatless dishes anywhere. The book is available via Hiltl ([www.hiltl.ch](http://www.hiltl.ch)).

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# Beating Stress

Has the economy, job pressure or the state of the world got you down? Take heart! There are many easy, energizing ways to uplift body, mind and soul.

by Elyse Glickman

The year 2008 was a roller coaster for many Americans. However, even with the optimism that a new year brings, many of us in the Valley are still dealing with the various pressures that come from living in Southern California—traffic, a rising cost-of-living, body image, a tightening job market and over-planned schedules. Because of these stress-triggering circumstances, many of us may be compelled to start changing our lifestyle habits to reduce our expenses and keep our minds and health in check.

Indeed, the growing constraints of stress present an opportunity to simplify our lives by adopting smarter habits, attitudes and hobbies. Continuation of these practices can even pay off in the long run, with lower medical bills, better communication with others and a lower dependence on prescription medications. You may even realize that as you downsize personally and professionally, you'll be increasingly convinced less really is more.

## Improving Your "Nerve Center"

"You can find statistics from doctors that indicate 70 percent to 95 percent of health problems patients report are one way or another connected to stress," points out Dr. Lisa Hubler, who with husband/partner Dr. Dale Jaffe, operates A Mind Matters. The center addresses stress and self-destructive habits that go with it (smoking, overeating) through a customized mix of body and mind therapies that can produce more exact and lasting results, say the doctors.

"Because of the way most of us live our lives today, our neuro-system is constantly bombarded with hundreds of demands on our well-being because of emails, cell phone calls and other things we feel obligated to respond to," Hubler continues. "As these things accumulate, patients realize they need some help in order to cope with the new demands life brings."

"A lot of people have come to us for help with job performance and weight loss," adds Jaffe. "More recently, people are approaching us about dealing with post-traumatic stress. We don't know exactly if it is because there is an increased incidence of it, or if people are more upfront about it because there is a greater awareness about it. No matter what form stress takes, it is a component of virtually every health issue patients bring to us."

Jaffe and Hubler point out that many popular anti-anxiety drugs only mask or reduce the intensity of symptoms. (And, many have proven undesirable side effects like weight gain and the accumulation of chemicals in the system.) Indeed, Jaffe and Hubler believe patients are better served with a customized program that address the problem directly.

## Changing Your Train of Thought... and Your Family's

As Sherman Oaks-based acupuncture, chiropractor and herbalist Geraldine Greenberg sees it, patients of all ages need to take a step back. They need to ask themselves how they are doing...and be truly honest with themselves and their loved ones.

"I appreciate patients who really get into my whole body-mind-soul approach," Greenberg says candidly. "Some people are not present, even in treatment. They ask me to just do the acupuncture, recommend herbs or do the adjustments and get them back on the freeway...as if life were a NASCAR race. I am a technician working in the pit, and they've made a pit stop. If parents are under stress, the whole family is under stress. Just as you cannot function without a balance of body, mind and spirit, the family has a body, a mind and a spirit, and each person affects the other. I teach the parents and kids I treat that just as music without pauses is noise, life without rest is a surefire way to burn out the system. I try to get them to exercise not just their bodies. Through breathing exercises and calming techniques, they can exercise their minds."

Greenberg cites the overly programmed lives of kids as a major cause of family-related stress, especially as she—and her adult patients—recall a time not so long ago where kids had after-school playtime to expend their pent up energy, and Sundays were times for family bonding without the "ulterior motives" to accomplish something. Though some patients say they get benefits for their souls at church or synagogue, Greenberg points out that even that may not be an absolute retreat from stress. Sometimes the solution, with the help of a professional who maintains a variety of practices (or "modalities," as she refers to them), comes from within.

"While I respect patients who make the commitment to be worked on and have chosen a natural [drug-free] way to go about it, ultimately, they need to slow down and take a closer look at what's going on with their whole environment," she affirms. "The economy is making people look inside and find ways they can simplify in ways that are meaningful. They should ask themselves if they really need pills or an abundance of stimulants [movies, iPods, material things]. Many find what they really need in the end is quiet time. While there is a time and place for pharmaceuticals depending on the person, patients should pay closest attention to their most affected areas. While pharmaceuticals relieve some symptoms, you need to address areas where stress affects you most as an individual—getting to where the stress manifests itself most in your body."



## Not Just Child's Play

Jules Hogan, who offers children's yoga at Two Hearts Yoga in Sherman Oaks, notes that although children and teens can benefit from a yoga practice no matter when they start, those who start between ages 3 and 5 are at a certain advantage. As she sees it, they adapt to the physicality of this relaxing form of exercise most quickly, gaining health and stress management benefits that will serve them throughout their lives.

"My biggest goal with yoga, especially with the youngest students, is teaching kids how to establish a sense of self-love, especially in L.A. where the surroundings bring up self-esteem issues," she says. "Through the various poses and breathing, they learn how to take care of and nurture themselves. Learning how to breathe properly is very important, especially as kids deal with situations like exams, competitive sports and family disputes. For example, instead of engaging or freezing in a tense situation, I teach kids they can go into their room, get into tree pose and count to 30. This will enable them to see the situation a lot differently and help them avoid doing or saying things they may regret. The calming Shavasana pose also can help them get to sleep and relax more easily."

Hogan has observed in her practice that yoga is especially beneficial to children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and other disabilities. Because these children are often detail-oriented, she noticed they have special appreciation for how yogic movements and breathing can serve them beyond the studio, especially if they get mainstreamed into regular education classrooms.

Angela Parker, creator of Body Inspired Fitness ([www.bodyinspiredfitness.com](http://www.bodyinspiredfitness.com), offering classes in Balboa Park and North Hollywood Park) feels that a personalized approach to fitness better serves the physical and mental needs of clients between 5 and 105. Like Hogan, Parker offers classes that not only burn calories but also give participants the impetus to maintain their newly acquired good habits on their own. Parker's programs also offset stress simply by virtue of the fact that she and her team will take into account favorite indoor and outdoor activities and settings for workout sessions.

## Dancing Your Cares Away

Councilwoman Jan Perry, representing Los Angeles District 9 (skirting downtown Los Angeles and the USC area), has coped with stress from her job successfully for years through a variety of healthy practices, including Thai boxing. However, adding ballroom dancing to the slate not only added a creative dimension to her life, but also great opportunities to become closer to her teenage daughter. Though Perry started dancing lessons at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, she found that Santa Monica's The Dance Doctor's (John Cassese) approach to dance instruction spoke to her body, mind and spirit.

"The more I dance, and the better I become, the more I am able to empty my mind of all negative thoughts," says Perry. "Dancing is a very freeing experience, and I am just in the moment. [The studio] is unpretentious—a crossroads of people who come from all over L.A. to learn a variety of different kinds of dances, and it is fun to watch these different people practice. My teacher also has me build upon [my skills] in a way that is supportive and non-threatening. I feel enriched by listening to him, because when I was growing up, people had told me that I wasn't so coordinated. He proved to me that all I needed was a teacher who would help me understand how to work with my body. It is also intellectually satisfying because you also learn something new."

Perry also values the experience she has had in the past year attending lessons with her daughter, emphasizing that doing this is not just a way for the two of them to get exercise, but it is also helping her teach her child how to manage stress. "The fact that my teenager is willing to come with me gives me downtime with her, making this a two-for-one experience," she muses.

According to Cassese, while a student is focusing on what she is learning, she is releasing endorphins. That student is using her mind, her body and soul and spirit. Everything goes into it because that is what is required to become a good dancer. He also believes that if one can walk, one can dance, which is, in turn, why a significant number of his students and his staff come from the Valley for the experience. "Without dance, life can be very boring, so I tell my teachers and staff to make sure everybody is having fun," Cassese says. "Then they don't feel stress because they have smiles on their faces."



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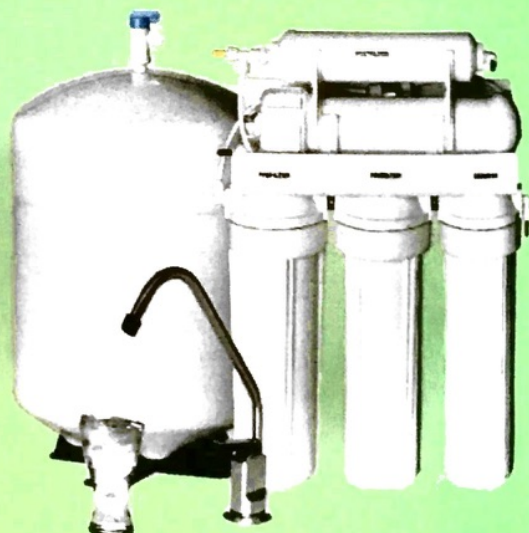
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*The Dance Doctor*

### **Animal Instinct**

According to Elizabeth Scott, MS, the very presence of pets can alleviate a bad mood. And, pet owners are more apt to go out and get more exercise. In fact, it has been medically proven that pets can help control blood pressure better than ACE inhibiting drugs, and they can help their humans develop improved social skills and greater confidence. Attaining this type of cuddly therapy is as easy as visiting [www.adoptapet.com](http://www.adoptapet.com) or [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com) to locate a nearby shelter.

For those in situations where pet adoption is not possible, the ADOPT Program at the Los Angeles County Zoo ([www.lazoo.org](http://www.lazoo.org)) enables people to bond with endangered animals in ways that are also socially responsible. According to the program's Laura Stegman, becoming involved with a favorite species puts donors more in touch with nature and the world. Adoptive "foster" humans receive a personalized adoption certificate and animal fact sheet with a photo of their animal ambassador. The program can include special experiences, including docent-led zoo cart tours guaranteed to take ADOPT-ors out of their every day confines. VM



*LA County Zoo's ADOPT Program*





# Should I Stay,

# REDUCED PRICE

# or Should I Go ?

by Elyse Glickman

*The economy may be down, but affordable home-buying opportunities in the Valley are up. Real estate experts weigh in on the current market scenario.*

Sometimes the things we want most are just beyond our reach. That old truism certainly applied to the Southern California real estate market for much of this decade, when home prices soared to dizzying new heights. Families who needed to upgrade from their existing homes for more space or a better school district found themselves in a challenging place.

That said, there is another truism: What goes up, must come down. As home prices have tumbled, the dream house now seems within reach for those who saved and managed their finances well. Trustworthy real estate agents, however, point out there are more than just a few catches involved with the falling prices. Though many of them acknowledge that buyers are in the driver's seat again for the first time in years, the rules of the game have changed, and it's helpful to become intimately familiar with these new real estate standards.

## How Green is Our Valley?

Syd Leibovitch, owner and president of Rodeo Realty, believes that now is the time to buy a home or a condominium, if you are planning on making a long-term commitment. He also notes that the price of condos has fallen dramatically (40 percent in value, in comparison to 30 percent for single family homes), especially in areas like Sherman Oaks and North Hollywood where too many condos were built during the boom. However, Leibovitch expects homes to stabilize.

Todd Hays of Dickson Podley Realtors in Pasadena sees the market now at the cusp of the downward cycle and thinks prices could start going up. "If you try to time the market at this point and wait for a better deal, you could miss out on the house that's right for you," he says. "Prices are competitive, and that dream house may not stay on the market for long. Even if you don't think you

will be ready to start the buying process for months, start looking now so you're ready when that right house comes along."

Zip Realty's Richard Greene observes that while the San Fernando Valley has taken a good hit, buyers are realizing that as home prices have fallen, interest rates now favor those entering the market. The ZipRealty.com site, meanwhile, is intended to be a virtual library set up to demystify the many terms that have become part of the home-buying vernacular. Short sales, for example, happen when a seller owes more on the property than what the property is currently worth on the market. When a seller cannot make payments, they make arrangements with the lending institution to sell the property for less than what is owed on it. Many loans and mortgages, especially sub-prime mortgages, were bundled up and sold to Wall Street, which then sold them to other investors. Unfortunately, when one of these properties is a potential sale, each of the investors has to be contacted to accept the offer.

"I have a lot of clients who were sitting outside the market who have now contacted me to tell me they are now ready and prepared to start seriously looking for a property," Greene says. "However, buyers need to be patient, especially with foreclosures or short sales, and competition between buyers is keen. With short sale homes, it can take up to five-and-a-half months to make final decisions from the lending institutions."

While Daron Campbell, managing partner of RE/MAX Real Estate in Sherman Oaks, agrees the recession has brought about a buyer's market, he also warns that it will probably go on for another three to four years, and home prices will continue to fall. Contrary to other real estate specialists, he also believes the market correcting itself means home-buying opportunities will not dry up overnight.

"In this cycle, we are only in the front end of the buyer's market and about two years from bottoming out," Campbell explains. "Other real estate people may be more optimistic than me, but as I see it—especially because I have a degree in economics—different things have to happen before the market corrects itself. We have such a big [supply] of real estate that is headed for foreclosure. All of it has to cycle through the system. When the banks take houses back, they have to sell them for lower than the lowest comparable prices, continuing to drive prices down. While a three to four year recession is a scary thing to talk about, it is also a time of opportunity for people just getting into the market who may not have previously been able to afford it."

Jamie Duran, Studio City branch manager of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage, like Campbell, also believes there is an opportunity to purchase desirable, well-priced homes and condos for first-time buyers. "We are in a perfect storm with higher inventory, lower sales units and favorable interest rates," she says. "We are particularly seeing a lot of competition on our bank-owned properties and short sale properties because that's where buyers recognize the best value right now."



## Selling vs. Buying: Tales from the Homefront

So, where are the best places to find bargains and what are the up-and-coming areas new buyers should consider? While many cite neighborhoods around the North Hollywood Arts District, Campbell observes great opportunities can be found even in some upscale enclaves of Encino and Tarzana, as well as Valley Village, Woodland Hills, West Hills and Walnut Acres. The agents also share the opinion that those who buy should do it for the long term, and those who sell should only do it because they have to...and to proceed with care and caution.

Zip Realty's Greene warns that a key downside of being a seller in today's market is that he or she is competing with foreclosures and short sales. "Even though your home has been upgraded with granite kitchen countertops and all kinds of bells and whistles, everything you can do to a home to make it more desirable and saleable still has to compete with lower-priced homes," he warns.

According to Coldwell Banker's Duran, however, the buy vs. sell argument is not black and white. "Buying and selling houses is an individual decision," she says. "Some buyers recognize that taking advantage of the market right now is a wise decision, since there is high inventory and lower interest rates in good neighborhoods. However, people who need to sell can also benefit in this market. While they may need to lower their selling price, they can make up the difference on the buy."

For families in the market, Hays advises them to become familiar with the school districts. Buyers without children, he points out, will find lower-priced homes outside of areas known for their good schools. "Many of our agents noted condos were a great alternative, especially for single professionals and first-time buyers," he adds. "Monthly payments on condos are currently near or about the same as the going rents in the area."

"Condos are going to be a great option because the government is going to create incentives for first-time buyers," adds Campbell. "Condos are being heavily discounted because they are being foreclosed upon just like single family homes, and this creates a great entry point for people. Condos that sold for \$600,000 or \$700,000 are now selling for \$350,000 or \$400,000. As for those who already own homes, the bottom line is that if you love your home and you can afford it, then you should stay because the value won't go up for years. However, there are some other mitigating factors, such as buying a home one couldn't afford. If your income does not justify the size of your mortgage or you bought with some kind of hybrid loan, you should get out fast, because the value of that home is going to continue to drop for at least a couple more years, and you will be further under water."

## The Number's Game

Campbell further explains that the drop in home values was a correction that had to happen. "We got into this greed pattern where the prices kept going up and the banks kept lending irrationally, and things had to collapse," he explains. "The other

side of the coin is that many opportunities are being created for those who can now afford to buy."

"There are two different markets," details Rodeo Realty's Leibovitch. "There is one market where you can get a loan at 6.25 percent or lower. That market is really good, and there are lots of homes on the market, and they have stabilized in price. In some better neighborhoods, they have come up from the very bottom. With FHA financing, buyers can get that loan with as low as 3.5 percent down, which means one could buy a \$500,000 home for about \$20,000 down. However, any loan with a rate more than 6.255 percent, the interest rate goes up to 8 percent, and you need to put 20 percent down and it requires perfect or near perfect credit. You also need documentable income. It is really hard to qualify above 6.255 percent because these are loans from private lenders, not the government."

Hays, meanwhile, says current interest rates at historic lows may be not be here a year from now. "You won't necessarily be aware of when they are actually going up until they've started to go up," he cautions. "Now is an amazing time to buy, in part, because prices are at a great low, interest rates are at a great low, and if you are a first-time home buyer, there is that first-time home buyer tax credit. All these things together make this year, this moment, the best time to buy, provided you are not planning to flip the house anytime soon."

If you need to sell your home for any reason, Greene and Duran both stress maintenance, upgrades and curb appeal are required to secure a sale. However, sellers should be careful not to upgrade themselves out of the competition. "If your home is as upgraded as a home can be, and a client understands what has been put into the home, and they are willing to pay the price, great," Greene says. "However, some buyers will come back to you and tell you that they found a comparable house down the street that's \$300,000 instead of the \$500,000 you are charging."

"Pricing is key right now," says Duran. "Buyers need to see something exciting in the market. Sellers don't have to give away their property, but they do need to give buyers incentive. For example, sellers can stay competitive by offering to buy down a rate or pay closing costs. Curb appeal is also important, as is staging and uncluttering the home. In general, sellers must be prepared for a longer time on the market."

"Do upgrades strategically where the returns will be higher than the cost," concurs Leibovitch. "First impressions of a home can make or break a deal. Kitchen and bath renovations are important for higher-end properties, but you need to be careful about costs and who is doing the renovations."

Across the board, one maxim both buyers and sellers should follow is that there's no place like home—at least until the overall economy gets healthier. Taking note of expert opinions about buying and selling and doing additional research is a necessity. VM