

SUMMER 2019 Issue No. 10

edible LA

Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

the
outdoor
issue

GELATERIA ULI'S PERFECT SORBETS
FUELING UP WITH BRENDAN BRAZIER
HIKING WITH THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY (+ SNACKS!)
TIFFANI THIESSEN ON GARDENING WITH HER KIDS
SUMMER ROSÉ COCKTAILS, AND MORE...

Member of Edible Communities

PLANT-BASED FOR THE WIN

A local athlete and entrepreneur is on his way to save the world, one venture at a time.

BY LISA ALEXANDER

Brendan Brazier is extremely fit. Loping toward me in a t-shirt and shorts, it's not like it hits you in the face, it's more of a subtle kind of I've got this fit, which makes sense, since the guy is a former professional Ironman triathlete and two-time Canadian 50km Ultra Marathon Champion. It's that obsession, in fact, that determination to figure out how to do an impossible thing, that gave him the idea for Vega, a blockbuster plant-based protein powder (among other things, nowadays) that's the title sponsor for Ironman in Kona this year—this is after Amazon sponsored last year and Gatorade the year before that. Brendan is also one of the world's leading authorities on plant-based performance nutrition as well as the author of the bestseller *Thrive* and the creator of a bunch of techie health apps. These days he's all about making the world a better place. After an hour talking with him, or maybe learning from him is more accurate, I'd say we're lucky to have him on the case, especially in these precarious times.

But how did this mild-mannered Canadian end up on the top of the fitness juggernaut? The music's too loud in the Venice restaurant, so we head to the back seat of my car to find out. I quickly discover that Brendan is curious and far-reaching and fitness-obsessed and, maybe most importantly, he's all about paradigm-shifting how we all think about food.

Take birthday cake: "It's your birthday. I baked you a cake,"

"You didn't have cake? Come on. Treat yourself," or "Eat some cake!"
Perfect example.

It's your day, your special day, and here you are, gifted with, no guilt-ed with, a sugar and fat bomb which supplies a momentary high or happiness before it crashes you into a miserable funk.

Brendan would have a lot to say about that, I think. It starts with how it would be best to stop thinking about food as a treat or a comfort, and really see it as nourishment. We're good. We're alive. We're worthy. We deserve to ingest nutrients that regenerate us.

His philosophy stems from when he was living in his mom's garage in North Vancouver, trying to figure out how to make a career as a triathlete.

"I looked at a bunch of things that I thought could help boost performance, different training methods, different technologies...really anything I could find that would increase my odds of having this career," he says.

It certainly takes stamina and talent to succeed as a professional triathlete. What most people don't realize is that it also takes extreme focus and strategy. What separates Brendan from the pack is that he watches and cares for himself, noticing on a cellular level what works and what doesn't. Brendan quickly realized it was all about recovery, or how fast you can get your body to recover and renew itself after intense exercise.





Photo © 24 Hour Fitness

A workout breaks down tissue that your body rushes to repair and—a good thing—your body always overcompensates. That’s how we end up stronger after repeated exercise. Which brings us to the important point: your body thrives, yes, thrives on top-quality nutrients to regenerate. As Brendan tells me, “your body is literally made up of what you eat.” And, another plus, the more you work out and repair, the newer your cells are, and that’s how you lower your biological age.

According to Brendan, succeeding at intense endurance sports is not so much about skill, but about how much time you’re willing to put into it, as well as that crucial paradigm shift: thinking of food as fuel. To figure this out, he used himself as a guinea pig, testing pretty much every diet—high and low carb, high and low protein—before he got to plant-based. And he didn’t even do that right, at first.

“I was just loading up on lots of starch and really not high-quality protein, essential fats or B vitamins or Omega threes or anything like that,” he says. This realization led to even more trial and error, and research too. He was listening to the radio one day when this guy came on, talking about a mysterious root called maca that apparently reduced cortisol in the body. “He described many of my symptoms,” Brendan says. “Sugar and starch cravings late at night, not sleeping as well, waking up still feeling tired, craving sugar and caffeine.” Brendan wasted no time adding maca to a blender drink for optimum recovery. That’s when the magic happened. He felt great. He slept deeper. His muscles

weren’t as sore. It was so tangible that he ended up calling the guy he heard on the radio—Charlie Chang—and, almost immediately, they were finishing each other’s sentences. By the end of the meeting, he and Charlie decided to take Brendan’s drink to the people, and so Vega was born.

But how does this all work for the average Jane, perhaps someone like me who loves good food but doesn’t need to go all crazy-ass obsessive?

Easy, Brendan tells me. If you don’t support your cortisol, you’ll slump into adrenal fatigue—hence the need for sugar and caffeine, to jack ourselves back up before we spiral down again. A vicious cycle of modern life (never mind sports) that few of us have the energy or inclination to fix. Vega seemingly puts its drinkers on the path to regenerate cells by giving the body what it needs.

Most days, Brendan goes to Gold’s Gym. “It’s the mecca... definitely a lot of characters.” He also bikes and runs in Topanga State Park, close to where he lives, way more than most of us do. He’s fully vegan. And then there’s the saving-the-world thing too. According to Brendan, it’s all about the food.

“I think the big takeaway is [eating] plants, and eating socially. And what I mean by that is not necessarily with other people, but with other people *in mind*...thinking about, ‘what impact did the production of the food I’m about to eat have on the planet?’ and what impact did have it on those who produced it?”

He calls it the nutrient-to-resource ratio, a way of looking

at the amount of nutrition—vitamins, mineral, phytochemicals, antioxidants—that exist in any given food in relation to the environmental spend—land, water, fossil fuel. The goal is to get as much nutrition as possible while being mindful of things like CO₂, methane, and nitric oxide emissions.

“I’m working with a group called Pinto in New York that’s actually using that ratio to grade foods.”

The problem, really, is information overload. We have doctors and dietitians and nutritionists and celebrities touting the way to go, and yet all the information is conflicting and every day we read scientific studies that seem to cancel out the dietary mandate of the month before. Pinto has built a comprehensive nutritional database of over 100,000 food items that we Americans consume. The idea is that you should be able to look up pretty much anything and also find out if it’s lactose-free, vegan, keto-friendly, paleo, gluten-free, and so on. It’s the personalization of the food label or a stellar way to get conscious of how we choose what we eat, as well as labeling for nutrient density.

“Unfortunately you can have food now without nutrition,” Brendan says. “Which [in the past] would’ve been a paradox.”

He’s also proud of his work with Tulsi Gabbard, a Congresswoman from Hawaii who’s running for president in 2020. “She’s very enthusiastic, as I would hope any presidential candidate is, in trying to fix the system... like farmers unfortunately have to grow a lot of corn, wheat, and soy for animals which they’re not very well-paid for because it’s so inefficient. If we can get the free market really working and stop taxpayer subsidies going to artificially lower the cost of meat... food that’s produced more efficiently will be as affordable as it ought to be,” Brendan tells me.

But Brendan isn’t all work and no play. His newest venture, Pulp Culture, will be a line of hard-pressed juice made in collaboration with 101 Cider House, a local producer of delicious, small-batch, organic hard ciders. Brendan tells me he was first

introduced to their line of alcoholic “good drinks” on the shelf at Whole Foods Markets and was so impressed that apples were the first of very few ingredients, and yet there was also zero residual sugar. Much like the Vega story, he reached out and clicked with founder Mark McTavish and, before they knew it, they were partners in a new line of fermented juice that will have fun natural ingredients like mushrooms.

“There’s one that’s called ‘Relax,’” Brendan shares. “It’s the first one we’re bringing out that will have reishi and valerian root. It’s just a relaxing thing, helping to reduce cortisol. My role is to contribute the functionality.”

He also tells me he hadn’t had alcohol in fourteen years, but after trying 101’s Tippy Buddha—matcha and fermented juice—he experienced “this incredible focus.”

Later that day, I check out 101 Cider House for myself and find that it’s wildly imaginative in its labeling and concoctions. The flavored sour cider ranges from Scrumpy (“complex barnyard”) to Black Dog, which contains blood oranges and lavender plus activated charcoal to obliterate hangovers. Other flavors have nopal cactus, Thai basil, spirulina, crushed bananas, and pears. With no carbs and loads of naturally occurring probiotics, the idea is that you can knock one, or two or three, back and still feel good.

In the U.S., companies can market a beverage as cider as long as it contains at least 50% apples. McTavish’s brew is 100% free-pressed raw apple juice from local California fruit, with added natural ingredients. Brendan adds the know-how to kick it up a nutritional notch.

Next step is the cider house they plan to open in the LA River area. This burgeoning creative hub seems perfect somehow, an iconic part of Los Angeles that’s newly regenerated and hosting a different kind of high: a buzzy drink that makes you feel great and is good for you too. Sounds to me like saving the world, one venture at a time. ♦

