Rice cakes. Turns out they work just as well for long distance rowers as they do for Tour de France cyclists (thinking of oneself as a TdF athlete also helps with moral.).
Just cook 500g of rice with 800ml of water for 10 minutes (precision here is important to guarantee also the precise sweep catch during the race), add 250g cream cheese and whatever else you want (here precision gives way to taste and feel - it's good to listen to your body when on the water for 15 hours), so add as much as you want but make sure it tastes good (dried fruits, sugar, honey… or if you prefer salty, you can cook bacon chunks and add chives and onions). Mix it all together in a tray and leave it in the fridge overnight and you have most of what you need for a successful Tour du Léman.

One other thing you need is 5 willing guys or girls. And we had 10?! Split that in two and you end up with the only two Swiss boats taking part in this year's Tour du Léman – so we had to represent.

We arrive in our shiny Swiss car (thank you Christine) and the two boats on our bright red trailer (thank you Marina) an hour early at the Société Nautique de Genève (SNG) on the day before the race. To our surprise, we're the last boats there. The Bonner Ruderverein has already prepped it's two pretty blue Wiersma boats. One would go on to just miss the all-time TdL record by 20 minutes. Other teams had travelled in from Turkey (one man walked around handing out Turkish sweet treats during the boat prep so we were rooting for the Turks), Holland, France, and even the Brits had arrived there before us.
We were still able to impress with our hand-crafted boat tuning gear (thank you, Andy). Jean Tonic was kited out with handmade wrap-around seat pollsters that didn't budge during the whole race, a fitted wooden rig to hold the light mast, a precisely cut plywood wave deflector, and much more! Whether or not this was better than the rolls of duct tape used by the other teams remains up for debate, but we like to think we were a Patek Philippe in a lake of Casios. Even if duct-taped bananas and Snickers all along the inside of the boats did seem the tried-and-tested method. At this point, the Dutch boat deserves a mention too. They managed to fit each rowing seat with a mini battery pack and float-activated water pump with a thin tube that would automatically pump the water out of each rower's footwell (there is, of course, no way to outdo the Dutch when it comes to hydro engineering).

Now for race day.

The race starts the next day at 0800. We say our goodbyes half an hour before and push off for the starting line. In our sweep boat are Simon à la bare, Guy à la nage, Andy in 3, Antoine in 2, and me in 1. With a couple of minutes to go before the start, the boats begin to cluster around the start buoy. We try to find a spot but are squeezed out by the other boats. Guy (who else) wanted to do a racing start for this 15-hour race, and the rest of us had reluctantly agreed. So now, with 1 min until the start, we see a gap and get our boat up into position in the first line of boats just before the start. Roughly 15 hours to go and already running on adrenaline.

The gun fires, and we're off. Everyone wants to get out in front. We end up in a mini swearing contest with our German neighbour cox - who was getting a little close for comfort - before taking off ahead (never saw them again) and as we round the first buoy, the field starts to spread out. We're level with the second ARZ boat with Eric, Michel, Cedric, Claudio, and Mau, and the Dutch boat is just up ahead. Guy is setting a blistering pace on stroke, and everyone else is trying to hang on. We rotated seats with the cox every 30 minutes as we had trained, and our first changes were speedy (forget Tour de France cyclist, think Formula One race car pit stop). This let us ease into our position, and we slowly honed in on our steady-state pace. The muscles are warm and loose, the sun is shining with no clouds in sight, and we're chugging along nicely – enjoying ourselves even! Time is just floating by, and in no time, it's 1 o'clock. Some are grabbing for a rice cake lunch break (savoury first, of course), and others are enjoying the pretty views. We pass the Lausanne buoy where Andy's girlfriend is waiting to cheer us on. And his dog, Coca, is there too. In the last second, she recognizes it's Andy out on the boat, she runs along the coast barking her goodbye (thank you, Sandy and Coca).

One quarter down, three to go. It's getting hot out here.

Soon thereafter, we have the Turkish boat in our sights. We're not sure what position we're in, but we have a boat to catch. Not too much later, the Turks do a seat change, but they're no match for our speedy changes, and we shoot by (not to be seen again). At this point, Andy is steering and says: "Guys, I think we're in third place." Who knew this would end up being a real race?

The next hours pass by relatively easily – albeit time is slowing down as the hands get rougher and the seats more uncomfortable. I remember Guy complaining about the wake surfers in the distance, Simon eating a banana, Andy telling Guy to relax his shoulders, and Antoine enjoying some well-deserved rest in cox. We round the last buoy at the easternmost point of the lake and gladly get on our way back towards Geneva.

The next few hours are uneventful and long to say the least. We're munching our rice cakes, eating our bananas and energy bars, and drinking the lake water (don't forget your electrolyte pills). Holding a steady pace through the wobbly water. 1700 rolls around and I find myself checking the time more often (this does not help). The steering breaks are great for my bum but rowing after the break is hard on the fingers.
We're at the point when you start wanting to arrive a little bit too much. Aches are turning painful and we're shedding skin. Our changes are getting slower at this point too.

We had been lucky to row in such good conditions up until now.
And now as we rowed past the chateau of Ripaille with the sun setting behind us and the biggest full moon I've seen rising in front of us from behind the mountains (you can't make this stuff up), the water goes from calm to a glassy clear blue black. I remember Guy was in stroke and I remember the first 30 minutes after my break being some of the most beautiful and smooth rowing I have ever experienced. It stayed the same until the sun had completely set. By that point the pain was starting to creep in again.

Luckily, there was something to distract us here at the last buoy in Sciez. As we rowed away from the buoy with roughly 30 kilometres to go, we made out two boats approaching the buoy. We couldn't tell which crews it was, but it was the first time in at least 3 hours that we had seen any boats at all, and they were gaining on us. Guy was just finishing his turn in stroke, and Andy was next in stroke seat. We were tired, and the light from the setting sun was all but gone. But the race was on. What remained was the same distance we had trained a handful of times in Zurich together. Club – Halbinsel Au – Club. At last, back in familiar territory. Andy was in stroke, and off we went. We pushed for quick changes (tricky to climb across a boat when you can barely walk) and gritted our teeth. We were making good time, but in the dark, we didn't know when the two boats behind might catch up. Tricky to tell at this point whether we're enjoying ourselves or not.

Finally, with 10 minutes left on stroke, Andy says: "Boys. I'm gonna empty my tank." Time is ticking by just fine at this point. He carries us through the end of his stroke, and now the finish line is in sight. 5 kilometers to go. From the Schoggi Fabrik back to the club, and we're there! Antoines in stroke and demi, demi, trois cars, plein! 30 minutes left. Our split is low and steady. We're all working hard, but we have to time it well! Andy can see the lights of Geneva up in the distance. 7 minutes left, and Simon says from 2: "I think we can push." So off we go. Power 10, power 10, and 10 more. 1, 2, 3 more, and we pass through the floodlights.