Chef Follows a Trainer's Recipe to Fight Back Pain

By Jen Murphy

When Ryan Pera started talking about opening a second restaurant in 2013 his wife had one condition. He had to get back in shape.

Mr. Pera, 43, chef and co-owner of three popular Houston restaurants, is married to Lori Choi, a vascular surgeon. "She laid down the law," he says. "She's on the front line seeing the effects of poor health every day."

WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT?

When the couple started dating in 2002, Dr. Choi persuaded Mr. Pera to train for a marathon with her. "She really introduced me to fitness," he says. But in 2011, while opening his first business, Revival Market, a whole-animal butcher shop and cafe, Mr. Pera fell out of shape. "I threw my back out butchering a pig," Mr. Pera recalls. "I couldn't even do my job because I was so out of shape."

In the lead-up to the 2014 opening of Coltivare Pizza & Garden, Mr. Pera's vegetable-centric restaurant, he became a regular at Timberline Fitness Studio. For the first year, he worked out with a handful of different personal trainers. "I liked getting different perspectives, and I needed to get comfortable and confident in the gym," he says. "One trainer used basketball drills, another focused on weights."

He clicked with Jeff Raben, a former U.S. Army captain who has chronic lower-back pain related to years of carrying heavy weight over long periods. "Since day one I connected with Jeff," Mr. Pera says. He "understood what I was going through," and which exercises would help ease the pain."

Houston chef Ryan Pera, in gray, performs exercises on a Pilates Reformer machine with former U.S. Army officer Jeff Raben, in black, a personal trainer who specializes in countering chronic back pain.

JULIE SOEFER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (4)

Workouts using Pilates equipment focused on core strength and flexibility. After a year of Pilates combined with cardio workouts, Mr. Pera says he experienced back spasms less frequently, and he was able to go from 190 to 150 pounds. Two-and-a-half years later, he has maintained the weight loss and opened his third restaurant, Eight Row Flint, in December 2015.

Mr. Pera now works out seven days a week. "If I don't work out, I feel like something is missing," he says. He estimates that when he's working in one of his kitchens, he does 300 squats between 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. "When you're on the line, you're bending down to get meat and grab things from the cooler," he says. "It's a young person's job, and I think it's important for me to be faster than my 21-year-old cooks and show them I can still keep up."

The Workout

Once a week, Mr. Pera meets Mr. Raben for a 45-minute Pilates session. "Our approach to mitigate and prevent lower-back pain was not only to strengthen the core, but to increase flexibility through the leg muscles, hips and glutes," Mr. Raben says.

Their program starts on the Pilates Reformer machine, with moves including straight leg pull-downs to target the hamstrings and lower-back flexibility; leg circles to work hip and leg flexibility; and lunges with a twist to target hip flexors, quadriceps and abdominal muscles.

Mr. Pera performs a variety of stretches, such as a chest opener, which improves posture, lengthens the spine and strengthens the core. The session ends with yoga poses, such as the hip-opener, pigeon pose and bridge pose, which strengthen the lower back and work the hamstrings.

Four days a week Mr. Pera does a one-hour gym workout. He uses the Fitness Builder app to create a routine, selecting from 1,000-plus workout programs and videos. "I'll pick an eight- or 12-week plan," he says. "It ensures I'm always learning new exercises and mixing things up."

He spends 40 minutes doing strength exercises and the last 10 to 20 minutes he does cardio on the stationary bike, treadmill or rowing machine. At least once a week, he makes himself run on a self-powered treadmill. "I'll do intervals of one-minute sprinting, one-minute walking—and it's the most intense workout you can imagine," he says. He ends his workouts stretching his muscles with a foam roller.

On weekends, he and his wife bike 20 miles along the bike trails in Buffalo Bayou Park. Currently, he is training for a 100-mile charity bike ride in October sponsored by Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit that works to end childhood hunger in the U.S. "The farthest I've gone on my bike is 40 miles, but like most chefs, I'm competitive by nature, so I'm going to train so I can finish well," he says.

Simple Pilates Moves to Strengthen the Core

Back pain makes everything from gardening to grocery shopping harder.

Kate Lillis, owner of Colorado Active Pilates in Loveland, Colo., says back pain most often results from overuse of back muscles that are compensating for other weak core muscles. "Standing, sitting in your car or even running several miles daily might seem perfectly normal. But if your back likes to compensate for weak abdominals, tension will build in the back," she says.

Pilates combines breathing, flexibility and strengthening exercises to train the body in more-efficient patterns of movement. Ms. Lillis recommends these beginner moves to strengthen deep core muscles and fight tension-related back pain. (If you suspect your pain is caused by a herniated disk, consult a physician.)

Knee Folds: Lie on your back with knees bent, feet flat and arms long by your sides. Draw your navel to your spine. On an inhale, bring your right leg up to tabletop, with the knee just over the hip and shin parallel to the floor. On an exhale, lower the foot back to the ground. Repeat on the other side.

Toe Touches: From the same start position, draw your navel to your spine. On an inhale, bring your right knee up to tabletop. On an exhale, bring your left leg up to table top. Take a breath in. On an exhale, touch one toe to the ground and bring it back up to table top. Repeat on the other side.

Single-Leg Stretch: Lie on your back and draw your navel to your spine. On an inhale, bring your right knee into your chest and then your left knee into your chest. On an exhale, curl your head and shoulders up off the ground. Gaze just above your knees and slide your rib cage toward your pelvis. Inhale, hug your right knee into your chest and extend the left leg up to the ceiling. Exhale, switch legs. *Jen Murphy*