

Excerpt

Be Happy Without Being Perfect

How to Worry Less and Enjoy Life More

Martha's World

Nobody is better at showing us what perfection looks like than Martha Stewart. In her magazine, books, and television shows, Martha sets the bar higher than ever. For example, the November 2006 issue promises "The Perfect Thanksgiving – a Classic Feast at Martha's." And perfect it is. A 10-page spread (plus six pages of recipes) shows Martha serving dinner to 23 people in her stable in Westchester County, N.Y. Her 17 ½-foot-long mahogany dining table groans with picture-perfect food, including rolls shaped like turkey tails, mushroom soup with chervil cream and tiny croutons, a photogenic turkey with quince glaze, seven side dishes, three sauces, and two desserts – all made from scratch, of course.

Photos show Martha and her adult guests relaxing at the candlelit dinner table while the children sit happily at a kids' table made with plywood planks set across hay bales and covered with linen cloths. Five handsome thoroughbred horses stand in their stables nearby, adding ambience. A trough full of wine and sparkling water sits beneath a large wreath made of real carrots. Martha even seems to have control over the weather: A light snowfall has "powdered trees, frosted rooftops, and coated the ground like a plush blanket."

What's wrong with these pictures? I'll tell you what's wrong with them. You see perfection, but you don't see the army of people – chefs, recipe testers, food stylists, editors, clothing stylists, lighting experts, horse trainers, and kitchen

helpers, to name a few – who worked endless hours to create this fantasy. What you see in the pictures is Martha pulling off this immense, amazing dinner by herself, with the only help coming, in one picture, from a burly guest who helps her carry the perfectly browned 26-pound turkey to the table. But one person can't pull this off. To cook this meal, you'd need to make 21 recipes that call for about 150 ingredients. You'd need a restaurant-size staff to serve a Thanksgiving dinner like Martha's.

All this is fine as a fantasy, but when real women look at it and compare their Thanksgiving dinners to Martha's, theirs don't stand a chance. There is no room on Martha's table for canned cranberry sauce, green bean casserole with French-fried onions, and sweet potato-marshmallow bake. Martha's turkey-tail rolls would leave my Pop' n' Fresh rolls in the dust, and her sweet tartlets made with "a variety of heirloom squashes chosen for their hues" would put my pie made with canned pumpkin and ready-to-bake pie crust to shame.

While ladling soup into elegant china bowls, Martha looks calm and fresh, without even a drop of basting juices on her apron. I don't know about you, but at my house, by the time I'm actually ladling things into bowls, I am sweating, splattered with gravy, and looking around anxiously for my next glass of wine. If a real family ate at Martha's, the kids would be fighting ("I don't *wanna* sit at the kids' table! I don't care if it's made of hay!), the men would be searching the stables for a TV, and the horses would be making a meal of the carrot wreath.

And don't get me started on what Martha does for Christmas.

The new normal

Even if you don't buy into Martha's fantasy world, it affects you. Having Martha in our culture raises expectations to unrealistic levels for all of us, whether we buy into it or not. It changes what our society thinks of as "normal." And it's not just Martha, although she is by far the most fun to pick on. Rachael Ray sells fantasy, too, but in 30-minute packages. Sure, her recipes take half an hour to prepare – provided you have a vegetable fairy to wash the celery, chop the onions, slice the mushrooms, dice the tomatoes, pulverize the garlic, and salad-spin the fresh herbs. What you see on television is perky Rachel making a pizza from scratch in half an hour. What you don't see is the shopping and preparation that go into having all those ingredients ready to use in the refrigerator.

Stores and catalogs sell fantasy, too. Williams-Sonoma (where a 26-pound turkey costs upwards of \$129 plus shipping), Pottery Barn, and Restoration Hardware are some of the most egregious purveyors of daydream-as-reality, but even discount chain Target perpetuates the perfect party fallacy by referring to a football-themed serving dish as an "entertaining essential." I'm here to tell you that it is not essential to have a football-themed serving dish no matter how many Superbowl parties you host. People will not speak unkindly of you if you serve pretzels in a non-football-themed bowl. Most people won't care if you serve them pretzels in a bag. As long as the beer is cold, your guests will think well of you with or without a football-themed serving dish. And if there's enough beer, they won't even remember if there was any food served at all.

The most insidious part of all this is that not only does the media tell you what to do to live a perfect life, but, through advertising, it tells you what to buy in order to have a perfect life. It's easy to forget that the media has a vested interest in making us feel like we need to be more and buy more. Having a country full of

women who won't accept anything less than 100 percent is just what the media wants – you can spend an awful lot of money chasing perfection.