

## ***Fueling for Life: You are What you Don't Eat?***

I first met Tom Onda in 1998 when he joined one of my tri-groups as a newbie to the sport.

When I observed some of Tom's spartan eating habits and inquired casually as to his general diet, I remember advising him on the spot that a demanding new exercise training regimen like triathlon would most certainly require him to broaden his nutritional intake. I did not know Tom well at the time, and while he politely acknowledged my advice, I sensed that he would simply have to learn the hard way...



Seven years later I am writing to say how I was most mistaken in my nutritional assumptions. I must say that I have never seen anyone so generally healthy, in perpetual motion, and unfailingly vibrant as Tom Onda. Nor have I ever met anyone so assiduous in regards to the food and drink that he allows into his body.

When I think about Tom's approach to life nutrition, I recognize two core M2 Training Principles---Quality versus Quantity, the need to seek out Efficiency. My focused, but relatively Spartan training concepts are decidedly non-mainstream in a sport that breeds excess. Yet, athletes of all abilities practicing M2 training consistently turn in extraordinary performances in events like Ironman that are very unforgiving when it comes to inadequate preparation.

M2 athletes know that I believe general multi-sport dogma regarding endurance sport fueling to be excessive, unnecessarily complicated, and too often counterproductive. In my various articles I have explained how athletes can easily teach their body to need less fuel and improve overall performance in the process.

Tom, as you will see in the interview, takes M2 Fueling Efficiency concepts and applies them to life in general, and with incredible results.

While there are many schools of thought regarding what constitutes proper and healthy nutrition, I think all persons can agree that general health is profoundly affected by a healthy diet. With this in mind, and as you ponder the merits of Tom's nutritional practice, consider the following:

- Tom exercises 4-5 hours per day
- Sleeps 4-5 hours per night
- Has never had so much as a sniffle in the 7 years that I have known him
- Reports not having been sick or had a cold for 18 years
- General persona is vibrant, engaged, and in the moment

I am sure that to many of you, Tom's nutritional practice and his unerring discipline will seem extreme, but so too is his extraordinary health and enthusiasm for all that he does.

Just as winning Ironman performances cannot result from flawed training fundamentals, neither can sustained and extraordinary health be achieved on the basis of unsound nutritional principles.

### **Stats & General Background:**

- 40 years old (in his 41<sup>st</sup> year)
- 5'11, 140-145 lbs
- Blood pressure is generally around 115/70. Resting heart rate is 30-40. Cholesterol level is very low, difficult to get an accurate reading. Body fat is around 4-5%.
- Former Classical Ballet Dancer, Chicago Ballet

- Current Occupation- Chief Intellectual Property Counsel, Levi Strauss & Co., San Francisco, CA
- Proud Godfather to Jimmy and Yuna McCormack. Love those kids.

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**Describe your weekly exercise routine, what activities, how much time in each, intensity, general scheduling?**

- Bikram yoga class 8-9 times/week. 1.5 hour class everyday. Double classes (3 hours) on Saturday and/or Sunday. Class consists of 26 yoga postures in a 100+ degree heated room. Intense stretching and moderate cardio workout. During the week, I usually go to the 6 am or 5:30 pm class depending on my work schedule. I mix it up on weekends and take class at various times during the day.
- Swim 12,000-15,000 yards/week. Usually swim Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday evenings and Saturday and/or Sunday afternoon. 3,000-4,000 yard workouts. Butterfly is my favorite/best stroke.
- Classical Ballet and Modern Jazz dance classes 4 times/week. Wednesday evenings 7:30-9:00 pm; Friday evenings 5:30-7:00 pm, Saturday morning 11:45-1:00 pm; Sunday morning 11:15-12:30 pm. Moderate to high intensity depending on choreography. Dancing remains a passion of mine.
- Weekend run. 1.5 hours on Saturday or Sunday afternoon, evening. Generally moderate, various tempos. Always with music.

Recap: About 3-4 hours of activity/day during the week, and 5-7 hours/day on the weekends. I do not feel obligated to workout. I do it because I truly enjoy it. My focus is not on competing with others. I competed intensely as a dancer and early in my law career. I now try to live this period of my life free of competition.

**What do you eat?**

I eat only natural foods - organic vegetables, fruit (fresh and dried), nuts, oats, rye, barley and legumes. I drink only water and bancha tea (made from the twigs of Japanese tea plants). No alcohol, soda, candy, potato chips, pretzels, goldfish crackers, chocolate, cakes, ice cream, desserts, fast foods, pastas or bread. Never.

I think of food as a fuel. Eating for me is like stopping at a gas station to fuel up to go on a big trip.

**What is a typical food day?**

I don't eat when I wake up in the morning because I am not hungry. I go to yoga class and then to work and will drink lots of water throughout the day. I sometimes have fruit or nuts in the afternoon, but nothing too heavy. I will swim or take a dance class in the evening after work and eat my main meal of the day afterwards at home. The main meal generally consists of steamed vegetables, legumes and brown rice in very healthy portions. I snack on organic air-popped popcorn. It is generally the same fare everyday. I never get bored with it. I look forward to my main meal it and eat it slowly and in peace. Never rush through it. I truly appreciate the meal. It is somewhat spiritual.

**Do you eat take special steps to eat just prior to exercise, during, or immediately afterwards?**

I don't schedule eating times. I eat only when my body tells me that I am hungry. Sometimes that is before I workout, sometimes after, never during because I am focused on working out and not my appetite.

**What do you use for hydration?**

Plenty of water. I only drink water when I am working out. No sports drinks or any processed beverages. When I am not working out, I will also drink bancha tea.

**Do you count calories?**

I don't count calories. I eat according to how I feel. I stop when I feel full.

**Is there a term for the diet you practice?**

My current eating habits evolved from a macrobiotic diet, which I began following 18 years ago. The macrobiotic diet is based on the premise that diet is a principal cause of many illnesses, including cancer. A macrobiotic diet consists of whole grains, organically grown fresh vegetables, protein-rich legumes and sea vegetables as primary sources of energy and nutrition. My current eating habits are a bit narrower because there are foods that are included in a macrobiotic diet, such as fish, oils and seasonings that I choose not to eat.

**How did you begin your diet?**

I learned about the macrobiotic diet from a dancer friend in the late 80's. I was always impressed with how she managed to avoid eating and drinking candy, desserts, soda and alcohol at social gatherings. She had amazing energy. I also will never forget the whites of her eyes – they were as pure as snow. I asked her about her diet and she recommended that I read a remarkable book titled "Confessions of a Kamikaze Cowboy" by Dirk Benedict. Benedict was an actor on the 1970's television series "Battlestar Galactica". He was diagnosed with prostate cancer and cured himself through a macrobiotic diet. The book is a very powerful autobiography about his journey. He learned about the diet from actress Gloria Swanson, who was known for her unrelenting energy and age-defying presence. The premise is simple. Processed foods contain ingredients that are not natural to the human body. They build up in your system and cause illness. If you starve your body of those toxins, your body stays well.

I began my personal journey by eliminating certain foods from my diet. I started with all fast foods, then beef, chicken, fish, soda, sweets, dairy and eventually all processed foods – anything packaged or in a can.

**How did you feel when you changed your diet?**

With each food group that I eliminated, I felt increasingly better. The change was DRASTIC. I was bouncing off the walls with energy. I needed less sleep. My thinking became clearer. I excelled in law school. I danced with increased passion. People commented that I was on fire. I was. I felt as though I could conquer the world – and still do.

**How has your diet changed your life?**

At first, my body changed. There was unintended drastic weight loss. I was on the crew team during college and had established a fairly nice physique from rowing and dancing. I weighed 175 lbs. After switching to a macrobiotic diet, my weight dropped to 150 lbs. People thought that I was sick and told me that I "didn't look good". Admittedly, I looked very different. But, if they asked me how I felt, it was like night and day. My weight currently hovers between 140-145 lbs.

Over time, I gradually became aware of another change. I stopped getting sick – no colds, flus, fevers or headaches.

And there was another significant change – to my budget!! During 1990-1993, I kept a journal of everything I ate and how much I spent on food. It consisted of grains, beans and vegetables – for an average cost of \$2/day! The money that I saved on food went towards the down payment on my first house in San Francisco. Yet another benefit!

Also, because I like to eat fresh, organic foods, I keep very little food in my house. Usually just enough for 2 days at most. I never use an oven or microwave. My friends joke that I can use my oven and refrigerator for storing books and clothes!

The change in my diet was a crucial turning point in my life. Not only did I change my eating habits, but part of the process was focusing on and learning about my needs and wants. I learned that my body actually needed very little to function at a euphoric level. So much of what I ate before changing my diet consisted of foods that I wanted, not necessarily foods that my body needed. I learned what my body actually needed and I restricted my diet to those foods. Extreme? Yes. But it was an incredible learning lesson that impacted other aspects of my life. I learned that I actually need very little in life, and that is comforting. As a result, I now focus on those things that I need. I have low tolerance for superficiality. I am not focused on material wealth. I value meaningful friendships and relationships. I now see the world through different eyes.

**Describe your general state?**

ABSOLUTELY GREAT! Both physically and emotionally. I am an optimistic person and maintain a positive attitude. No bouts of depression. I am able to roll with life's punches. The glass is always half full to me. I consider myself a person with a lot of physical and mental stamina.

**When is the last time you were sick, or had a cold?**

I can honestly say that I have not been sick since I changed my eating habits over 18 years ago. I don't remember what a headache feels like. I keep no medicine in my house because there is no need for it. I attribute my healthy life to my diet, but also to my attitude. I simply refuse to allow myself to get sick. It would prevent me from doing the things that I enjoy.

**How much do you sleep each night? Do you take naps?**

I sleep 4-5 hours per night. It is very high quality, deep, uninterrupted sleep. No waking up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Sound asleep like a rock. No naps. I don't get tired during the day. Too much to do and enjoy. Life is short and I don't want to miss it by sleeping too much! Because I don't need to sleep that much, I am very productive with my time. Again, I was not always able to function on so little sleep. This was a direct result of the change in my diet.

**Have you ever "cheated" on your diet?**

I have never "cheated" on my diet. I would never think to do so. My way of eating is a purely voluntary choice that I truly enjoy. It is a wonderful relationship. The music has not stopped playing. I doubt that it ever will.

**What do you do when you travel?**

I pack my own food with me when I travel. I have noticed that when I travel, I am so busy exploring the different environments and cultures that I think less about food. I carry "snack" foods with me, such as dried fruit and trail mixes. I throw them in my back pack, snack on them as I walk around, and don't stop for big meals. I have even found that when I travel I am on such an energy buzz that I can last for extended durations of time without sleeping or eating. During a recent business trip to Singapore, I was on my way to a yoga class. I looked at my watch and it occurred to me that I had not eaten for almost 2 days. And I felt great! The downside is that my luggage is very heavy at the beginning of a trip!

At business meals, I may have a salad or rice and steamed vegetables. Most of my work colleagues know about my diet and are very accommodating. They are also quite interested to hear and learn about it.

**Do you miss certain foods? Do you now like certain foods that you previously did not?**

When I was growing up, I ate all kinds of "junk food" - sugar coated cereals, fast foods, soda, chips, candy, cookies, cakes, ice cream, processed, packaged foods. I don't miss ANY of it. My taste buds have changed completely I ate very few vegetables growing up. Never cared for them. Now they are a primary component of my meals. When I get hungry, I now crave raisins or carrots or broccoli.

**Is your diet for everyone?**

NO! Each person is unique - by inherited constitution, age, sex and occupation and environment. I don't believe in people dispensing general diet advice. I don't believe in fad diets, such as all-protein diets, no-protein diets, all fruit diets, cottage cheese diets, no-salt diets, low-salt diets, high fat and no-fat diets, carbohydrate diets, vegetarian diets. All these diets fail because they are man-made and cannot be followed for a lifetime. I don't believe in anyone who touts that he/she has discovered the perfect diet. Each person needs to find what works for him/her. It is a personal journey – and a very worthwhile one.