

# LIM'S KITCHEN

ALLEN LIM IS ONE OF THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED CYCLING COACHES IN THE WORLD, AS WELL AS CO-FOUNDER OF NUTRITION COMPANY SKRATCH LABS. WE TALKED TURKEY AND MORE WITH HIM...



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Allen readies his breakfast to go before a ride out of Boulder.

**F**OR MANY YEARS NOW Allen Lim has been and the forefront of sports science and training for cyclists; all be it in a comparatively modest way.

The bubbly Boulder based star maker is a long time cyclist, and avid fan of the sport, and has worked most of the major US riders and teams over the years, including the 2016 Olympic squad.

His passion for cycling is positively inspirational, and his once seemingly oddball (in an era of high-tech cycling) home baked natural snacks and treats fast became standard issue favourites with the teams he worked with; and as being a passionate coach doesn't exactly pay as much as it should he decided to make a business out of his nutritional delights, and called it Skratch Labs.

Simple, tasty, natural, and has always been the approach of Mr Lim when it comes to food, which is a long side-step away from many "over-egged" eating regimes others often preach. His approach to nutrition is refreshingly wholesome, and is seasoned with logic and sprinkled with science – a true recipe for success.

We caught up with him at the Haute Route Rockies and talked at length about the realities of eating for regular riders (and the stars) such as us.

**ST:** Skratch energy drinks really put the company on the nutritional map, what is different about your mix and what is important to consider in a sports drink?

**AL:** Simplicity, that's it. I don't think we're doing anything unique. Our drink is incredibly simple; probably like Gatorade used to be when it was first made.

When you're exercising you're using salt and sugar, and that's basically what Skratch

is; sodium and a little bit of sugar. This is good for health reasons, and to keep your blood sugar and glucose levels up so that your body can transport water, with a little flavouring added to make it taste good.

All you're trying to do is replace the water and sodium that you use during exercise, and thirst is a great natural monitor of this. But what people maybe don't realise is that we use more water than salt/sodium during exercise. As you sweat out sodium it exaggerates the thirst effect, and if you just drink water you will probably take on more than you actually lose and need. Adding salt to the drink reduces the thirst by levelling the sodium.

As you lose water (maybe 2-3% volume) then performance declines, so by taking on a simple mix that maintains the balance and reduces decline in performance,

That said, although it's very simple there is a lot of science behind it. We have a ratio of fructose and glucose that we believe best matches the demands on the body and lower intestine, which in turn helps absorption of the fluids.

Because it's so simple the molecular osmolality in our drink is just 160, which is important; blood is around 280, so if it's bellow that you will always get the water through by osmosis, and not have to rely on active transport of the molecules.

If that ratio is higher it means that the small intestine has to drive molecules through. That ratio is not just made up by sugar and sodium, the colourings, flavourings and emulsifiers all add up, and many drinks run out at 320 or so, which can negatively impact on absorption.

This simplicity is what makes the product actually work. People could mix similar drinks in their own kitchen, but most people don't want to go to those lengths.

**ST:** Do you think that as athletes we may drink too much water at times?

**AL:** Potentially, yes. The real question is how much do you pee. If you urinate more than 5 times or so a day you may be drinking a little too much water. Thirst is another indicator – if you're drinking just for the sake of it then your kidneys will just filter out that water into urine; they are remarkable for maintaining sodium balance. But, it's all down to the individual; we're all different – listen to your thirst.

**ST:** Caffeine, what's your take on its place in sport?

**AL:** Caffeine is a really effective organic aid. It helps mobilise fatty acids, stimulates and helps clarity; but of course you do de-sensitise to its effects. To get any performance boost from it you need to refrain from using it at times and then re-introduce it when needed.

Coffee is also a big part of our culture; it's enjoyable, and social too. There is no major performance gain from it by drinking it daily, but it definitely has a cultural role in cycling, which has its own advantages.

**ST:** Alcohol?

**AL:** I think it's probably perfectly fine. It only becomes a problem when people are drinking so much that they are not focussing. There is a big difference between having a drink and being an alcoholic; in moderation it's fine, and social, which is very important.

**ST:** Diet theories and approaches seem to have changed dramatically in recent times; what's your overall philosophy on food?

**AL:** What I have seen with riders is that there has been a big return towards the "slow food" movement, and here I

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[[ As long as the food you are eating is fresh, comes with its own package and is a recognisable whole food then it's probably ok. ]]

do strongly emphasise the 'made from scratch' approach. As long as the food you are eating is fresh, comes with its own package and is a recognisable whole food then it's probably ok.

There was a time where people focussed on how much protein was needed, and also a time when we went towards pre-packaged foods. Now it has gone back to more natural food.

There are still a lot of riders focussing on pastas and high carbs, but also a lot more riders now take much more care of what they eat, and are a lot more sensitive to what makes them feel good and are sure to eat that. Some may see this as hedonism, but hedonism works pretty well for athletes who are really in tune with themselves.

For example; some riders may lose small amounts of sodium when they sweat, others maybe lose 4-5 times more, so they will naturally crave more salt and need to replace that. Then you may get a team director who has a belief system based around salt intake limits then they may well limit and inhibit the rider who needs more salt, and that goes for all dietary issues. I think hedonism is good in this

respect, and should be individual to riders, both mentally and physically.

**ST: Carbo-loading seems to have fallen by the roadside, is it still relevant?**

**AL:** Its really just about terminology. If you look at the average carbo intake during the Tour de France now compared to when carbo-loading was huge, well – it might actually be the same, we don't really know that. Because it was seen as "faddish" we turned away from carbo-loading, but it did actually work.

I think it's important to remove terminology from around what riders are actually doing.

**ST: How important is comfort eating, especially during hard training or a stage sportive event?**

**AL:** It's everything, really important. Even with top athletes, they are not robots; they are human beings.

Performance at a high level has to come from happiness and joy. There is often a miss conception that in order to be happy you must be successful, but in reality it's the opposite – you need to be happy to be successful in sport and life.

Many of the athletes I've worked with recognise this – in the past people thought that the sun revolved around the earth, but it was the opposite,

With this in mind nutrition in sport all depends on your goals. If you want to win the Tour de France you may need a very different diet to your friends and family, which impacts on those important human relationships and on the way that food brings us all around a table. This effect may actually be more important than the food we eat. Social feel may well be even more important than chemical feel.

**ST: Many of us may carry a few extra pounds around the short line – should we be obsessed with this if we want to improve in sportive and local events?**

**AL:** I'm not one to advocate broad policies. There is definitely a strict discipline requirement at top-level sport, not just in diet but also in training and everything else, and they may need that to achieve their goals.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Haute Route riders mixing and matching energy food with real snacks.

According to Lim a drink here and there is not a bad thing.

Allan reflecting on a coffee and cake which waits as a treat at the end of his ride.



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Even in wet weather it's important to stay well hydrated.

[[ People could mix similar drinks in their own kitchen, but most people don't want to go to those lengths.]]

Some times you're all in, others your not – one rider may not even worry about food, to another it may be all-important, and restricting it may have negative fall out. It's so individual and variable dependent on the person.

**ST:** For a regular rider, with a job and home commitments, who wants to survive a week-long Haute Route style event diet is often something they focus on. What would be your general nutritional advice?

**AL:** I often see riders in these kind of events, and it's all very extreme to them, and they tend to do everything else to extremes and not relax. This often means over eating, and often eating way too many of the wrong things.

Using too many gels and products marketed as performance enhancing when they don't need them is an issue, and even more important is that they often use these products for the first time during an event.

People end up getting stressed out and end up going to the bike shop and buying everything they can. Do not use products that you have not tried before. Have a plan coming into the event and keep things simple. Don't get stressed out about where you are and what you're doing.

The human body is great at taking care of its self and telling you what it needs. You may head out on a 100-mile training rider and not even worry about having enough food and water and still perform very well because you're not stressed out about it all. Relax and you will be fine.

If you're thirsty drink; if you're not then don't – you may end up over drinking. You may find yourself craving salt more than normal, or getting hungry; appease these cravings, your body is telling you what it needs.

If something feels good to eat then eat it. You may want pizza and think that you can't have it because you're supposed to be performing at a high level – it's not actually true. In the last Tour de France I did after 17 of the 21 stages I cooked up chicken fried rice for the riders, and the rest of the time they had pizza.

People might think that they are not allowed to eat this in events like the Haute Route, but it's okay. They may actually perform better by eating something they actually want rather than sticking to a dogma where they think that you have to eat and do certain things.

I often read people writing that you should eat this and that – but your body knows what it needs and so let it have what it needs and wants.

You should try to be consistent with your eating, and when you eat. When you get tired it's easy to slip. It is very important to eat a good breakfast (if you have time), be consistent with eating on the bike, to eat something as soon as you finish (very important for recovery) and also to eat at night.

In training you have gone to bed a little hungry in order to lose weight – but you do not want to do that in an event like this.

**ST:** Breakfast is something many of us skip on, what are the essentials on this and when to eat in general?

**AL:** It's a very individual thing. You need to do a lot of self-experimentation and find out what works for you – it can be misleading to give general advice.

A lot of the riders I work with will keep breakfast very simple, often rice and eggs. If they are awake three hours before the start of a race they may eat more, and have time to consume it. But, if it's really close to a race

start then they may skip breakfast and just snack when they are on the bike, relying on what is already stored in the body.

We're starting to understand that nutrition and diet is highly individual, and will depend of your own needs and goals for the day, and that it can affect your moods and temperament on a daily basis.

This is why it's difficult to give general advice. People see others behaviour and think they need to do that, and often screw themselves up by doing so. Unfortunately a lot of the articles you read in sports magazines end up perpetuating a lot of negative behaviour, which is ironic because they're trying to come up with these sexy short sound bites in digestible ways. The best advice (from me) is if it feels and tastes good eat it.

**ST:** How about on the bike eating – natural treats versus high tech gels and potions?

**AL:** There is definitely a movement towards real food. Gels are fine for emergencies and so on, but real and good tasting treats are far more bearable, especially after a few days.

**ST:** Losing weight – what's the reality?

**AL:** First thing to recognise is that you probably will not lose more and a pound a week and keep it off. Timing can help – stack most of your calories in the first half of the day and then taper your eating down.

Ultimately, it does all come down to calories in against calories out, even though various things affect your metabolic rate during the day.

Hunger is a good way to judge if you are in deficit; going to bed a little hungry is a good cue. But at the end of the day – remember that you are a human being, do enjoy that and eat what you want, in moderation. 🍌