

Deanna's Diet as a Young Girl at Universal Pictures

A short extract from the book "Deanna Durbin: An Operella. Volume One" by Alice Lorence, Pages 38-40.

In addition to providing sexual instruction, Dr. Evans placed Deanna on a rigorous well balanced diet designed in a scientific manner to ensure that she stayed both slim and in perfect health, and that she received the correct amounts of vitamins and minerals each day. Dr. Evans restricted all carbohydrates to a low level, believing quite correctly that most of the energy-calories required by the body should be derived from the fats and oils which occur naturally in foods high in proteins; and he was opposed in particular to all refined sugars and starches. Like most progressive doctors of his time, Dr. Evans regarded carbohydrates as empty calories due to the lack of both protein and other nutrients in such foods. He thus avoided the catastrophic error, which would arise in the following decades, of blaming poor health and cardiovascular disease on fats and oils instead of the true culprit which is the excess consumption of carbohydrates, in particular refined sugars and starches, which results in the insulin resistance which initiates in turn the destructive "metabolic syndrome". Dr. Evans stressed instead the need for a very high protein diet with a most definite emphasis on lean red meat with sufficient iron, an ideal diet for a growing girl. This high protein diet was combined with copious amounts of green and other low starch vegetables. On a typical day, following Dr. Evans' diet, Deanna ate a large steak, or similar serving of lean red meat, for both luncheon and dinner, combined, on both occasions, with copious amounts of mixed low-starch vegetables or a large salad on the side; and she minimised all starches and sugars even when unrefined. Dr. Evans also insisted that Deanna take a dose of cod liver oil each morning to provide her with suffi-

cient Vitamin D, and this had the additional advantage that it provided her with the all important omega-3 fatty acids whose importance, and even existence, had at that time not yet been discovered. Deanna was also required to drink three large glasses of milk and three large glasses of tomato juice each day, and she never failed to do so. To ensure perfect nutrition, Dr. Evans designed a special salad for Deanna containing a custom blend of ingredients. Known as the “Deanna Durbin Salad”, this dish was also offered to other diners on the menu of the studio café; but not for long, because few were up to the challenge, the one exception being Deanna. She had been told to eat the salad to maintain her health, and she did as she was told. Prior to her arrival at Universal, Deanna had loved pasta, in particular spaghetti, but she now had to abandon it almost in total following the restrictions placed on starches by Dr. Evans.

Deanna, who more often than not described herself at mealtimes as utterly famished, consumed her large steaks and salads with great enthusiasm. When she was making her film *Mad About Music* at age fifteen in late 1937, Deanna, announcing that she loved to eat, told a visiting journalist at luncheon that she was so glad that people had not started taking their meals in the form of little pills because pills could never satisfy her appetite. Deanna, who never missed seeing a motion picture musical, must have picked up this idea up from seeing the futurist musical film *Just Imagine* which was released in 1930 but set in 1980, a film which had starred Maureen O'Sullivan. The Martian rocket-ship which is seen in *Just Imagine* was later purchased by Universal and turned over to Flash Gordon. As a note of interest it might also be mentioned that Deanna's agent Jack Sherrill also represented Maureen O'Sullivan.

Deanna took up her new health regimen in earnest because such a programme had been emphasised in her favourite motion picture, the operatic film

One Night of Love which had been released two years earlier in 1934 and which had starred the Metropolitan Opera soprano Grace Moore. With her new health regimen imposed on her by the studio, Deanna felt that she was being moulded into a great operatic soprano just as Grace Moore, playing the role of the young opera student Mary Barrett, had been moulded in *One Night of Love* by a similar rigorous health regimen of diet and exercise imposed on her by her demanding vocal coach Giulio Monteverdi who is played in the film by Tullio Carminati.

It wasn't long before word of Deanna's rigorous diet and exercise programme, based on strict scientific principles, spread to Europe. This programme, which was described in detail, caused great excitement among actresses who wanted to improve their health while rejuvenating themselves; and, some five years after Deanna first came under the instruction of Dr. Charles Evans, the French film star Renée Saint-Cyr revealed that she had been following a rigorous diet and exercise programme for quite some time, a programme which she said was based directly on Deanna's own programme. According to Renée, adherence to this programme was responsible for maintaining her in a state of perpetual youth, so that she wasn't ageing at all. Renée also said that it was her devotion to physical culture which was the reason for Deanna's triumph over the film star Greta Garbo. Garbo's own much advertised health programme didn't amount to very much at all because she had fallen into the clutches of diet guru Gayelord Hauser whose misguided emphasis on blackstrap molasses exposed Garbo to the extreme dangers of refined sugars, much to the detriment of her mental and physical health.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, all California children, including teenagers, were required to drink two large glasses of California orange juice each day to help boost the local economy. When Deanna was making her first fea-

ture film *Three Smart Girls* at Universal Pictures, she and the other two girls in the picture, Nan Grey and Barbara Read, were duly posed for photographs demonstrating their support for their adopted state by drinking their two glasses of orange juice which are being served by Ernest Cossart in his uniform as Binns the Butler, the role he played in *Three Smart Girls*. However, unlike the other two girls in the photographs, Deanna looks more than a little sceptical because she knew that drinking so much orange juice was wrong due to its high sugar content. It went against everything she had been taught by Dr. Evans, and she was determined to continue drinking nothing but tomato juice, with no more than a very small glass of orange juice each day as a supplement.

As a young girl Deanna was forever munching apples, and, from the time she first began her film career at Universal as a young girl, she wore a small red cloisonné apple of spherical shape as a trinket on one of her charm bracelets, this gold mounted apple being a gift from Dr. Evans to remind her to eat an apple a day to help maintain her perfect teeth and perfect complexion. Deanna had a long term love affair with apples, and long after she retired from the screen she was often seen buying apples at the local fruit shop near her apartment in down-town Paris.