

Madison on my Mind: cycling, cuisine and Cuban jazz

By Peggy Newland - Columnist | Sep 27, 2026



I have an icy martini and I'm listening to Cuban jazz in a retro-swank club, The Cardinal, exactly one hour after exiting my direct flight from Boston to Madison, Wisconsin. And this is after checking into the Embassy Suites downtown. Madison is geared up for Ironman and Half Ironman this weekend but the city is open and welcoming and unstressed for the celebrations. We're planning to explore this platinum awarded bicycle friendly community on its extensive trail network with hopes of spying Frank Lloyd Wright inspired architectural gems in neighborhoods and perhaps even discovering new takes on midwestern cuisine along the way.

Good bread is always an omen for good food and after the cocktail hour at The Cardinal, Brian and I happen upon Osteria Papavero by walking past the outdoor diners.

"The bread," I say to Brian, and inside we go.

Warm orange interiors, dining nooks, and a rusticated twist on traditional Bolognese courses? Yes, please. We share prosciutto di parma with local sugar cube melon and black truffle burrata with roasted Italian ham, fresh peaches, spring mix, toasted pecans, balsamic vinaigrette. Brian chooses a pan seared pork chop while I enjoy spinach lasagne with bolognese ragout, bechamel sauce, and parmigiano cheese. We share a half bottle of pecorino. Dessert is a perfectly layered butterscotch pudding with whipped cream and cocoa powder.

We wander over to the Monona Terrace which has lit up fountains and an ethereal view of the ornate capital. "Only granite dome in the world," Brian reads. "Largest dome by volume in the U.S.A."



The dome glows as the Ironman flags wave just below.

The next morning, we make an early morning visit to Dane County Farmers Market-the "largest producer-only" farmers market in the United States-and sample local cheeses and charcuterie and smell dozens of gorgeous flowers. Then we head to a buffet breakfast meant for champions. Most of the real athletes are in the lake racing the first part of the Half Ironman while we enjoy made-to-order omelets, fresh fruit, and tons of coffee. After grabbing our bikes from Budget Bicycle Center (the friendliest bike shop ever!), we ride over to the cycling paths from downtown. The mood is celebratory even for those not competing and we get waves and thumbs up as we glide past.

"Midwest friendly," I say.

Our goal: 14 miles from Madison to the smoothie station in Verona. We are geared up with sandwiches from Casetta Kitchen and our water bottles are filled for this competition with ourselves. The trails roll out along streambeds, past flowered meadows, wetlands, prairies, groves of trees as we connect to Capital City Trail and then Badger State and Military Ridge Trails for up and down fun. Everything is marked and everything is smooth, even the gravel trails to Verona.

Madison's history of offering protected routes for bicycling is impressive. With decades of locally grown grassroots activism, public investments, bike shop foundation funding, and bike sharing initiatives, the trails are well-loved and well-used for commuting to work, school, and recreationally. There are over 200 miles of interconnected trails in/around the city. The hotel offered additional maps outlining routes to Illinois and Minnesota.



"This is cycling country," Brian smiles.

By the afternoon, we've cycled over 40 miles on the well-established trails and upon returning to the city center, we watch as the Ironmen/women finish their 70.3-mile bike rides.

"Now they have to run over 13 miles," I say.

Not us. We head to the Great Dane Pub's beer garden to celebrate our first day's victory with happy hour pilsners.

That night, we stroll over to the urban-funky Tenney-Lapham corridor and discover the spiciest secret nook of perfection-the Deliciouser. Sitting at the chef's counter in this former Greyhound Bus Depot gives us the opportunity to watch the action and it is like a ballet of coordinated movement. Owned and operated by Patrick, Marcia, and Michelle, this family of cuisine connoisseurs offer seasonal menus, handcrafted cocktails, an open kitchen, and globally inspired small batch spice boutique. Brian and I share plate-after-plate of gorgeous cuisine: mezze plate with hummus, sheep's milk feta, cucumber salad, cracked olives, Za'atar on flatbread; liver pate; maitake mushroom dashi with broccolini and misoyaki; ricotta agnolotti with N'Duja, peas, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Mezzogiorno and a bottle of Grüner Veltliner. Patrick invites us to tour the spice boutique next door and we are surrounded by the worlds of spice collected and blended. Many stories are told about the adventures sourcing so many curated creations. We choose Herbes de Provence crème brûlée and devil's food cake with espresso sauce for a sugar buzz prior to the long walk back to the hotel.

At dawn, we watch Ironmen/women leaping into Lake Monona to swim 2.4 miles through headwinds of waves. Safety kayaks surround their frothy route. After all this excitement, we have a leisurely breakfast buffet and spend most of the day cycling the city and lakes. We tour mansion row's ornate lakeside cottages, head through U Wisconsin cycling paths, find swanky Shorewood Hills and the wildlife area of Black Earth Creek before heading down Pheasant Branch Trails to West Towne Paths. After a pop over to Marigold Kitchen for cappuccinos and burritos, we make a beeline around Lake Monona for distant city views along the historic Frost Woods neighborhoods that are filled with Modern Prairie and Midcentury gems before finding a neighborhood festival of music and crafts at Olin Park. In the distance, Ironmen/women zip over the bridge crossing Monona Bay.

Wisconsin is known for its classic "supper clubs"; comfort foods like relish trays, hearty portions, cocktails, dim lighting, dark paneling, and vintage decor, so The Harvey House is the place to be. Located in the old Baggage Claim House and hidden behind Madison's historic train depot, this is golden-era-speakeasy wonderful. We, of course, start with the relish tray of deviled eggs, applewood smoked whitefish dip, pickled vegetables, accompanied by two gin penny whistles. Chopped wedge salads, a pinwheel of salmon, and fried walleye fish sandwich round out the meal before ending with spiced honey cake.

Our last day is spent at Olbrich Botanical Gardens: herb, sunken, serenity, moonlight, English. We wander along limestone terraces to a serene reflecting pool, and stroll past wildflowers and berries, through hostas and fern, and eventually find the golden Royal Thai Pavilion with hardy bamboo and clipped tree art. We could have stayed in the Olbrich for hours more but we had a Madison Eats Food Tour. We trade regular bicycles for e-bikes and zip through diverse communities and nosh internationally on boba teas, skewers of meat and rice at Roll Play, and then dine on Ethiopian dips on Injera bread at Buraka before heading into historically preserved Willy Street neighborhoods. Ending with a tasting of Starkweather pilsners and a scoop of Calliope ice cream, we are stuffed upon return. While Brian takes a break at Garver Feed Mill's couches, I head upstairs to Kosa Wellness Spa for Ayurvedic tea and an herbal inspired treatment in its calming, sensory space.

That night, we hang by the lake, after grabbing some slices of Ian's pizza at the Garver Feed Mill and cycling them over to the biergarten at Olbrich Park for sunset. Madison is the peaceful place to escape for uncrowded bicycle trails, five star cuisine, friendly midwesterners, and an easy flight away from Boston.

Budget Bicycle Center. 1230 Regent Street. 608-251-8413. www.budgetbicyclecenter.com. Make sure to check out the used bicycle annex that doubles as a bicycle museum.

Embassy Suites by Hilton Madison Downtown. 231 S. Pinckney Street. 608-246-3380. www.hilton.com. Madison Eats Food Tours. 608-628-8927. www.madisoneatsfoodtours.com. A re-imagined urban oasis of noshing, spa treatments, and local community gathering at Garver Feed Mill. **Olbrich Botanical Gardens.** 33330 Atwood Ave. 608-246-4550. www.olbrich.org. Kosa Wellness Spa & Retreat. 3241 Garver Feed Mill. 608-999-7558. www.kosaspa.com.