Lisa Wilkinson

“I feel like I have my husband back”

It was time to change and Peter FitzSimons knew it. With the support of his wife, *Today* co-host Lisa Wilkinson, he embarked on a transformation which, as **Susan Horsburgh** discovers, has reignited their marriage.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● **PETER BREW-BEVAN** STYLING ● **MATTIE CRONAN**

Every Christmas, Peter FitzSimons would pose in his budgie smugglers, exposing his ever-expanding girth, and take what he optimistically called the “before shot”. This year, vowed the writer, he’d finally give up the Big Macs and long boozy lunches, and regain the physique of his salad days as a Wallaby second rower. Three days into the New Year, however, his resolutions would always be dead in the water.

Lisa Wilkinson took a number of those annual swimsuit shots and witnessed years of her husband’s yo-yo dieting, but still she remained hopeful he’d stop over-indulging. “Every year I’d say, ‘Good on you, darling – this year you’re going to do it’, hoping he’d do it for himself and for his relationship with everybody else, but this time he has,” says the 56-year-old *Today* show host. “I feel like I have my husband back.”

By giving up sugar and alcohol, the author and newspaper columnist has dropped more than 40kg over the past two years – an achievement that has only augmented what he admits is already a robust ego. These days, he jokes about his own version of sexting, pulling out a triumphant photo he recently sent to Lisa. It’s a close-up of his digital scales, showing a weight of 112.7kg and his hairy toes in the foreground. The night before, after a run, he also sent photographic evidence of his new personal best. And today he had lean chicken and quinoa for lunch.

That’s quite a turnaround for a man who used to dismiss all health nuts and teetotallers as “dickheads” – but that, he argues, is exactly what makes him qualified to convert millions of overweight Australian men. As an alpha male who speaks fluent ocker, the 55-year-old has penned *The Great Aussie Bloke Slim-Down* (Penguin) to tell fellow “fatties” how to lose the lard for good. “Stop the sugar, stop the hunger,” he argues. “As for alcohol, just give it a go for a month and see if your life is not better without it.”

Fresh from the gym and sporting his signature red bandana, Peter arrives home a few minutes late, after the two family dogs have greeted *The Weekly* at the front door. For the past two decades, the couple has raised their three children in this gracious two-storey Edwardian beauty, filling it with the clutter of family life, as well as countless antiques and curios collected by flea market fan Lisa. With its patchwork quilts and piles of cushions, the place feels comfy and lived-in, and boasts a spectacular view of Sydney Harbour.

In the sitting room, before a single question is posed, Peter holds forth for 20 minutes straight, his meaty legs propped up on a coffee table laden with books. A little while later, Lisa arrives home and he bends his 201cm frame in half to enfold his diminutive wife in a theatrical embrace. They share an easy, affectionate banter. Lisa laughs at his quips and conceits, batting away his interruptions with a swift “let me finish”.

They are a happy couple, but Peter says they don’t have a “Hallmark greeting-card marriage” – which means an average year roughly works out to “300 good days, 50 fabulous days and 15 shockers”. Lately, though, their numbers are looking up – and ditching the grog has made all the difference. »

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY MAX MAY. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED. LISA WEARS PREEN BY THORNTON BREGAZZI DRESS AT MATCHESFASHION.COM.AU, KAILIS CUFF AND OLE LYNGGAARD RING AND EARRINGS.



Lisa Wilkinson and Peter FitzSimons are the first to admit they don’t have a “Hallmark greeting-card marriage”.



Lisa and Peter (opposite) at their gracious Edwardian-era house on Sydney’s lower North Shore.



THIS PAGE: LISA WEARS ISABEL MARANT BLOUSE FROM PARLOUR X AND CARLA ZAMPATTI PANTS. OPPOSITE: LISA WEARS ISA ARFEN BLOUSE FROM MATCHESFASHION.COM.AU AND RACHEL GILBERT SKIRT.

Peter says he was never an alcoholic – for the first 15 years of their marriage he never drank at home – but the pressures of work and parenting, and the long lunches that came with his corporate speaking gigs, meant that hitting the turps became part of his daily life. Lisa would often come home in the afternoon to find Peter sleeping it off on the couch. If he was up, she could tell if he’d been drinking within 30 seconds.

“Either an argument would start and I’d extricate myself, or I’d think, this is probably going to end in an argument so I’ll extricate myself,” says Lisa. “He stopped caring when he had alcohol. He wouldn’t care too much what he’d say to me, he’d be careless he might upset me – and it actually takes a lot to upset me. He just wasn’t the man I married. We were missing out on time spent together, which we love. There’s never been silence between Pete and me, unless I’m pissed off about something – and that usually followed an alcoholic lunch.”

Yet it was a mate’s comment, not Lisa’s anger, which ultimately made him give up alcohol. Picking up second son Louis from the snow two years ago, Peter had dinner with his friend, Jordan Rodgers, who runs Thredbo resorts. After knocking back his first bottle of wine in record time, Peter asked why his mate wasn’t drinking. When Jordan said he wanted to bring his “A-game” to the job, Peter had a lightbulb moment: as a writer, husband and father, shouldn’t he be doing the same thing? He drove back to Sydney and hasn’t drunk since.

A happy by-product of this clean living, says Peter, is a delighted partner, so he has brownie points to burn. “Even in tense moments, I have a control and a calm that I never had when I had a bottle of wine in me,” he says. “I don’t lose energy on domestic squabbles about nonsense. I just say, ‘Lisa, you’re quite right, it’s my fault’ – and I’m usually correct.”

It’s a new chapter in a relationship that has spanned a quarter of a century. Lisa still fondly recalls their first, fleeting encounter in 1990, oddly enough in the make-up room of the *Today* show, where they were guests. Lisa’s much-loved dad, Ray, who was secretary of Sydney Rugby Union, had died a week earlier and the then *Cleo* editor was feeling fragile. When the two were introduced and Peter realised who she was, his gruff, ruck-scarred face transformed.

“He said, ‘Your father was a wonderful man and rugby is so much the poorer for his passing’, and this strong handshake had suddenly become this soft touch of my hand,” recalls Lisa. “His whole expression softened and he just smiled at me. I remember thinking, what a lovely thing to say.”

Peter remembers thinking she was “absolutely gorgeous”.

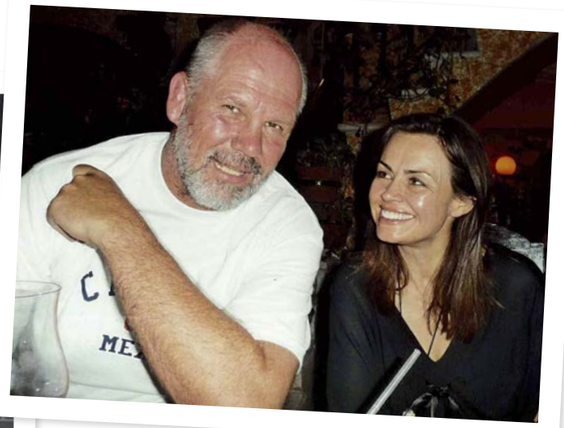
When Lisa’s best friend and housemate, Liz Hayes, set them up 18 months later, the attraction was instant. As Liz said in her bridesmaid’s speech, “All I had to do with those two was introduce them and stand back and watch the fireworks.”

Within a week, they were discussing baby names and Peter had informed her that “FitzSimonses don’t divorce”. Says Lisa, “I just loved being around him because there was so much laughter and fun, and I think he helped me not take myself too seriously.”

Six weeks into the romance, Peter signed his house over to Lisa in his will, which they now laugh about; a month later, he proposed. Both in their early 30s, they knew what they wanted. “It was a really pure love that we both felt,” says Lisa. “We just kind of looked at each other and thought, what are we waiting for?” They were married in September 1992, nine months after their first date. By their first wedding anniversary, Lisa was holding six-day-old Jake. Louis and daughter Billi soon followed.

Wrangling three kids under five was hard-going, but perhaps their toughest time came in 2007, when Peter was doing the 2UE breakfast »





ABOVE: Nine months after their first date, Peter and Lisa wed, and her bridesmaids included Deborah Thomas (left) and Liz Hayes (right). RIGHT: Lisa and Peter before he lost more than 40 kilograms.

> *"I was doubly tired because we weren't sharing the load as equally as I'd have liked."*

radio show and Lisa had just scored her dream job on *Today* – and both were getting up at 3am. "Pete and I were competing for the first one to get to bed and Pete always won," says Lisa, "so I was doing homework with the kids and making sure the dogs were fed. I was doubly tired because we weren't sharing the load as equally as I'd have liked." After three months, the family was barely coping, so Peter resigned.

Theirs, it seems, is a marriage of equals and an attraction of opposites. "The thing that unites us is a very common view of family," says Peter. "We're totally opposites – I try to do 10 things fairly well, she is more inclined to do three things perfectly." Lisa will spend four hours preparing for a five-minute political interview, whereas Peter prefers to wing it. "I think we go for the partner who has the qualities we would like more of ourselves," says Lisa.

What is obvious, after spending an afternoon with the pair, separately and together, is that they really *like* each other – which perhaps should be a given in a long-term relationship, but often isn't. Still, they say, they've had to work at their marriage and make time for each other. For the hardworking couple, their favourite time of the day is sunset, when they sit on the upstairs veranda, have a cup of tea and chat about their days. In July, they went on a holiday together to France. Their relationship has evolved from an intense romance into a solid, abiding love founded on friendship and respect. "That's the stuff that lasts," says Lisa.

Over the years, as Peter stacked on the weight, Lisa worried about her husband's health, but didn't feel she could say anything because of the reassurance he had once given her. Lisa, who struggled with the scales through her 20s, remembers bursting into tears after Peter made a fairly innocent comment about her weight a couple of months into their romance. "He gripped me by the shoulders," she recalls, "and brought his face right up to mine and said, 'You don't get it, do you? I'd love you if you were 25 stone.' It was at that exact point that I stopped worrying about my weight. I dropped all my excess and I've been basically the same weight ever since – because I was with somebody who didn't care. He'd given me permission to be comfortable with who I was, so I would have been a complete hypocrite to be the nagging wife, saying, 'You've got to lose weight'."

Besides, even at 152kg, Peter suffered from dangerously high self-esteem. Says Lisa, "He'd walk past a mirror, puff his chest out – even further – and say, 'What a fine figure of a man! What a lucky woman you are, Ms Wilkinson!'" It's only now »



THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION. OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BREW-BEVAN. LISA WEARS SABA DRESS AND CHRISTIE NICOLAIDES EARRINGS.





Peter and Lisa are looking forward to a big family Christmas. INSET: With their children (from left) Billi, Jake and Louis.

that Peter realises how overweight he was. He pulls out an unflattering old picture of himself with a mountainous belly. "Look at my man boobs!" says Peter, who is now 108kg. "That's grotesque, isn't it?" A consummate diplomat, Lisa replies, "Well, no, because that's my husband you're dissing there. It's someone who's let himself go."

These days, with Jake, 23, Louis, 21, and 19-year-old Billi all studying and living out of home, a typical dinner is a tuna and 'slaw salad with avocado, pomegranate and chia and pumpkin seeds. Lisa, who tries to hit the gym twice a week, isn't as hardcore as her husband, however. "How do you think I get through the hours I do," she asks, "without Kit Kats?"

Earlier this year, *Today* finally toppled *Sunrise* in the ratings, and Lisa still seems to be revelling in what she calls "the best job in TV", even as she nears the 10-year mark. As for her history buff husband, Peter continues to churn out best-sellers. This year, he released *Victory At Villers-Bretonneux* and is working on a book about explorers Burke and Wills, all while chairing the Australian Republican Movement.

As the days grow longer, the family is now looking forward to Christmas, when the whole FitzSimons clan decamps to Sydney's northern beaches.

> "How do you think I get through the hours I do without Kit Kats?"

Every December, Peter and his siblings and their families descend upon the simple beach house Peter's grandfather built in the 1920s, playing cards and boules, throwing barbecues for 40-plus people and sitting up every night telling stories. Lisa hosts *Carols by Candlelight* in Melbourne every Christmas Eve, but flies home as soon as it's over so she can lob back into the beach house at 4am and wake up with the family on Christmas morning. It's the same summer holiday every year, and that's why they all love it. Perhaps this year, though, Peter will finally strike a pose in his Speedos for the all-important "after shot".

The youngest of seven kids, Peter says he was raised by a strong woman, which might explain why he wasn't intimidated when he met Lisa. He didn't think she was out of his league, of course, but he knew she was a catch. "Somebody once said that marriage is like writing a book – you shouldn't embark on either unless you can't believe your luck," says Peter. "Meeting Lisa and marrying her? Can't believe my luck." **AWW**

MAIN IMAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BREW-BEVAN. LISA WEARS DION LEE DRESS FROM DAVID JONES. MAJE COAT AND OLE LYNGGAARD EARRINGS. PETER WEARS TED BAKER BLAZER, SHIRT AND PANTS FROM HIGH AND MIGHTY. INSET: SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION.