

GARDENER'S GUIDE TO GROWING HERBS

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JUNE 2017



MILE MARKER



THE LONG ROUTE

For chef Matthew Accarrino, hopping on a bike is the best way to explore the West—and its bounty.

By Peter Flax

*Accarrino cycles along
Yount Mill Road in
Yountville, CA.*

T

he pavement is still glistening with hailstones from an earlier storm in Yountville, California, but that doesn't stop Matthew Accarrino from clipping into his pedals. Lean, compact, and dressed head to toe in Lycra, the 39-year-old looks every bit the part of a serious cyclist. And he is: In the past year, he's competed in more than 25 amateur races, finishing first or second several times. But Accarrino is also the seriously talented chef behind San Francisco's acclaimed SPQR restaurant, making him perhaps the only American road racer with a Michelin star and a James Beard nomination.

Rather than vying for Accarrino's attention, however, the two passions feed one another. He uses his time on the bike to visit farmers, dream up new dishes, and occasionally pull over to forage roadside herbs or greens. "To be honest, I get more ideas from riding my bike than I do Googling other restaurants or looking on Instagram," he says, as he rolls past two cows munching on a grassy Napa Valley hillside. "Most of my [cooking] inspirations come from travel of some sort."

Wherever he goes—whether it's to appear at a food festival, collect a culinary award, or cook for a pro team—he's usually out on his bike, pedaling hard. Between cook-off events in Aspen, for example, he spun his wheels along the 12,095-foot Independent Pass in the Colorado Rockies. While in the Southwest, he saddled up to take in the moonscape along New Mexico's Mogollon Mountains. And near Santa Barbara, he climbed up Gibraltar Road, peaking nearly 4,000 feet above the rugged coastline.

Accarrino has been an avid cyclist since his teenage years in New Jersey, when he was on the path to going pro. But when he was 16 he suffered a debilitating bone tumor in his right femur, followed by a major surgery that left him bedridden for two years. During that time, in a kind of pre-Netflix binge, he began watching hours of chefs' cooking shows every day: Alain Ducasse, Emeril Lagasse, and Jacques Pépin. Accarrino, who'd never so much as made an



Accarrino (right) with Peter Jacobsen, one of the farmers he visits on his rides in the Napa Valley.

omelet before, became obsessed. Once his leg healed, he wrote to Lagasse and snagged a stint in his kitchen in New Orleans, which later led to a gig cooking alongside Charlie Trotter and admission to culinary school.

Twelve years after his surgery, with his career as a Bay Area chef in full swing, Accarrino decided to try getting back on the bike. To his surprise, his leg no longer ached, and he began training again for races. "The way I was about cooking then is also how I am about riding now," he says. "I'm all in. There's no gray area."

These days, between Sunday night after dinner service and Tuesday morning, Accarrino can often be found here on the country roads of the Napa Valley. As he begins a 5-mile ascent to Lake Hennessy, he stomps on the pedals of his Italian race bike, easily keeping pace while describing a mozzarella salad with black sesame seeds

Travel

Accarrino—always thinking, always talking—but he gets quieter as the ride goes on and the number of cars passing by dwindles.

A half-hour after he's finished the 25-mile tour, he's back at SPQR restaurant, showered and calmly walking through the evening's specials with his staff. Many of the dishes are reinterpretations of Italian classics with a Northern California twist: Pulverized redwood needles that were hanging in Jacobsen's yard that morning infuse a salt that's sprinkled over cured duck liver. Plates arrive bearing local flowers and tiny spring vegetables. Sea urchin is accompanied by chanterelles that are reminiscent of the glorious glut of wild mushrooms he once came across while riding on the winding roads of California's Mt. Tamalpais. "I've always chosen to take the hard way," says Accarrino. "Part of it is for the sense of accomplishment, but I think it also makes life and food more memorable."



Accarrino with his Wilier Zero.7 race bike

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EASY RIDERS

A few of Matthew Accarrino's favorite biking locales around the West—Ironman stamina not required

CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

Accarrino has cooked for training camps around this part of the state and is a big fan of its quiet country roads. Many recreational cyclists enjoy a 12-mile loop through Ballard Canyon, beginning and ending in the Danish-inspired town of Solvang. The chef suggests pairing a ride around the area with a visit to The Hitching Post II steakhouse, the place made famous by the movie *Sideways*. hitchingpost2.com.

NEW MEXICO

For years, Accarrino has made food for a cycling team at the prestigious Tour of the Gila, held in April. While the pros tackle 100-mile days, the chef tells everyday riders to try a backroads climb from Silver City toward Pinos Altos. A full round-trip is about 30 miles, but you can turn around at any point to shorten the workout and more quickly reward yourself with an iced coffee at Javalina Coffee House in Silver City (575/388-1350).

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

For a loop that is moderately challenging—and maximally scenic—Accarrino often cruises out of the city, over the Golden Gate Bridge, and into the hills of the Marin Headlands. There, a roughly 15-mile circuit takes him up Hawk Hill, traverses Rodeo Lagoon, and passes old military installations. Back in the city, he stops for thick toast with butter and cinnamon-sugar at The Mill to satisfy his sweet tooth. themillssf.com.

COLORADO

When Accarrino lands in Colorado for food festivals, he's been known to bike straight from the airport all the way to Aspen—a weeklong journey. For mere mortals, he suggests trying the 20-mile round-trip on Maroon Creek Road in Aspen, which delivers iconic views of snowcapped rocky peaks. The route also happens to go past Highlands Alehouse, which counts 16 beers on tap. highlandsalehouse.com. 🍺

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