

# GENTRY



## PLAY TO WIN

How three of San Francisco Ballet's top dancers tackle health and fitness

**+DESTINATIONS**



SILICON VALLEY & SAN FRANCISCO

# PLAY TO WIN

It's a compelling story: how three of San Francisco Ballet's top dancers tackle health and fitness when they're off duty. Having achieved the coveted status of membership in one of the world's most exceptional dance companies, Mathilde Froustey, WanTing Zhao, and Gabriela Gonzalez embody exceptional beauty, femininity, and grace. You might expect their lives off stage to resemble that of a Nutcracker doll: all nuts and no Chardonnay or sugar. Think again.

WRITTEN BY CORRY COOK  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY HILLARY JEANNE PHOTOGRAPHY





Mathilde Froustey

Like the city they represent, these extraordinary dancers are also delightfully accessible; “our” San Francisco ballerinas have been known to drink wine, stay out late, ride motorcycles, and listen to metal. Yet each is a wicked combination of performer and athlete, a fierce competitor, capable of laser focus and harnessing not only femininity, but exceptional mental and physical power as well in pursuit of relentless perfection on pointe.

Led by Artistic Director and Principal Choreographer Helgi Tomasson, San Francisco Ballet is accompanied by its own orchestra and operates one of the country’s most prestigious schools

of ballet. What rests on the shoulders of these performers is advancing the company’s position as one of the world’s finest, through their vitality, innovation, and diversity, as well as an uncompromising commitment to artistic excellence.

Ballet may look a hell of a lot prettier than some other athletic careers, but blood, sweat, and tears are still involved. Like any top-tier athlete, these dancers live to return again and again to hard and unforgiving territory. Every day at the “office,” they dominate a hot zone of intense competition, otherwise known as the dance floor, to push themselves beyond the average body’s limitations. Toes wrecked, joints battered, and bones bruised.

How do these badass ballerinas

achieve peak performance? Here are a few key takeaways...

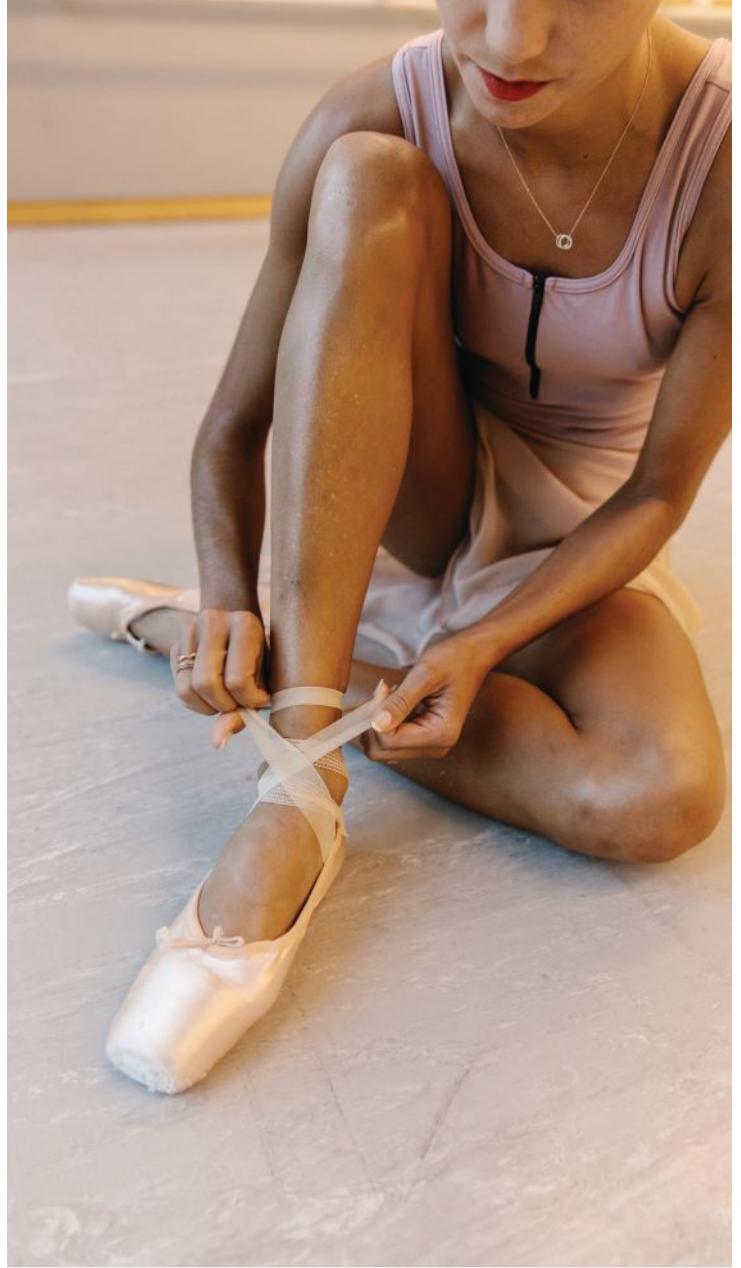
## **MATHILDE FROUSTEY**

**COUNTRY: FRANCE**

**AGE: 34**

### **POWER LIES WITHIN**

Principal Dancer Mathilde Froustey loves to laugh off the clichés. When other young girls in France couldn’t wait to get into their tutus at ballet class, Mathilde was determined to get kicked out. “Bad posture, not passion, first introduced me to ballet,” she remembers. With an entire year of classes paid for by her mother, however, she was



stuck. It wasn't until Mom confiscated her beloved skateboard, that she began to take things seriously.

"As a child I first looked at ballerinas and saw only beauty," she recalls, "not the powerful women and athletes that make me so drawn to dancing today." Mathilde went on to sign her first professional dance contract in France at 17. She joined the San Francisco Ballet in 2015 as a principal dancer, receiving acclaim and awards for the title role in *Sleeping Beauty* and as Kitri in *Don Quixote*.

Today, Mathilde is certain that her health and abilities hinge on embracing all that she is both on and off the dance floor. "As a dancer my job is to perform several

roles—athlete, artist, and even model," shares Mathilde. "My various jobs often conflict. As an athlete I must stay healthy, rigorous, and focused. As a model, I work to be an immaculate inspiration. The artist in me thrives out in the world with other artists, drinking wine and talking until dawn. I revel in all of these things and make them work at the right time for me." Not only is this bold admission key to her success on the dance floor, it makes her ridiculously attractive.

#### KEEP IT SEXY

Mathilde doesn't need to kiss and tell; it's written all over her face. This is a woman in love. She is engaged to marry Michelin-starred chef Mourad Lahlou, who in addition

to her biggest fan is the culinary force behind San Francisco's Aziza. "I enjoy being a woman and feeling sensual in my body and my art."

No surprise, love and life with a chef leads to finding joy in food and eating well. "I've actually lost weight. What I find with Mourad in the kitchen is that the quality of food is extraordinary. We focus on simple, high-quality, and a little bit of everything—proteins, vegetables, fruits, but also cheese and bread—all in smaller proportions." Apparently, Mathilde is great with her feet, but not with her hands. "I am clumsy. Mourad is right to prefer I eat more than I help."

Dancing requires these athletes be unafraid when it comes to analyzing their

bodies as instruments, essential tools of their art, requiring constant honest assessment and refinement. Mathilde delights in her private gyrotomics classes, where she focuses on turning areas of weakness into opportunities. Time spent playing with the couple's two cats and hiking near their home in Sausalito also keep the blood pressure low and spirits high.

It is important to Mathilde to harness all this joy she experiences and use it to thrive on the job. "Right before I perform, I focus on the pleasure and the beauty in life," says Mathilde. That includes supporting different kinds of artists in the pursuit of their craft. When she is not on stage or in the dance studio, Mathilde finds creative inspiration in curating La Maison in Oakland, an interdisciplinary creative space for artists that she co-founded.

## WANTING ZHAO

COUNTRY: CHINA

AGE: 27

### ADOPT A WARRIOR MENTALITY

For WanTing Zhao, there is no body without a strong and persistent mind. Promoted to Principal Dancer in 2019, her steady ascension through the ranks is due to pinpoint precision and fierce confidence in her training and skill. She explains, "Intense focus before a performance is key. I listen to the music, visualize the steps, and feel my way into the character." So far she has dazzled in principal or featured roles at SF Ballet including Tomasson's *Giselle*, *Nutcracker*, *Romeo & Juliet* and more. "Afraid to fail is not an option," she declares.

WanTing gives every inch of who she is required during rehearsals as well as performance. "On stage every moment counts. I focus on nothing else but enjoying the moment, being precise with my steps, feeling the music, and engaging with the audience. Nothing else exists," she shares.

When she is not on duty, not talking about her day job is important. She explains, "I don't bring my work home with me. I jump into

my favorite things to do off the dance floor, like going to museums, taking a spa day, and being with my cat."

The old rule of, "if you don't use it, you lose it," applies as well. She shares, "Most of my workouts are in formal ballet. When I am not dancing, I love doing Pilates. Sometimes I take spin classes (SoulCycle)—it's fun and a good conditioning workout." Her road to post-workout recovery includes weekly acupuncture and massage, drinking plenty of water, and a skincare routine that balances out all that stage makeup. "Also, daily meditation helps me reset my energy and get prepared for the next day."

### FOCUS ON FUEL

WanTing's body responds to multiple smaller meals throughout the day. She explains, "I like to start my day with coffee, a hard-boiled egg, and some fruits. When I go the ballet, I normally take snacks with me like nuts, banana, trail mix, dried fruits, or yogurt. On my lunch break I like to eat a

salad with chicken."

Down time includes plenty of cooking and quality time with her boyfriend. "As we both eat light during the day, we like to have fish or steak for dinner together with some rice and seasonal vegetables." Thankfully, she admits to an occasional guilty pleasure in the form of red wine.

There's an emotional component as well. Maintaining a support system of family and friends along with a clear plan provides direction and keeps her on track to achieve future goals. "My family and friends mean everything to me," she shares. "Without them I could not have ever made it this far." Like many of these dancers, WanTing views each new ballet danced as another goal attained, another critical step conquered on an intense vertical climb. "For me, I have clear goals that I want to achieve in my personal and professional life. *Lady of the Camellias*, *Swan Lake*, and *Carmen* because they each have a large acting component and lots of drama."

"On stage every moment counts. I focus on nothing else but enjoying the moment, being precise with my steps, feeling the music, and engaging with the audience. Nothing else exists."





## GABRIELA GONZALEZ

COUNTRY: MEXICO

AGE: FOREVER YOUNG

### NEVER EVER GIVE UP

For dancer Gabriela Gonzalez, ballet is a chance to inspire, motivate, and spread beauty in the world, and nothing is going to get in the way of this joy. “All athletes know the body has a clock,” Gabriela explains. “We are often reminded that certain things can’t be done at a certain age or after an injury. I am in control of what I tell my mind. It’s about managing positive thought to achieve whatever is in front of me.” Gabriela joined SF Ballet’s corps de ballet in 2017 at age 28—on

the older side in the ballet world.

For all athletes, fear of injuries both past and future is a constant. Ballet is no exception, even with endless precautions in place, dancers must overcome everything from bloody toes to broken bones. Gabriela saw her choice in foods as a key part of recovery after a fractured ankle and torn ligament occurred from a jump gone wrong years ago. She shares, “To expedite the healing process, I researched what I could eat that would deliver the best nutrients for my body and continue to eat that way today—lots of salmon, fruits, and veggies in rich colors like bright red and dark green.”

What’s in Gabriela’s kitchen right now?

She laughs, “Carrot cupcakes with a lot of crème on top. I don’t believe in good days and cheating days when it comes to food. If I don’t allow myself to have something, I want it even more.” Despite the fact that her body is a finely tuned performing machine, she loves sweets as much as the next girl, but focuses on quality fuel. Her favorite post-workout routine? “Smoothies with raw eggs, strawberries, banana, flax and chia seeds, and plain Greek yogurt as well as acupuncture and massage,” she raves. “I love coconut oil for the body and a raw honey mask for the face.”



### LIVE HARD CORE

As a young, highly active child growing up in Mérida, Mexico, Gabriela had energy to burn. At her mother's suggestion, she took on dancing seriously in her hometown, as well as competitive swimming and triathlons across the country. Today a diverse physical and mental approach continues to work for her. Gabriela created roles in two major works at SF Ballet's Unbound festival in 2018: Cathy Marston's *Snowblind*, and Justin Peck's sneaker ballet *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*. Her future is bright.

Rehearsals are where Gabriela gets her body better, stronger, and more in control. "My day job comes with such intense

physical demands, so I seek balance off the dance floor," she shares. "I am drawn to a variety of activity that addresses the mind and the body in different ways, such as meditation, yoga, Pilates, or my favorite, gyrotomics." She explains, "It helps me focus my breathing. I enjoy how it promotes my ability to be long, lean, and elastic, yet it demands a strong core, which is essential to everything in ballet and life."

Gabriela finds power in looking at motivational documentaries and listening to everything from the Phillip Glass station to the hard stuff in her pre-performance playlist. Quality time outside in nature with her adorable Chihuahua Kity and her

uber-supportive boyfriend Michael is also essential. Not only does Gabriela refuse to accept roadblocks, she continues to find motivation in others who share her relentless attitude. "Every day I learn something from watching my colleagues. The exceptional talent and artistic freedom all around me at SF Ballet are part of what makes me a better performer and athlete every day." ●