

ABÍLIO
DINIZ

1936 – ∞

BRAZILIAN BILLIONAIRE
ABÍLIO DOS SANTOS DINIZ PLANS
TO LIVE FOREVER.
AND HE WANTS YOU TO JOIN HIM.



ABÍLIO DINIZ CAN RUN BACKWARD. ON A TREADMILL. IN THE DARK. AT AGE 77.

Don't hate Abílio Diniz.

He wants you to do all the things he can do when you, too, are pushing 80: box, play squash, pump iron, even procreate: He has a 7-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old son with his second wife, Geyze, who's 41—younger than all four children from his first marriage.

Diniz has written down his secrets in a book succinctly titled *Smart Choices for a Successful Life*. It's a best-seller in Brazil, where Diniz lives and where he made his fortune—some \$3.5 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index—by building a supermarket chain into the country's biggest retailer.

Unlike fellow billionaires who've slouched toward foie gras and profiteroles—or, in Warren Buffett's case, five Cherry Cokes a day—Diniz (pronounced Di-NEEZ) has a fine-tuned formula for living that he says will cheat death. "I have to believe I'm eternal," he says in an interview at his modernist mansion in São Paulo's leafy Jardins neighborhood. "Even if there's some decline in physical terms—a little less strength, a little less muscle tone—I'm gaining so much in terms of experience. I'm getting the wisdom of age without the problems of aging."

Diniz has a six-pronged approach that's simple to understand but harder to do, particularly as the decades pile up: Get a daily dose of strenuous exercise, burn more calories than you consume, ruthlessly limit your commitments, explore your inner psyche, pray to God and, above all, stay passionate. "I have loved the women in my life fiercely," he says. "Each one in her time."

Once you have all the money in the world, the only thing left to covet is just that: time. The rich have been using lucre to fight death for decades. During the 1920s, wealthy men flocked to the south of France to have tissue from monkey testicles grafted inside their scrotums by Serge Voronoff, a Russian-born surgeon who claimed the procedure would slow the aging process and sharpen the mind. Mao Zedong had sex with hundreds of young women, guided by the Taoist belief that copulating with virgins extends one's life.

During our current gilded age, billionaires are betting on science. Larry Ellison, founder of software maker Oracle Corp. and the world's eighth-richest man, according to the Billionaires Index, funds the Ellison Medical Foundation to study longevity. The foundation supports research on telomeres, the protective caps on the ends of chromosomes that have been linked to how rapidly we age.

The best reason for buying into Diniz's particular approach is the man himself. He's not just trim and fit; he's ripped. His arms are guns. His abs come in a pack. And today he's working as hard as ever. While still chairman of his Pão de Açúcar supermarket chain, he last year bought a stake in BRF SA, the biggest food producer in Brazil; became chairman in April; and, in August, appointed a new chief executive officer to spur growth. To put Diniz's recent accomplishments in perspective, Sam Walton, another billionaire grocer, died at 74—just a year older than Diniz was when he sired his second child with Geyze.

Like many other would-be gurus, Diniz talks up the importance of inner peace. A devout Catholic, he often blends East and West—meditating before a statue of the Virgin Mary, for example, in a little white chapel just past two swimming pools in his palm-studded backyard.

But Diniz is no Dalai Lama. He ended up rich not from seeking peace but by courting strife. He cut four of his five siblings out of the supermarket empire, putting business before family. His own mother didn't speak to him for years, Diniz says. Back then, he'd pick fights during polo matches, and he suffered from extreme road rage. "I was utterly capable of violence with people who annoyed me while in traffic," he writes in his book. "I used to say to my friends that I never signaled which way I was going to turn when I was driving because I didn't have to tell anyone where I was going."

Diniz says he's mellowed since then. However, actual punches remain very much a part of his routine. Two mornings a week, as the hum of incipient traffic mingles with the songs of subtropical birds, Diniz boxes in his private gym, adding his heavy blows to the city's soundtrack. "Abílio is never satisfied," says his sparring partner and fitness instructor, Irineu Loturco, whose other job is director of an Olympics training facility. "He's always searching for new things."

Diniz exercises two hours a day, a step down from his previously punishing regimen of thrice daily exercise for up to five hours total—although Loturco is adamant that they've modified Diniz's routine based on the newest science, not his age. Vigorous, varied cardio is Diniz's cornerstone. Running backward in the dark hones coordination and proprioception—the sense of where his core and limbs are in space. "Abílio works out with the intensity of a 40-year-old," Loturco says. "I have never known him to mess around."

When you're approaching your ninth decade, determination gets you only so far. To combat the loss of muscle mass

that comes with old age, Diniz lifts moderate amounts of weight at high speed and then adds bigger loads. Losing muscle to age clearly spooks him. “It’s called sarcopenia,” he says solemnly.

Russell R. Pate, a professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, confirms that Diniz is on the right track, although lifelong couch potatoes and desk jockeys might not have as much luck with the septuagenarian’s strenuous approach. “His story demonstrates what is possible when someone is highly active throughout their life span,” Pate says. “I wouldn’t necessarily hold him out as a model for old people who haven’t been that active.”



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Diniz’s diet strategy also fits the latest science, which suggests that limiting calories extends life. “Calorie restriction is very effective in preventing cancer,” says Dr. Valter Longo, director of the Longevity Institute at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Longo is currently conducting a study in which subjects severely restrict their caloric intake for periods of five days a month in order to mimic chronic calorie restriction, which has been proven to prevent cancer in monkeys. “You don’t need to be in a perpetual state of deprivation,” Longo says in a phone interview.

Diniz, too, believes in cutting yourself some slack. He generally avoids white bread and red meat, getting much of his

protein from the *mozzarella di bufala* in the Abílio salad he orders at lunch most days from Dressing, a restaurant owned by one of his sons. Dining out, though, he’ll order lasagna, and at a barbecue, he’ll eat steak. “I’m no Shiite,” he says, using his favorite, if misguided, shorthand for an excess of ascetic living. In his quest for eternity, Diniz allows that he also benefits from genetics: His father died at 94; his mother, at 98.

When it comes to stress, Diniz has practical advice just about anyone can follow: Set priorities and give yourself time between appointments. Delegate, he says, and keep phone calls brief. Learn how to say no to extraneous commitments.

Though he makes it sound simple, Diniz acknowledges that, in retooling one’s life, “money and power are, of course, very useful.” As for self-knowledge, it, too, can be expensive. Diniz says he began Freudian analysis at 29; the cost of his half-century of psychotherapy alone exceeds most Brazilians’ lifetime earnings.

Which brings us to his final pillar: passion. Geyze, who worked as a planner at Pão de Açúcar before the two got married, says Diniz still brings it. “Abílio is superromantic, caring, serene,” she said in a 2012 interview with *Alfa*, a local men’s magazine. “We never fight. During sex, he’s like a boy. He has pep. He’s not only ripped; he’s healthy, and his body works.” The couple’s two small children are younger than some of Diniz’s grandchildren, for whom the word *grandpa* is verboten. They must instead call him Bilo.

On a recent morning, following his workout, Diniz sat in a love seat with a framed photo of Geyze in his hands. A brunette with a wide smile, Geyze looks like a Brazilian Mariel Hemingway, the American actress, writer and granddaughter of author Ernest. In the

photograph, his wife is in the final weeks of pregnancy, and Diniz gazes at her image with a surfeit of pride. He’s proud that she’s young. And he’s proud that he was able to give her a child, not once but twice.

“The thing is, when my adult children were little, all of my friends my age were also having kids, so there was nothing extraordinary about it,” Diniz says, weighing his words carefully. “What was extraordinary was to be a winner—to win at sports, to win at business. Now, having kids and a young wife at my age ... that’s extraordinary.”

With assistance from Alex Cuadros in São Paulo.