fat city

Durham, North Carolina, is the diet capital of America, with staggering success rates and thousands of newly thin converts. So what's the secret?

It is 8:15 A.M., and a handful of people are scattered in a conference room, each sitting with one palm upturned. Perched in the center of every palm is a single, tiny, wrinkled raisin. Outside, the Southern sky is low and rainy. The "How to Eat Just One Raisin" workshop at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center has begun.

"I want you to think about where this raisin came from, how it got to you," intones the leader, clinical social worker Sasha Loring. "Examine it closely, think of what had to happen to make it what it is." Heads bow in concentration. "Now put it in your mouth, but don't chew it. Notice how it feels on your tongue. Just let it sit there for a minute." Eyes close, mouths purse. "Okay, start chewing, and chew it as long as you can, focusing on what it feels like, tastes like."

Some of the people now intent on the half-teaspoon of sweet, sticky mush in their mouths have been known to down multiple pizzas in one sitting. Some have weighed hundreds more pounds than their frames were built to support. All have suffered guilt, remorse, and self-loathing over their inability to lose weight. They have finally traveled to Durham, North Carolina, a place that has been called the Diet Capital of the World. Here, at one of several large weight-loss programs—to dieters what the Hazelden or Betty Ford centers are to drug addicts—they will spend weeks learning to radically scale down.

I am privately wondering how soon I will be hungry again, though it's only a few minutes since I ate the apple pancakes and grapefruit in the DFC dining room. Two hours after a DFC dinner the night before, I wrenched open the door of the refrigerator in my two-room suite to find a lone bottle of Poland Spring water. But hunger, I am to find out in Durham, is not really the heart of the problem.

"I never realized raisins were that sweet," says Marcy Drogin, a thirty-three-year-old production executive from New York who is in many ways emblematic of DFC participants. She's lost weight before—at the Diet Center, the Diet Institute, and three forays at Weight Watchers—each time the pounds crept back. Exercise made her stronger but no less fat. She wants to do it right this time, and is willing to miss work for two weeks and spend over $5,000 to find out what that right way is. She is tired of being fat. DFC is the last stop.

What Durham offers is the upper end of the desperation market. Coming here is the dieting equivalent of attending a graduate-level Harvard seminar (the hoi polloi have to settle for a Zone Diet correspondence-school course). But even the graduate curriculum is far from a sure thing.

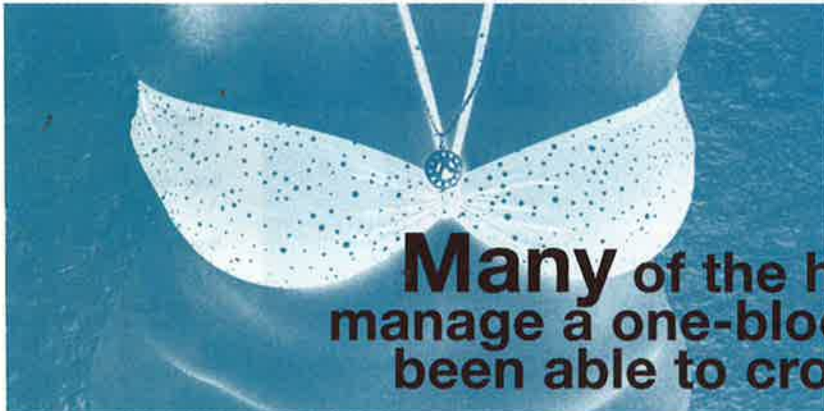
The raisin-eaters this morning are nonetheless hopeful and attentive. For many, the decision to come here was not cosmetic but mortal. Some arrive connected to oxygen tanks or in wheelchairs. Many of the heaviest cannot manage a one-block walk; many have not been able to cross >

VIVIANE MOOS/SABA

Elle. April '99

their legs in years. New Jersey priest Emil Agostino, sixty-one, is here because his weight was causing back pain so severe he could barely stagger down the aisle of his church. After two weeks, he was thrilled to find he could reach his feet and tie his shoelaces. Jerry, fifty-five, from Long Island, came because his blood pressure remained dangerously high even on medication. His mother had died of a cerebral hemorrhage. On the DFC plan, his blood pressure fell to the normal range within eight days.

Now the raisin-eaters are ready to listen to the sayings of a Buddhist meditation teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. Sasha Loring reads aloud: "When I was four, my mother used to bring me a cookie . . . I took my time eating it, sometimes forty-five minutes . . . I would take a small bite and look up at the sky. I enjoyed being there, with the sky, the earth, the bamboo thickets, the cat, the dog, the flowers. I did not think of the future, I did not regret the past. I was entirely in the present. . . . It is possible to eat our meals as slowly and joyfully as I ate the cookie of my childhood."



Many of the heaviest cannot manage a one-block walk; many have not been able to cross their legs in years.

One of the most intriguing questions that is raised in Durham, and the question that may underlie all efforts to lose the millions of excess pounds Americans are currently carting around, is how that cookie—that ability to be at peace with food—was lost in the first place. Was it laziness, inattention, neurosis, predestination, simple gluttony? The diet emporiums of Durham do not agree on an answer.

Durham, founded on tobacco money, reinvented itself as the City of Medicine in 1981. Now every year, some 8,100 dieters come to Durham—a tiny but well-heeled and well-educated percentage of the country's obese population—and bring with them about $31 million to drop into the local economy. Besides the DFC, which was begun in 1969 by doctors at the Duke University Medical Center, there is Structure House, founded in 1977 by Gerard J. Musante, PhD, and his wife, Rita; and the Rice Diet program, started in 1939 by a German doctor, Walter Kempner.

The three programs all claim that 60 to 70 percent of their participants have kept the weight off or lost more a year after leaving, but all point out that these numbers are soft: They are self-reported by the dieters, and there is a percentage of alumni who drop out of touch and cannot be counted; those are likely to be regainers. But even if optimistic, the numbers are better than the dismal findings of a National Institutes of Health panel in 1992, which estimated that 90 to 95 percent of people in organized diet programs gain back most or all of the weight they lost.

The big three also share the fundamentals: portion control, a low-calorie food plan, a "lifestyle" approach, and a big business in returnees. These return visits are not a sign of failure, administrators insist, but instead simply proof of the depth of the transformation that must take place.

Yet the differences between the programs reveal exactly how much—and how little—is known about obesity. Those differences also prompt the closest thing to rivalry between the directors of the program. None will openly criticize the other two; only in the heat of discussing the issues are any mild aspersions cast. For instance, on the discovery of leptin and other related hormones and genes: "The use of food in our society is more of an issue than the genetic underpinnings," says Structure House's Musante, whose program emphasizes the emotional roots of obesity. "Leptin was an important discovery," says Michael Hamilton, MD, director of the DFC, where weight loss is approached as an intellectual pursuit. On the idea that emotions are the key to obesity (Structure House's core theory): "Overweight is in the psychological realm, but does that kind of intervention fix the problem?" asks Robert Rosati, MD, director of the Rice Diet program, the success of which lies in its participants committing to a lifetime of spartan eating (the original diet was rice and fruit, nothing else).

After a few days absorbing the accumulated wisdom in Durham, I no longer wondered why so many people failed at losing weight; rather, the wonder is that any succeed. One other thing: I was very hungry.

"I used to feel I was a fat person in a fat person's body," Marcy Drogin says. "But a couple of years ago, I started working out, firming up, getting stronger, and I realized I didn't feel like I fit my body anymore." Even so, when she arrived at DFC and started unpacking, she was startled to find herself overwhelmed. "I was scared—I hardly told anyone I was doing this, and in the past, I told everybody about my diets. That way, it was about them >

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policing and helping me. This time, it's about me."

My first day at DFC, a group-therapy session of returnees graphically illustrated what makes the plan work, and not work. Steve, forties, Milwaukee: "I lost fifty-five pounds and kept them off for eighteen months. Then I started losing control. I stopped eating breakfast, stopped using my diary. I gained back half the weight I'd lost."

Amelia, fifties, Florida: "I became resentful about the diet and exercise. Finally, I threw out the whole thing."

Joanne, who's lost twenty-five pounds and would like to lose another ten, describes a grueling workshop she attended last year: "We had to eat our favorite food until we were satisfied—chocolate, Brie, whatever. Then we had to throw it away. Some people couldn't do it. They begged to give it away—to the receptionist, anybody. Some went back later and took it out of the garbage and ate it."

"We eat in response to happiness, we eat in response to sadness," DFC director Hamilton tells me a few days later. "We're all predisposed to store fat." Hamilton is a moderate, or perhaps simply a realist, when it comes to results. "We need to start saying something different about success," he says. "The fact is, we can't all be thin, but we can all be healthy." Another reason to lower expectations, he says, is that the formerly fat will always be different from the never-fat, even if their weight is the same: They're susceptible to regain, and must eternally be careful.

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But Durham is a place premised on change. "In the end, thin people are thin because they prefer to be thin," says Robert Rosati, MD, of the Rice House. "On a day-to-day basis, I mean. If a thin person gains weight, they want to take it off; they don't say, Maybe I'll go back to the Rice House next year and do it. But overweight people would rather eat, and worry about it tomorrow."

Everyone in Durham has seen escapees, those for whom the lure of fast food or Carolina barbecue was, at least momentarily, too powerful. After twenty-four hours on low-sodium, low-calorie foods, I thought I understood why: hunger. Yet the dieters I met said they weren't inordinately hungry. "The people who work here starve on the diet," says DFC nutritionist Franca Alphin. "If we eat lunch here, by mid-afternoon we're cruising the office, looking for snacks. But many clients don't know what hungry feels like—they have so many fat stores and are used to eating all the time. They never wait long enough to get hungry."

By my second day, I staggered to Fowler's, a gourmet store a few blocks from the DFC. There, proprietors Mimi Jardine and Dan Fairris have watched dieters pace their creaking wooden floors. They browse the cookbooks, eye the rafts of salamis and prosciutto, the gleaming counters of cheese and olives, the rows of sweets—Dutch syrup wafers, orange cake dipped in chocolate.

I left with a package of McVitie's Rich Tea Biscuits (emotional connection: I lived on them in college), Gala apples, a package of dates, and Death By Chocolate: a brownie stuffed with chocolate chips and nuts. This I ate out of a paper bag while walking back to my room at Duke Tower, in the manner of an alcoholic sneaking a drink. I did not eat mindfully; I did not restore the cookie of my childhood.

The next day I headed across town to Structure House, where the money shows. The main building mimics a graceful mansion, with a piano in the front drawing room. The dining room is more restaurant than mess hall, and the apartments on the grounds, are cushy and lodgelike. The gym, exercise rooms, and pools occupy their own building. The program itself is as spare as the others—1,000 to 1,500 calories per day, exercise, nutrition reeducation.

At a twice-weekly encounter session called "Staying Structured," Gerard J. Musante, PhD, Structure House's founder/guru, leads a discussion that circles back to his main point: It's about feelings. Musante is a tall, lanky man—formerly fat, as he often mentions.

"When I see my daughter do self-destructive things," says one woman, "I feel, God, I was a terrible mother. So I eat, to punish myself."

"What do you want to eat at that moment?" asks Musante.

"Spaghetti. But I don't have it in the house, because I know I binge on it. So I might eat bread—a whole loaf."

"Why do you like spaghetti? What is your earliest memory of spaghetti?"

"Stirring the spaghetti sauce in my grandmother's kitchen, and her saying what a good, helpful girl I was."

"That doesn't sound like food as punishment to me," says Musante. "Always look for the payoff you're getting. In this situation, you want to feel like that good little girl again. The speediest way to do that is to eat spaghetti. How can you recapture the emotion without using the food? This is a journey, it's gradual. It could take six years to understand the emotional connections, then more years to break them."

Musante elaborates on his program over lunch in his office. A waiter brings in our lunch on trays: mine is a small toasted bagel with a scoop of tuna salad, coleslaw, mandarin oranges; Dr. M (as he is often called) has whole-wheat toast with a little roast beef and oranges. "You can't keep weight off if the prior relationship with food is still >

there," he says. "And you have to realize you're different—you can't behave like someone who's naturally thin. It's like being a veteran of a war; you are forever changed by it."

Rice House, Durham's first diet program and still its most spartan, is located in a low-sitting, modest building reminiscent of an Elks Lodge—industrial-style carpeting, spare furnishings, an entryway with documentary-style before-and-after photos attesting to losses of 112, 145, even 265 pounds. Walter Kempner, a German émigré who died in September 1997 at ninety-four, created the diet in the 1930s at Duke University to treat kidney problems (the program is still affiliated with the university, though separate from the Duke DFC). When Kempner noticed the weight loss that resulted, he began offering the diet to the obese. Many participants come in with sky-high cholesterol, trailing prescriptions, and find their numbers dropping within a week. A majority of them end up reducing or eliminating their medications.

The diet itself, around 800 calories a day, extremely low-fat and low-salt, is austere. It begins, for everyone, with rice and fruit, Kempner's bedrock. Robert Rosati, MD, a cardiologist who's been the director of the program since 1992, when Kempner retired, still feels that's the most effective diet, but has liberalized the program to include other grains, vegetables, dairy products, and meats. The diet is not about low-fat epicureanism; it's essentially about writing off food as a major source of pleasure. According to Rosati, one benefit of the low sodium content of the plan, in addition to its radical effect on blood pressure, is that it's simply not tasty enough to lust after. "My wife, Kitty, the nutrition director here, is convinced that if you make food attractive enough—beautiful roasted vegetables with garlic and herbs, say—they'll want that instead of a Big Mac. Well, that's a thin person thinking. I think an overweight person would still rather have the hamburger." Rosati laughs.

Overeaters, unlike alcoholics, can't give up their tormentor; they must learn to live with it.

Sunday is changing-of-the-guard day at DFC. Some participants are packing to leave, others are arriving at Duke Tower. Returning from this cocoon, boot camp though it is, to the American universe of mindless eating raises the inevitable question: Can the structure hold up to the blandishments that life on the inside has excluded? Many dieters have hedged their bets and already signed up for a return visit, which is heavily discounted for those who commit to it before they leave.

At relapse workshops, DFC behaviorists map out a basic survival strategy: Cheating without bingeing. Pick one of your "trigger foods," and order a smallish amount of this manna, eat it slowly (the cookie of your childhood), savor the taste, record your feelings, learn how to have it and walk away without being stuffed. This may be akin to giving an alcoholic half a shot of whiskey. DFC's stand is that overeaters, unlike alcoholics, can't give up their tormentor; they must learn to live with it.

One irony that many Durham dieters bring up is the fact that they come here to stop obsessing about food and instead end up having to think about every bite that goes into their mouths: Will I have a teaspoon of butter or of jam on my toast? How many grams of fat do I have left to play with today? Who can live like this?

Researchers at New York's Rockefeller University demonstrated in 1995 why such vigilance is necessary for the formerly overweight. In experiments with metabolic setpoints, they have shown that people who have lost weight must consume less than their same-size compatriots to stay at their new weight. Marcy Drogin has already known the self-disgust and despair of losing twenty-eight pounds on Weight Watchers, and then putting it all back on after she quit smoking. "Stopping smoking was excruciating," she says. "This is harder." □

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