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Justin Cogley Jumps From Professional Figure Skater To Grand Chef

BY KELLY E. CARTER | KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL | JULY 2, 2015



Plenty of chefs toil away in other fields before pursuing their culinary passions. Big deal. However, only Aubergine executive chef Justin Cogley has gone from a professional international figure skater performing for “Disney on Ice” to claiming prestigious honors such as Food & Wine’s Best New Chef in 2013, and James Beard Foundation award nominee for Best Chef, West in 2014 and 2015. His name, along with his lofty Grand Chef Relais & Châteaux title, adorns the exterior wall at L’Auberge Carmel, where Cogley delights diners nightly with a sophisticated tasting menu comprised of dishes created with local ingredients that the chef probably foraged that morning. The Erie, Pennsylvania native who graduated with top honors in 2005 from the Western Culinary Institute [now called Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Portland] brought his talents to Carmel-by-the-Sea in 2011 after a stint in Chicago, which included his experience serving as chef de cuisine at Charlie Trotter’s critically-acclaimed

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eponymous restaurant. Sure, Wine Spectator and Forbes Travel Guide, which awarded Aubergine its highest five-star rating, have both recognized Cogley's 12-table eatery, but what has the 36-year-old chef simply giddy these days is the newfound attention he receives for being an avid triathlete and long-distance runner. Recently, one of his recipes was featured in Triathlete, and Newton Running Shoes named him an ambassador. For a man who thrives on Half Ironman competitions [involving a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike ride and a 13.1-mile run] and excelled as a pairs figure skater from 1998 to 2001, sitting down in his restaurant to answer our questions was effortless.



Spring onions, flowers, cocoa, lemon verbena mousse

What was the best thing you got out of being a figure skater?

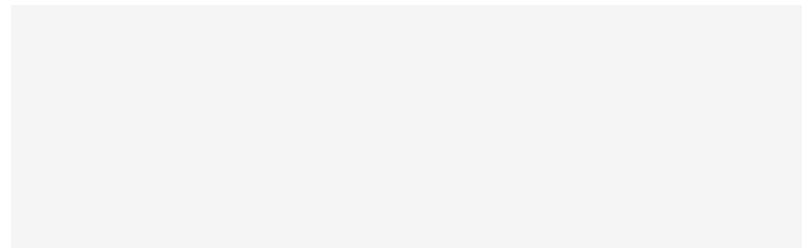
Traveling was my favorite part. We would have a month off between each country. Most of the people [were] 20 or 21 years old and would spend their money on new Diesel clothes. In Europe, I went out to really nice Michelin star [restaurants] by myself. I'd have a \$500 lunch, which was silly, but it was great to see all of the aspects of fine dining and what Michelin star food was. It was fascinating to me. I got more into that than skating. I kept very detailed journals and pictures of all of the dishes.

How does your skating background help you as a chef?

We always had to train long hours. When I started getting into this crazy world of hospitality, one of the culinary schoolteachers in Vancouver said that athletes always make great line cooks because they want to work hard...I've never missed a day of work in my life. In the four years of performing with the show, I never missed one show. I tore my meniscus in Hong Kong and skated on it for four more months. We had a two-week break before our show shipped to Australia. I had the surgery done and recovered in two weeks.

You serve Japanese ayu. Is that a result of you getting to know the fish when you skated in Japan?

I was [in Japan for] eight months, and I've been back four times since. I love to use [ayu]. They smell like watermelon. It was popular at Charlie Trotter's when I was there. We love local fish [too]. We use local abalone. Sometimes we can get things [more] fresher from Japan that we get in Monterey. I know it sounds crazy.



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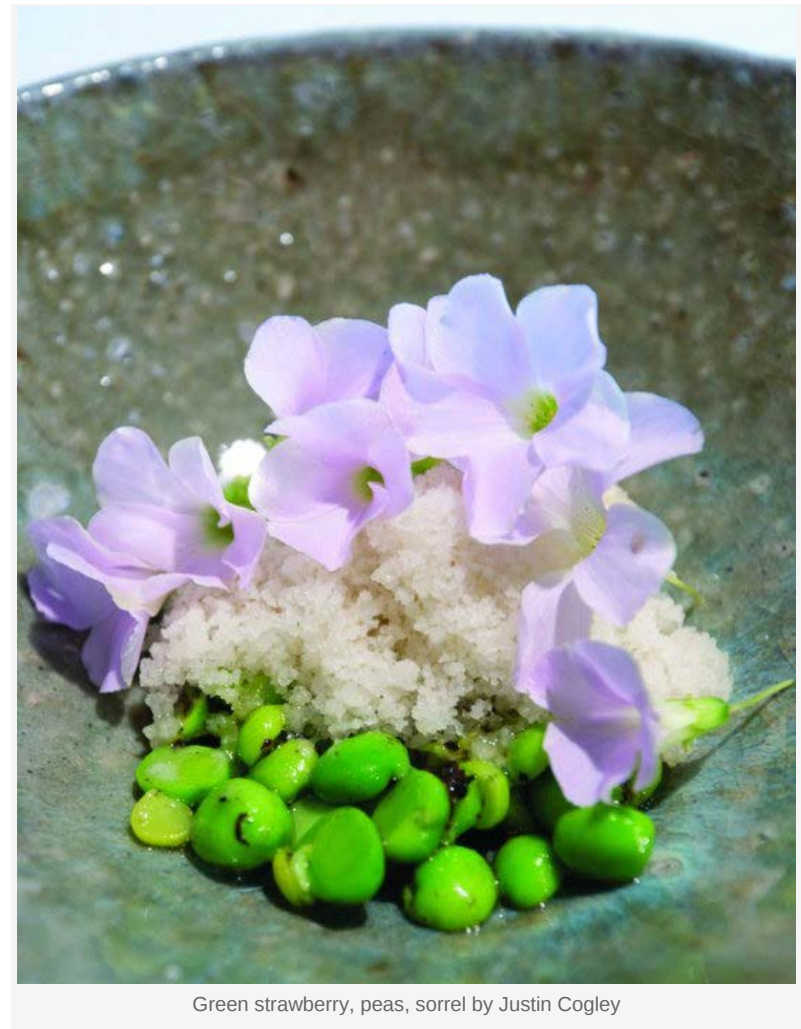


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Green strawberry, peas, sorrel by Justin Cogley

What do you find when you go foraging?

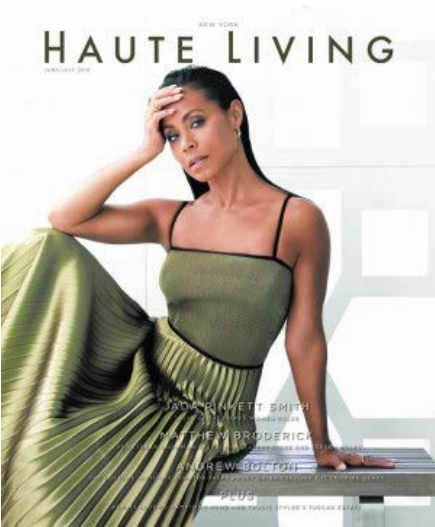
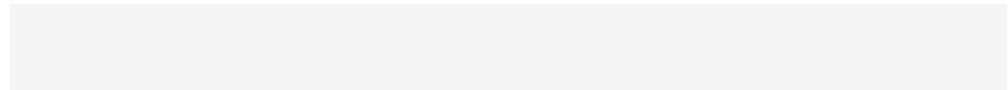
With the rain issue a lot of the fields have died out now. When they're around, there are edible flowers everywhere. There's miner's lettuce and wild radish pods. In Chicago, we used to pay hundreds of dollars in shipping for miner's lettuce. It's all around here; [there's] seaweed and sea grapes also. It just depends on the tides.

What did winning 'Best New Chef' do for you?

We started doing an event called Rediscover Coastal Cuisine, where we [bring in renowned chefs from around the country to collaborate on a 12-course tasting menu to] raise money for an abalone farm. This year we're going to raise money for the Ventana Wilderness [Alliance] so it can help with trail work, because we love trails. It's great to be in that class because there are some super successful chefs. Also in that group that I won with is Michael Voltaggio, who has the new television show ["Breaking Borders"]. Alex Stupak has four restaurants in New York City. I went to Puerto Rico twice for an event with [José Enrique]. Because of that, I was invited to do a number of things. I was invited to cook at the Goldman Sachs innovator conference, which is really cool. That's where I met the founders of Newton Running. I'm very happy here with what I can do and my time for triathlons. Everybody has their own level of what they want to achieve.

How did you get into endurance sports?

I was a very unhealthy chef. I started running and won an entry into the Big Sur Marathon within a month. Everyone told me not to do it, that it would be a terrible idea. I ran after work at night. I did quite well. I said, "Why don't I do a Half Ironman or something?" I lost 30 pounds. I found out that I'm really good at running long distances like [through] Big Sur. With some influential neighbors and newfound friends, I go on 16- or 17-mile runs just for fun. I ride between 60 and 100 miles every Sunday. I did a 100-mile loop last Sunday. That's my escape.



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Japanese ayu, blueberry, nori, kamebishi soy salt

What are your goals?

I want to be competitive. My goal is to complete a full Ironman in Tahoe this year. It's hard to fit in 13- or 17-hour training weeks and still work a lot here. You just have to not waste any time in the day. I'm excited about the fall. Tahoe is one of the toughest ones in the world. Last year I was there for the half but it got cancelled because of the [forest] fires. There were a lot of, as my wife says, "selfish men."

Does anyone else in the kitchen run?

We just started a kitchen running club. I got everyone Newton shoes. Last week we had four people show up. The first week we only had two. We meet at 12:30 on Saturdays and go for a three or four-mile scenic run. My idea was to not only promote a healthier lifestyle but sometimes some of the cooks who have been here for a year have never been to Pt. Lobos or Palo Corona, which is five minutes from here. There's an 800-foot climb and you can see all of Carmel. It's to show that there's more than what they know. Some started running already.

What does the Concours d'Elegance mean for you?

It's a very busy week. We have a number of people who [demand] the best—or not; they want tater tots at 2 in the morning. It's happened. [There is a] demand for private events....We've done private events at Big Sur houses, [including one] for 14 people for a Dom [Perignon] release party. Everybody is willing to pay top dollar. It's tough to turn down things if you know you can do these events and still execute dinner how it should be here. We have buyouts; people buy the restaurant for 14 people. I'm not a huge car person, but it's fun to see. It's great to see how that's evolved since I've been here. It's amazing.



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