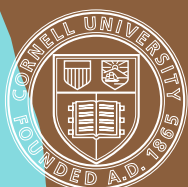


HumanEcology



POWERFUL Collaborations



Cornell University

A Taste for Life

Cookbook author Amy Riolo connects cultures through cuisine

In 2003, Amy Riolo '95 couldn't have imagined that little over a decade later she'd be a best-selling cookbook author, culinary consultant, TV personality, and lecturer. In fact, she wasn't even sure she'd live that long.

Bedridden by Lyme disease, she tried to envision the life she'd lead if she ever regained her health. "Cook and write" became her dream. Too weak to do either, she began to imagine a book on Egyptian culture and cuisine, based in her previous travels and research.

"It gave me hope and inspiration," says Riolo. "It actually transformed me, and within a year and a half I was not only out of bed, I had a clean bill of health."

experiences and deeply researched stories.

"I really want to give people the background," Riolo explains. "Why is a particular soup so important? What is the symbolism? It's a very easy way for people to literally digest culture, to learn from and be inspired by one another."

Lecturing at museums, including the Smithsonian, Riolo deftly ties together culinary, cultural, and historical strands, a skill she credits to her experience in Human



Riolo promotes her cookbook on the Mediterranean diet at Melissa's Produce in Los Angeles.

Her greatest influence in the kitchen—and in life—was her maternal grandmother, whose treats stood at the center of every holiday. Riolo also learned from her grandfather, a former Army cook, and her mother, who knew how to feed a crowd.

"I thought of food as something you just did," says Riolo. Riolo's two cookbooks for the American Diabetes Association, for example—the *Italian Diabetes Cookbook* was released in January 2016—are based on her experience learning to cook at 15 years old, after her mother was diagnosed with diabetes.

Riolo became a proponent for the Mediterranean diet after visiting relatives in Italy and noticing how much healthier they were than their American counterparts—a fact she attributed to food and lifestyle. Riolo's love for Middle Eastern food and culture arose around the same time during a trip down the Nile. For the next decade and half, she spent months out of each year immersing herself in Egyptian culture and cuisine.

Today, Riolo fills her days with a wide variety of tasks, whether reaching out to her fans on social media, testing recipes for TV appearances, engaging in philanthropic work, or developing her upcoming culturally-based culinary TV show or her own line of spices and cookware. All the while, she keeps feeding her curiosity through research, travel, and conversations.

"I think the best teachers are the ones who are always learning," says Riolo. "And what better way to break the ice than to talk about food?"

— Olivia M. Hall



Riolo and chef restaurateur Luigi Diotaiuti are interviewed at a signing for their book, *The Al Tiramisu Restaurant Cookbook*.

The result, *Nile Style*, now in its second edition, won a World Gourmand Award for Best Arab Cuisine and was chosen by the Library of Congress for the National Book Festival in 2014. Riolo's belief in the transformative power of food is the force behind much of her work. In seven cookbooks and countless public appearances, she not only shares her advocacy for the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet, but also builds bridges between cultures through culinary

Ecology. "If I hadn't gotten a rounded education, I wouldn't be able to do that. I'd only know about food, but I wouldn't know how it relates to other things at large."

When Riolo first arrived at Cornell, she majored in Textiles and Apparel, hoping to become a fashion director. Food was not yet on her radar as a career, even though it was woven deeply into the fabric of her childhood in Jamestown, N.Y. "Food was everything for us," says Riolo, now based in Washington, D.C. "It was nutrition. It was culture. It was entertainment."