



WE Belong

Meaningful Blogs from Dames

Atlanta Dame Virginia Willis Bares All

By ELLEN KANNER (WASHINGTON D.C.)

French-trained Southern chef, James Beard Award winning cookbook author, Food Network Kitchen contributor and on-camera talent, and the behind-the-scenes kitchen director who's made the likes of Bobby Flay, Martha Stewart and sister Dame **Nathalie Dupree** look good—Dame **Virginia Willis** is all this and more. But despite the sunny charm and confidence she exudes on camera, there was a time the chef wasn't comfortable in her own skin.

"I wasn't happy," Virginia says. "The not happy part was multifaceted." But it started with her weight. "Weight is so incredibly personal. It's the third rail for so many people. We're so judged on it (women especially) and it was the epicenter of me not feeling like enough for so long."

Oh, good grief! If Virginia Willis hasn't felt like enough, is there hope for the rest of us? You bet. And Chef Willis, in helping herself, is helping show so many others the way.

She's both frank and fearless about her journey to wellness—sharing first on social media, then with her cookbook, *Fresh Start*. "I lost a ton of weight and kept it off," Chef Willis says. "I'm super happy about it." While a profile in *Allrecipes* magazine and being the featured cover girl for *Women's World* didn't hurt, "the real reward," she says "is I quit trying to be someone else. I'm me."

In addition to shedding over 65 pounds, she shed a long term relationship, and left Massa-

chusetts to move back home to Georgia. Then came the pandemic lockdown. Virginia, who can waltz through an overflowing schedule, suddenly had free time. She used it to address the one item on her to-do list she'd been putting off for years: herself.

"My initial health journey started with weight, but once I peeled that layer of the onion off, there was a lot more to walk through." Virginia's mantra? *Bring it on*. "It's," she so humbly admits, "a process." And unlike the buttermilk biscuits she's rightly famous for, there's no way of knowing when you're done, if you're done, or even what "done" means. However, you might see some signs along the way.

Virginia did. She reached, what she calls "a super big tipping point" earlier this year. Armed with a shiny new cookbook proposal, she approached a literary agent, who rejected her based on her social media stats. "It's never enough," she says. "This is happening everywhere. Someone with 200,000 followers gets told readers are only interested in you if you have 500,000 followers. If you have 500,000 followers, you need a million. And so on. It's never enough."

It was enough for Chef Willis, though. "Measuring your worth via social media is a dead end," she says, "I'm done." Instead, she's returning the focus back onto her own wellbeing with healthful activities such as walking, yoga, meditation, writing in her gratitude journal, and so on. "If I do all these things, then my mental health is better."

Walking, which started as a way to help with weight loss has become one of the most important things in her life. "It keeps me grounded," she says. Daily walks with friends help to nurture her core relationships, and, it turns out, have also been a way to nurture herself. And when life gets complicated, "a walk is a good place to start solving problems."

There's no walking—or running—away from social media, though. As Chef Willis has said in the past, it's become part of our work and our world. Rather than retreat from it, she's learned to make it work for her. You name a platform, and she's on it—but, on *her* terms.

She no longer shies away from putting it out there, politically or personally. "I quit worrying about what people think. People who tell me to shut up and cook? Come make me. That's not how this works," she says. "It is my job to make this earth a place I want to live in, my responsibility to use whatever platform I



Woman's World News! Delicious snack activates fat-burning liver enzymes
METABOLISM SUPER-BOOST Cooking star Virginia Willis
#1 WEIGHT LOSS TIPS FOR FOOD LOVERS
Study: 'Holy' herb works better than minoxidil + reverses grays too
HAIR GROWS BACK THICKER
Margarita this way to de-puff fast
BYE BYE BELLY BLOAT!
Fast, fruity, good!
Quick, easy recipes + genius tips

have to make life better for other people and myself."

For every hater, Chef Willis has garnered a fistful of new followers. She responds to every one of them. It's their messages to her, though, that really get to her. "I hear from people telling me my story has encouraged them to start their own health journey," she says. "That's mind-blowing. That's powerful. That makes it all worth it."

Whether you have 500,000 followers or a single BFF, "we all affect one another so much," Virginia says. "That was a real lesson for me. Everything you do can have such a ripple effect. So why not have a good ripple?"

Top to bottom: Virginia Willis loves a good hike and fresh air (photo credit: *Eating Well Magazine*); Before and now. "No one, not even me," Virginia says, "remembers me being this large, but here it is... and here I am now!"; "Crazy to realize three national magazines covered my weight loss this year," comments Virginia. "I'm a cover girl!" (photo credit: *Woman's World*)