

## Pioneer of the Wellness Movement Deborah Szekely Shares Her Tips for Living Well at 100 Years Old

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CREDIT: BONNIE ANN STEWART

At 100 years old, [Deborah Szekely](#) has defined what it means to live, eat and be well.

The trailblazer has worn many hats throughout her career. As the president of the Inter-American Foundation from 1984 to 1990, the then-U.S. diplomat advocated

for grants in nearly all democratic nations in the Southern hemisphere. She's a founder of the New American Museum in San Diego and the Golden Door spa. And, 82 years ago, she created the renowned luxury wellness resort [Rancho La Puerta](#), widely considered one the first health resorts in North America.

The sprawling, 4,000-acre destination located at the base of [Mount Kuchumaa](#) in Tecate, Mexico, was founded in 1940 by Szekely and her late husband, health researcher Edmond Szekely. From early offerings of a vegetarian menu, group exercises and mindful meditation, Rancho La Puerta's early practices — many of which carry into the present day — forged a groundbreaking path for the self wellness movement.

Szekely describes Rancho La Puerta as "summer camp for adults." From eating flavorful, nutrient-dense, freshly-grown foods to joining in hikes, fitness classes and evening lectures, guests come for a meaningful experience in every part of their lives.

"They learn how equally important it is to relax in a hammock, recharge, enjoy a spa treatment every day and reflect on how their life can be more satisfying, healthier and more meaningful," says Szekely, who turned 100 on May 3. "We call the new habits they take home 'taking the Ranch home.'"



CREDIT: COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Szekely owes her century-old wisdom on how to live a healthy life to her parents and formative experiences. Although she was born in Brooklyn in 1922, her family moved to Tahiti in 1930 for five years to escape the Depression. She learned "just about everything" from her parents — her mom had an exercise routine and the family would visit different health camps in the summer.

"I learned to be an independent thinker because of my mom's commitment to her children's healthy diet," she says. In Tahiti, the family's meals were "outrageous"

"At first, we ate nothing but raw vegetables and fruits. Eventually we added fish, and my brother and I learned to tend our family's fish traps," she says.

Her takeaway from the family's of-the-earth habits are evident in Rancho La Puerta's holistic approach. What started as a summer health camp in which guests brought their own tents and paid \$17.50 a week has turned into a full-service, all-inclusive resort and spa — now run by Szekely's daughter, Sarah Livia — with cozy-but-plush casitas for lodging, heated Olympic-size pools, state-of-the-art gyms and fitness studios, ultra-pampering spas and, yes, even a wine bar.

As for the food, the menu hasn't ventured too far from its original vegetarian focus, with much of the fresh produce and fruit being grown on the [resort's own organic farm](#) — but the chefs now also offer delicious pescatarian options for almost every meal. Decades later, the establishment is still committed to cultivating a balanced mind, body and spirit for visitors.



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"Little saplings become trees. I think our growth was inevitable," Szekely says. "We did a good job as hosts and teachers, and people came back. Today two-thirds or more of our guests are returnees."

As for her foremost secret to longevity, Szekely says she credits her good health to her ever-optimistic attitude.

"My life has been stressful and uncertain at times, but I just know and believe that things will work out, and they usually do," says Szekely, who still visits the Ranch weekly, often attending lectures and eating with guests. "I often say, 'Do right, eat right, move right, sleep right, think right.' I do not worry; I just do my best."



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The mother of the wellness movement also shared some core tips when it comes to living a balanced life as an independent thinker. Her first tip starts with a morning ritual.

"When you wake up, don't pop right out of bed. Instead, spend 10 minutes feeling blessed and grateful for all the gifts that you have been given," she says. "Get your day started on the right foot."

She also recommends being wary of allowing small, unhealthy habits from adding up. "Beware of what I call 'The Smidgens.' If you add one little packet of artificial sweetener to your tea every day, those little 'smidgens' someday add up to a dump truck full of smidgens," she says. "And so it goes with any smidgen that can be bad for you. They add up."

While she's managed to check off countless bucket list items in her illustrious life, there's one more passion she's not yet finished with. "I'm concerned about climate change's effect on Tecate in Baja California," Szekely says. For that reason, she launched a "green umbrella" tree-planting initiative, adding that for her 100th birthday, she only wanted trees.

"It's a gift that has no end in sight, for it will grow and grow, and cool Tecate for many years to come," she says.