

THE RADAR HEALTH

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN PINES

FAT LIKE ME!

Too much gourmet for your own good? Dish with the diet Docs

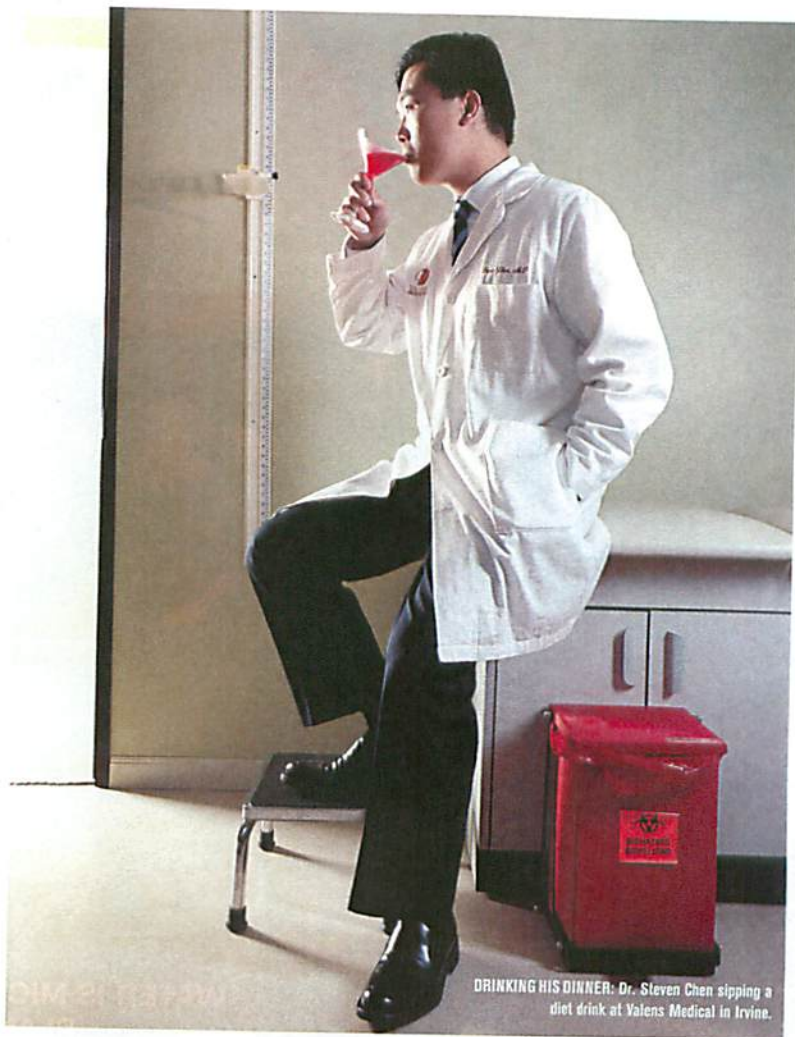
I don't care what the French women say; if you eat foie gras regularly you're going to get fat. At least if you have the increasingly inefficient metabolism of a 40-something-year-old man, you are. Despite running, being reasonably active and hitting the gym when a story calls for it, the life of a luxury magazine editor is not for an ascetic.

Between passed hors d'oeuvres and Martinis at society soirées, multi-course, wine-paired tasting menus at fine Orange County restaurants; and stress-induced burrito binges at deadline time, it's hard to keep a svelte silhouette.

So when I had a chance to join my fellow fatties at a physician-run weight loss clinic for a few weeks, I jumped at the chance, or rather I hopped gingerly. Fat men can't jump, at least not very high.

Valens Medical is tucked away in a neat, non-descript office park near the John Wayne Airport. Three highly educated, articulate and annoyingly young UCLA physicians run the program, Drs. Han, Yong and Chen. All are board-certified in internal medicine and are three of only 40 physician certified nutrition specialists in California. So they've got that going for them. Each week you come in to get weighed, checked-up and periodically poked for blood work to make sure your liver, kidney and all the rest aren't acting up, and you also talk to one of the doctors. And that's part of the plan's genius: the three guys are so earnest, smart and nice, that you want to lose weight for them.

But first you find out the answer to that burning question: So how fat am I? Some 60 percent of the U.S. population is overweight, and 33 percent is obese, the doctors say, and dozens of diseases are related directly to our fat-ass ways (if you're blinded to the problem by living in fit-friendly O.C., take a quick trip to a Wal-Mart in the Midwest).



DRINKING HIS DINNER: Dr. Steven Chen sipping a diet drink at Valens Medical in Irvine.

The Valens program is admirably scientific. In addition to all the blood tests, you stand on what looks like a high-tech scale that sends a current through your body, which flows through your fat, muscle, bone and all the rest at different rates. The computer calculates it all up and spits out a sheet that lists (and later tracks) your weight, body mass index, percent body fat, lean muscle mass and more.

But there's no quick fix. Despite the nutritionist on staff, the counseling sessions and scientific support, what it ultimately comes down to is deprivation. You've got to stick to the Valens meal replacement program, from soup to soy nuts, with plenty of shakes, protein bars and fruity drinks in between (I'm particularly fond of the chocolate shakes), while avoiding what put the pounds on in the first place.

If you stick to the program (700-800 calories a day for aggressive weight loss) and don't cheat, you'll lose weight (30-100 pounds for many), and add lean muscle mass. I dropped about 20 pounds, and brought my body mass index and percent body fat to almost within normal range, and all in about four weeks. Sure, I added some back on when I went off the program, but I still have some shakes and bars and it's almost beach season. Now if I can just find some fat-free foie gras. ■

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