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[This Alvin Ailey Dancer Fuels Herself With Healthy Meals, Yet All Her Kids Want Is Sugar](#)

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“I try to tell them, you have to fuel your brain and your body if your’re feeling sleepy... but what does mom know?”

The day I speak with Constance Stamatiou of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, she is preparing to meet her fate. Specifically, she is preparing to meet with legendary choreographer Judith Jamison, the company’s Artistic Director Emerita, to rehearse *Cry*, a grueling 16-minute solo that Jamison herself originated.

“I’m about to get my butt handed to me,” she tells me by phone. But Stamatiou knows the demands and is up for the challenge. *Cry* has been part of her repertoire since she joined Ailey in 2007 (she took a few years off to have her children — Savannah, almost 11, and Thanos, 9 — before rejoining in 2016) and she has a tried and true preparation plan: keep a zen mindset and eat. Eat strategically and a lot.



The night before, she says, you’re going to want something like a steak or a big burger. The day of rehearsal calls for a full breakfast: a croissant, eggs, oatmeal. “I try to tell people, especially the new girls that are learning that piece, you have to train and fuel yourself like a marathon runner for that. It goes from slow to more technical to being shot out of a cannon those last five minutes. By the end of the piece, you’re trying to bow, but you really just want to fall to the floor and just stay there for a while.”

I spoke to Stamatiou before she heads out on tour about what it takes to fuel herself as a dancer and a mom, the challenges of fueling tweens who would prefer to live on chips and sugar, and why you shouldn’t always believe influencers’ picture-perfect plates...

You’re from North Carolina. Your mom is African American. Your dad is from Greece. How was that reflected in how you ate growing up? What did family dinners look like for you?

For me, when I think of food, especially coming from the South, I think of soul food. I very much looked forward to holidays because that’s when my entire family would get together and just bring this ample amount of food — buffet style, everything made from scratch. You would have multiples of certain dishes, so it was almost like a bake off. My mom, especially on the holidays, was always telling my dad he had to make his Greek dish: spanakopita. The entire Black side of my family definitely looked forward to that.

Did your family pass down recipes to you?

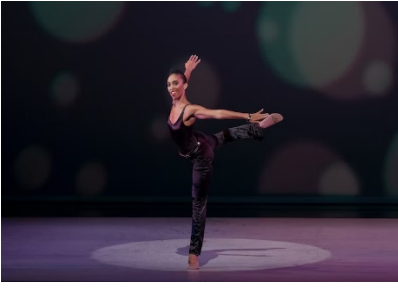
Oh, absolutely. I remember definitely growing up being in the kitchen with my father making spanakopita, and I actually have a notebook with my mom’s recipes.

Do you always like to use recipes or do you like to wing it?

Nope. I have to follow instructions. I guess that’s my life: “have discipline, do as you’re told, and try to get better and better.” When we wrote down my mom’s recipes it was hard because she’s been cooking for so long she can cook off the top of her head — a little this, a little that. I was like, “No mom! I need measurements. I need those instructions.” I don’t trust myself to improv on this! I’ll improv a dance, but not when it comes to cooking.

What does a typical weeknight dinner look like in your family?

My husband Steven is the main cook in the family and he keeps my children and I fed. Whenever I am home not touring, I don’t finish work until 7:00 and I don’t get home until about 8:30. Everyone’s eaten by then and I get home. I’ll eat, and



then it's me saying goodnight to the kids, trying to make them get to bed on time. Thankfully, my husband is super big with meal prepping. He's also a trainer, so this is his lifestyle. I have meals to go to work with and I have meals to come home too that are in little containers. I got a good man feeding me and training me. His motivation definitely helps with mine as a dancer and especially someone who's older. I got to do more than dance. The pounds do not come off as quick. I'm very flexible and I need to balance that out with strength training, otherwise, you're more prone to injuries.

Certainly rehearsing Cry today will be enough of a workout. We've talked about the physical side of performing that piece but I feel like there must be a mental component as well that's also challenging.

Yeah, you've got to be strong physically, and mentally you have to be just as strong. I think when I first joined the company, while Miss Jamison was the director, I was in my early 20s. I don't really say I had much experience, life experience to put into that piece. I was trying to take things from my mom's experience. Now being in my late 30s and having two kids and a husband and going through life, I'm like, "Oh, I have plenty to get off my chest or to release in this piece." It's very therapeutic.

It sounds like your husband has you and the kids well fed, but if it were up to your children, what would they be eating?

Let me tell you, my kids would probably eat hamburgers every day. Or steak. They got some expensive taste. And of course, pizza. And sugar, especially my daughter. [She sighs] When you have your firstborn, you're just like, everything's going to be perfect. They're going to be super healthy. You have this structure. I just remember one day when she was little going down to North Carolina and my dad gave her a bag of chips. I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's ruined!"

I was exactly the same way, and for a while my kids would eat anything and I was so smug about it because I mistook good luck for good parenting. Like, "Oh, well you just have to give them good food." Then both of them turned 2 and a switch flipped. All of a sudden it's like, "I don't want to eat that."

Yes! Same thing here! What happened? I envy these celebrities or friends who are prepping for their toddlers and you see all these little healthy meals. I'm just like, "I wish mine would eat like that." Of course you can't believe everything you see on Instagram...

Well, you are not alone. I love that you are just admitting it. This is so refreshing!

I mean, it's hard. It is a struggle. Especially for my daughter. She's in middle school, and I don't know if these teenage hormones are rubbing off on her, but it's in the morning she doesn't really have an appetite. And we no longer pack her lunch because she wants to have money to buy cool food from the cafeteria or the school store where you can buy candy and soda from the vending machine. And of course she has to make a pit stop on the way home to the 7/11 nearby. I try to tell them, you have to fuel your brain and your body if you're feeling sleepy, it's because of all that sugar you're eating. But what does mom know?

What does mom, the professional dancer, and dad, the trainer, know at all about food?

I swear they think they know more than we do or we haven't been through it.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will be on tour nationally from Feb. 3 to May 14, 2023. For more information, visit www.alvinailey.org