

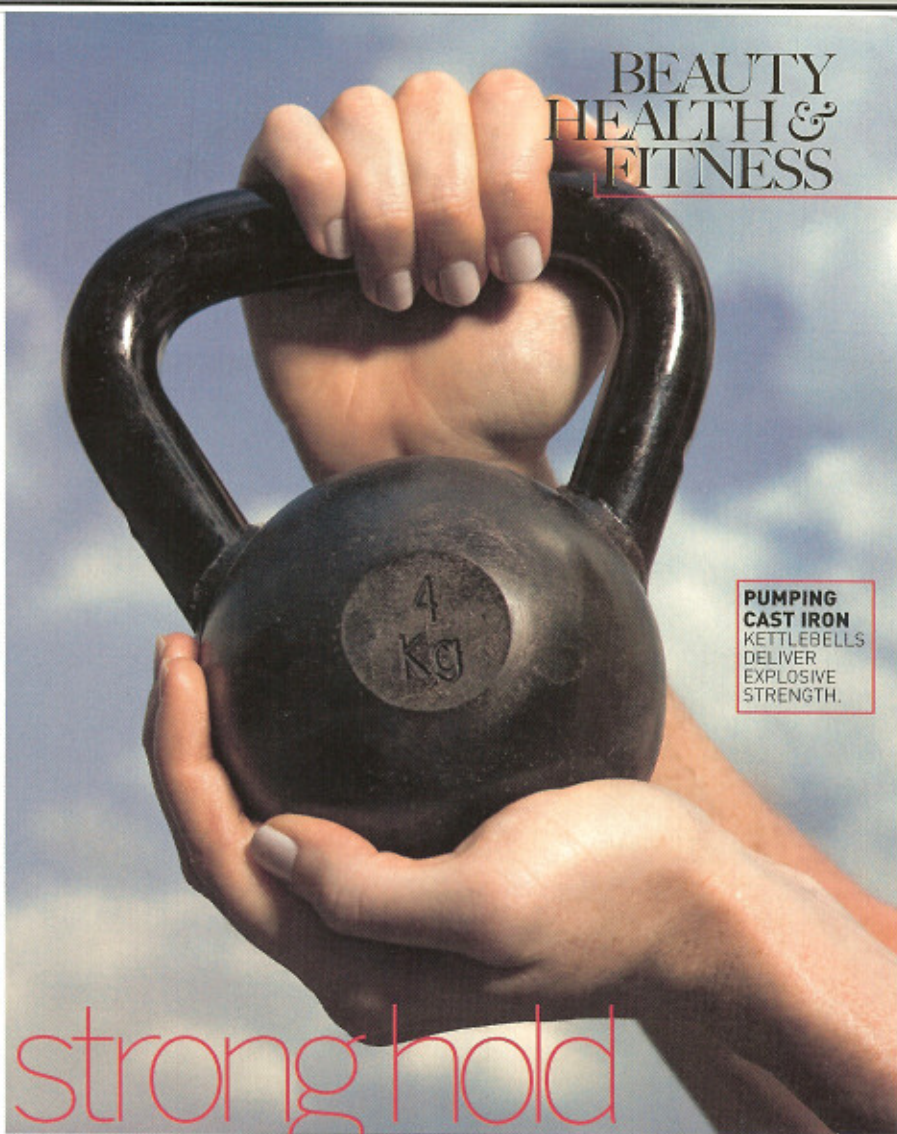
You will learn to do this," said Pat Manocchia, owner of La Palestra, the beautifully appointed, exclusive gym off Central Park on Manhattan's Upper West Side. He picked up a kettlebell—a globular chunk of cast iron with a large handle and flat base, a sort of teakettle minus the spout—and proceeded to demonstrate the Traveling Woodchopper. While expertly flinging a 35-pound kettlebell across his upper body, he crossed the mammoth space, lunging deeply with each step. Fearful that one slip of his grip could result in a broken nose, I discreetly took a step back. A quick glance around the room revealed eighteen equally petrified-looking people, ranging in age from 27 to 60. There was Marjanne, a Manhattan restaurant manager; Mark, a senior fashion-house executive; Marco, an NFL football player; and Adam Duritz, the lead singer of Counting Crows. We had signed up to be gym rats in an eight-week study designed by the directors of Kettlebell Concepts, a company that instructs personal trainers, to compare the effectiveness of traditional weights versus kettlebells.

Dating back to the earliest physical culture in czarist Russia, an era of baggy woolen exercise clothing and handlebar mustaches, kettlebells are the very definition of "old school." Some claim they're the fitness secret to the lengthy Soviet stronghold on Olympic medals and were the preferred training method of the KGB. In recent years, kettlebells have enjoyed a renaissance in Asia, where martial artists use them to gain speed, strength, and power without adding bulk, which is exactly why they've also caught on among American ballet dancers. Now kettlebells are storming into elite gyms across the country.

The promise of a kettlebell physique—long, lean, and strong—is why I willingly, even eagerly, handed my body over to science. But as I went through the preliminary tests to measure strength and flexibility, I wondered what I could reasonably expect from a program of just two weekly one-hour sessions, with additional cardio optional, and no dietary restrictions. Knowing that improvement doesn't come easy, I decided to stick to my routine of running several times a week—if only I'd known what I know now.

The highly choreographed maneuvers (with names like the Turkish Get-Up and the Russian Twist) combine strength and cardio training, challenging your whole body. The key to the kettlebell workout is using momentum to your physical advantage. "They're plyometric exercises," says Manocchia. "You stretch the muscle and shorten it, which develops explosive power."

During the first session, I lowered myself into the prescribed squat position—butt back, spine arched, head up—and placed one hand on my hip while the other tightly gripped a twelve-kilogram



**PUMPING  
CAST IRON  
KETTLEBELLS  
DELIVER  
EXPLOSIVE  
STRENGTH.**

## strong hold

Used as a strength-training method in czarist Russia, kettlebells are swinging into the modern exercise world.

Lynn Snowden Picket takes a whirl.

(26.5 pounds) kettlebell dangling between my legs. I stood up, flinging the kettlebell skyward and then back down between bent knees. The sight of the group moving in unison as an iron-slinging chorus line caused several gym bystanders to stop and gape. After just a few weeks, my body felt tighter, more compact. By week four, "You feel it here, too?" was the whispered refrain in the women's locker room as we incredulously patted our saddlebags.

At the end of the study, the group retested. We were stunned by our gains, none more so than me. The final three workouts of the program coincided with a two-week vacation in Hawaii, which included a stopover in Napa for a ten-course meal at the French Laundry. Even with improvising the last three workouts using water jugs in lieu of the kettlebells, I still managed to drop a pant size and achieve a staggering 20 to 40 percent improvement in strength and flexibility tests. (Preliminary results show that the group using traditional weights also got stronger, but without the same gains in the sort of power used to jump and throw.) I felt light and quick on my feet, plus I acquired what devotees call "a bell butt"—high, packed, narrow—all in the name of science. □