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OLIVIA'S JOY

For someone who has been through a lot over the years, Olivia Newton-John radiates a sense of happiness and contentment that belies the challenges. In fact, she says that these days, things are only getting better. The timeless star talks exclusively to MiNDFOOD about being in love, surviving cancer, and spending a lifetime in the media glare.

Words by **Joanna Tovia** Photography by **Michelle Day**

When Olivia Newton-John first donned those black spandex pants and told John Travolta he'd better shape up, she could never have imagined that generation after generation of fans would fall in love not only with the movie, but also with her. *Grease* was made in 1978, but Newton-John's timeless appeal means she is as busy as ever. The difference now, however, is that instead of being driven by the desire for superstardom, she is driven to heal and be healed. And instead of getting upset by tabloid

headlines shouting out about her private life, she has learned to laugh about them.

When she talks to MiNDFOOD from her award-winning Australian retreat, Gaia, in Byron Bay, Newton-John has just flown in after three weeks filming *A Few Best Men* in Sydney and the Blue Mountains. The plane was delayed, she did two media interviews in the car on the way from the airport, and says she's sorry for being a few minutes late. Newton-John betrays no sense that she's frazzled, however. Her soft voice is familiar – it's a voice we all know – and her sense of calm contentment is interrupted only by regular peals of melodic laughter.

Aged 62, Newton-John has been in the public eye for most of her life.

She gives careful thought to questions before putting her responses into words, knowing what can happen to even the most cautious of answers. In a January weekly-magazine article, Newton-John was quoted as “looking forward to lots of babies” now that her daughter and only child, Chloe Lattanzi, was engaged to be married. “I’m Going to be a Grandma!” splashed the headline, and the story quickly went viral. It wasn’t just celebrity gossip websites and magazines that spread the word. On January 17, a newspaper listed Lattanzi as one of the A-listers “joining the maternity club”. “No, she’s not pregnant,” Newton-John confirms. “I’d be happy if she were, mind you, but it isn’t the case.” ▶

Having lived most of her life in the spotlight, 62-year-old Olivia Newton-John says she has had to learn to ignore the more ridiculous stories.

“We all go through good and bad things in life – mine are just more public ... But that comes with being in the public eye.”



Lattanzi's wild-child ways and struggle with anorexia have been well-publicised, but Newton-John says she is immensely proud of her daughter's courage and strength and who she has become. "She's a very compassionate and kind person ... I'm proud of everything about her. She's a really special girl."

Although she used to get upset about the things that were written about her and the people close to her in the tabloids, now Newton-John tries not to let it have an impact on her life. "I have to just not pay any attention to tabloids," she says. "Of course it is difficult at times when they write things that are totally false, which is most of the time. We all go through good and bad things in life – mine are just more public because of these magazines. But that comes with being in the public eye."

Sometimes the stories are so ridiculous that laughter is the only appropriate response. One of the funniest was a tabloid magazine that took out of context a comment she made about how some people believed in UFOs. "The headline read something like: 'Olivia Believes in Little Green Men'. It was so utterly ridiculous, we had to laugh. After that one, my publicists received many calls from organisations supporting UFOs asking for me to endorse and support their causes. It was so silly."

But Newton-John says the public needs to know that these magazines concoct "truths" simply to sell magazines. "The sad thing is that the majority of people who read these types of magazines believe that what they are reading is true."

Speculation and misinformation was rife following the disappearance of Patrick McDermott, whom she dated for nine years after divorcing actor Matt Lattanzi. McDermott disappeared on an overnight fishing expedition in 2005,

shortly after their break-up. Stories appeared for years afterwards claiming McDermott staged his own death, drowned or met with foul play. A US Coast Guard report concluded that he had been lost at sea but 'sightings' in Mexico are still making news.

Newton-John has refused to talk about the incident, other than telling Australian *Women's Weekly* there would always be a question mark around his disappearance. "I don't think I will ever really be at peace with it," she said.

Newton-John married entrepreneur John Easterling in 2008 in a Peruvian mountaintop ceremony at sunrise. She and her husband now work together promoting the dietary supplements and skincare products of his company, Amazon Herb Company, which they hope to bring to Australia within the next few months. "I tease him all the time that I married him for his Camu C Serum!" she says.

Remarkably, Easterling hadn't seen *Grease* before they were married, so they sat down to watch it together. "That was a hoot!" Newton-John says. Asked about his reaction when Sandy was transformed into a black-clad bad girl, she roars laughing. "I think he appreciated it, but he's a gentleman." In January, Newton-John appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in Australia along with those now-famous, and tiny, black pants. "A body was in here! Look at this!" Winfrey marvelled. "And to think it was mine," Newton-John responded, laughing.

Newton-John and Easterling are working to help Amazon locals obtain rights and titles to better protect their land. They are also focused on educating the children of the Amazon about the importance of preserving the local ecosystem. "As the children grow up they learn that this little piece of the

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world is very important to the rest of the world; they get the bigger picture.”

Known for radiating health and vitality, Newton-John's life was turned upside down in 1992 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She remembers finding it difficult to accept. “I was in denial and I made a lot of silly jokes to the doctor when I was diagnosed. Humour is usually my way of coping.” From denial, she then moved on to other stages: “Fear, then acceptance and then finding out as much as I could about it and my options and then making the decision that I was going to be okay. That really was important. And luckily I was.”

Newton-John has since founded The Olivia Newton-John Cancer Centre in Melbourne, which she says is all about supporting the whole person through cancer – physically and emotionally – and having a positive attitude. “People who have a positive attitude do a lot better when they're going through surgery and treatment. If they believe they will be okay, it really helps; a positive mind gives them strength.”

It's also important for people around cancer sufferers to provide positive support. “I remember telling some of my friends [about my diagnosis] who got very emotional, and I found that very disabling; it made me feel negative, which was not good. I think women tend to put others before themselves generally anyway so it's important to kind of take stock of that. This is your time to take care of yourself.”

Newton-John agrees that breast cancer changed her life. “I don't think I realised it until later. I wrote an album called *Gaia* about a year after I finished my treatment; I was staying up here at Gaia and I'd wake up at night with these songs in my head and coming out of my spirit and they

connected to the earth and my experience, so that really started my journey. It was a huge part of the change for me.” And now? “Everything I seem to be doing in my life revolves around healing of some kind,” she says. “It helps me but I love it that it helps other people. It's important to me.”

While she had always felt a strong connection between food and wellness, her journey with cancer strengthened that connection. Newton-John says the mix of being completely happy, in love and aware of what she is putting into her body is what keeps her looking good.

“I'm a firm believer that what we put into our bodies creates the building blocks for our existence. I think one of the most important things is the balance of your diet. Eating the right foods in combination has helped to keep me healthy and fit.” Newton-John is also cutting down on meat to reduce her impact on the planet. “If we all reduced our meat consumption, it would be important to saving the rainforests as they cut down much of the rainforest to either graze cattle or grow soy bean to feed the cattle. Also, I am becoming more and more conscious of the uncompassionate way in which the cattle are treated.”

She and her husband eat organic and locally grown foods, acknowledging the effect growing, transporting and storing food has on the world. “The fossil fuels it takes to transport and store our food and drinks, it all adds up to your footprint on the planet, so John and I try to be aware

of that. Every animal and plant once had a life, and I acknowledge and honour that life in quiet grace at every meal.”

With several recent film and television projects requiring her focus and more on the horizon, the pace of Newton-John's busy life is unlikely to free up much downtime anytime soon. Her new film, *A Few Best Men*, is a comedy about a groom and his three best men who travel to the Australian outback for a wedding. It is directed by Stephan Elliott, best known for *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and co-stars Kris Marshall and Xavier Samuel.

“The script is hysterical,” she says. “They sent it to me to consider playing the mother-of-the-bride, and while I was reading it on the plane I lost count of how many times I laughed out loud.” Filming the movie was one of the best times she's had on set. “We laughed a lot and the cast and crew were fantastic,” she says.

In 2010, Newton-John remade her jazzercise hit *Physical* for a cameo appearance on hit TV show *Glee*, complete with retro sweatband. She also played a role in the 2010 movie *Score: A Hockey Musical*. Other movies are “in progress”, she says.

Although she loves to be busy and creative, she and her husband make sure they take time out to relax by taking a day or two each week to kayak, walk the dog or take in a movie. “Life just gets better and I want women to know that life can begin at 60. For me, I married my soulmate, love what I am doing and will soon see my daughter get married. Life is wonderful!”

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VISIT Read about Olivia Newton-John's 21-day trek along the Great Wall of China to raise money for cancer.

KEYWORDS: OLIVIA, CHINA



Above: Olivia Newton-John and her husband, John Easterling on the Amazon. Left: the couple with three generations of Shipibo tribe members in the Amazon Rainforest. Below, clockwise: Newton-John remakes *Physical* alongside Jane Lynch in *Glee*; breaking ground at the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Centre in Melbourne; vamping it up with *Grease* co-star John Travolta.



Liv-ing Well

Despite her busy schedule, Olivia Newton-John still finds time to cook when she's home. “I love to cook and my husband loves home-cooked meals because I think he ate out most of his life until we got married,” she says. Her favourite meal of the day is breakfast and her husband's favourite food is eggs, so Newton-John says she loves the challenge of coming up with healthy egg-based recipes with which to start the day.

Her new cookbook, *Livwise* (Murdoch Books, \$40), contains simple, healthy recipes designed for wellness and balance. The proceeds go to her cancer centre. Newton-John says her mum has been one of her mentors for healthy eating. Although indulgences in moderation were allowed (Newton-John's indulgence of choice is chocolate), her mum always encouraged her three children to eat the right foods.

Another mentor is author and cancer 'thriller' Kristine Matheson who writes about the importance of eating raw foods. “In 2010 I was in Australia fundraising for my hospital and someone gave me the book *From Cancer to Wellness: The Forgotten Secrets*, and I couldn't put it down.” Matheson has since contributed recipes to *Livwise*. Other recipes come from Newton-John's family, friends and from the chefs at Gaia Retreat & Spa.

“I have shared these meals not only at Gaia but also cooking for my husband and friends at home in Florida and at my farm in Australia. My lemon chicken is a homey comfort meal that I serve to friends and family when I want to not spend all night in the kitchen – it is so easy to prepare and cook. Sharing a meal with loved ones is such a blessing and one I am always grateful for.”