
Backpacking Foods

Outdoors

Gerry Giuliani
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This month and next, Outdoors takes a look at camp food; in particular, at alternatives to the expensive freeze dried stuff that often seems so low on taste but high in price.

This month's article is written by Doug Cunnington, member of the National Program Committee responsible for camping and outdoor activities. Doug, an active Scouter and teacher of outdoor studies in the Muskoka area of Ontario, has a lot of experience in the wilderness and is particularly fond of canoe tripping.

Next month, Russ Kempling will look at camp foods you can purchase from the supermarket.

Camp Foods You Can Make

One of the problems that continues to surface in the Scouting movement is boy dropout. For every case, I am sure there are slightly different reasons but, as I prepared this article and thought back over the past 14 years, I wondered if one of the reasons might have to do with food.

How often have you seen pancakes that resemble mud pies or plaster rather than something edible; or beans and wieners served three times a day; or elaborate seven course meals (only one of the courses hot), which take three hours to prepare and four hours to clean up? How often have you heard a boy complain about the weight and comfort of his pack and discovered that he had several cans of whatever "padding" his back?

Too often we take the view that boys must experience these hardships before they can appreciate the outdoors. We overlook the fact that we, the leaders, seldom partake of the burnt offerings prepared by the boys.

Over the past two or three years, I have waged war against unpalatable and unimaginative foods, and have discovered that there are alternatives.

First of all, a great variety of freeze dried foods are available. They tend to be costly and, in many cases, making a meal of them is rather like eating cardboard or styrofoam. They do, however, have a place on trips where weight and space is of major concern and taste and cost are secondary.

The regular supermarket camp fare in cans and boxes also has its place when deliveries can be made by vehicle to the camp. Because there is nothing unusual or special about this type of food, the price tends to be reasonable, although the taste offers little variation.

In the past few years, a large variety of lightweight dried and prepackaged foods have become available in the supermarkets. These have many advantages which will be described in next month's article.

There are two other alternatives which, in my opinion, far outweigh the others. It takes a little more effort to prepare them but the results, I am sure you will discover, more than compensate.

Home Dried

Where weight or long-term storage is a concern, drying your own food is the answer. You can dry almost any fresh food (fruit, vegetables, meat) without any elaborate equipment. All you need is your oven and a piece of aluminum screen wire to place over the oven rack.

Slice foods thinly (5 to 10 mm) and spread them out on the screen. Place in a 200 degree F oven and leave the door ajar to let moisture escape. The food will reach the desired consistency in six to 12 hours.

If, however, you are one of the many who now have a wood burning stove in your house, you can string these foods on a piece of small diameter dowelling about a metre above the stove until the desired consistency is obtained. If the stove is burning constantly, it usually takes about two days.

Beef jerky is a relatively simple food to prepare, but it seems to dry better if you suspend each piece on a toothpick between the bars of the oven rack, instead of spreading the pieces on a screen.

Bread and cookies, standard fare on nearly every outing, probably take the most abuse between packing and palate. When you open them, they often resemble pulverized bird food.

"Heavy" unsliced bread such as malt bread (available in supermarkets), tends to travel best. The loaves are of a size and shape that you can use the extra ones for a game of football-something quite impossible with sliced, white styrofoam.

Unleavened breads baked at home are a tastier choice, but they tend not to stay fresh as long as the supermarket varieties because they lack preservatives.

Trail snacks such as energy bars, fruit cakes, gorp and the like can be prepared at home and travel much better than crumbly supermarket cookies. You can freeze or refrigerate many of these items and store them indefinitely.

Boil-in-Bag

Where weight is not a major concern, you can prepare your own "boil-in-bag" meals before leaving home. One-pot dishes like chili, stew or salisbury steak and onions are the simplest to prepare. Whenever a dish of this kind is served at home, place the left-overs in clean one litre milk bags in one or two-person portions. Seal, label and freeze. At meal time, simply place the entire bag in boiling water until the contents are hot. If you are careful, you can eat right from the bag and avoid dirty dishes. There's another advantage. For summer camping you can wrap these frozen meals in newspaper and they'll keep for a day or two.

By far the most gratifying outdoor food is a fresh apple pie or hot biscuits you bake on site where fires are permitted and practical. Things like popovers, tea bisk, cake, muffins or square mixes which require a minimum of additional ingredients can easily be baked in a reflector oven. The secret is to have a high flame rather than coals, and to keep the oven as close as possible to the heat (about 30 cm). Hardwood burns longer and produces

less smoke than softwood I've also found that foil is handy for baking most things. Again, it saves on dirty pots, and it also keeps the oven clean. Remember to use good fire management: build fires in existing fire sites; keep them no bigger than what you actually need; burn to white ash; and put fires dead out.

Although the reflector oven, which you can buy from a good outdoors store or make from a couple of inexpensive cookie sheets, has been around for years, it is still one of the simplest pieces of cooking equipment to use. Practice makes perfect, they say, so don't be afraid to try your reflector oven. Mine sat in my basement for several years because I was afraid to try it. Now, it's a permanent fixture in my camp. Try experimenting with it in front of your fireplace, or on a meeting night, and you'll discover that the "old timers" really did have some good ideas before the advent of single burner stoves and microwave ovens.

Recipes

Emergency Ration

- 3 c rolled oats, barley or wheat
- 2 ♦ C powdered milk
- ♦ pkg citrus flavoured gelatin
- 1 c sugar
- 2 tbsp honey
- 3 tbsp water

Place rolled oats, powdered milk and sugar in bowl. Add water to honey and bring to boil. Dissolve gelatin in honey-water mixture and add to dry ingredients. After mixing well, add water a teaspoon at a time until the mixture is barely moist enough to be molded. Shape into two bars.

Each bar will be sufficient food for one day. You can eat the bar dry or cook it in about a pint of water. It may be dried in the oven under low heat, wrapped in foil and placed in a covered container for indefinite storage.

Dried Meat

Dried meat is a lightweight food that keeps well from four to six weeks. Keep sealed in plastic bags. It is desirable to start with very lean meat because fat will go rancid with time.

Beef Jerky

Use flank or round steak. While semi-frozen, slice into thin strips (0.5 -- 1 cm) diagonally across the grain. Season with your favourite seasoning but avoid thick sauces like ketchup or BBQ sauce because they turn very dark and hard. Place foil or a cookie sheet under the meat to catch drips, and dry jerky in the oven as described earlier.

- Suggested seasoning
 - ♦ c Worcestershire sauce;
 - ♦ tsp garlic powder;
- ♦ tsp onion powder or onion salt;
- ♦ tsp liquid smoke;
- ♦ c soy sauce;

- dash of salt and pepper.

Dry Beef

This type of dried meat takes less time to prepare and, because it is in smaller pieces, it can be reconstituted in a mulligan. Add it when you begin to cook the rice or pasta to allow the meat to reconstitute.

Start with very lean ground beef. Cook in a frying pan with no added fat until all red is gone. Drain off fat and water well, place the meat between sheets of absorbent paper and press. When very little moisture comes out of the meat, put it between sheets of dry paper, place a board on top of it and stand on the board to squeeze out any remaining moisture.

Spread meat on a cookie sheet and place in a 175 degree F oven for six to 10 hours. Ensure that air can circulate around the cookie sheet. Stir occasionally. When done, meat should be dry and crumbly.

Dehydrated Vegetables

If you start with frozen vegetables, you can dry immediately from the freezer. Spread on cookie sheet and place into a 175 degree F oven for about six hours. Turn vegetables at the halfway point.

Thin slice or chop fresh vegetables and blanch them before drying. Put them into boiling salted water, return to a full boil and boil 30 seconds. Plunge into cold water, drain well and absorb excess moisture with paper. Then dry in oven as above.

Bannock

- 1 c flour;
- 1 tbsp baking powder;
- 1 tsp salt;
- ♦--1/2 c raisins;
- 1 c water

Mix all ingredients. Cook one large "pancake" in a large frying pan, or wrap around a stick and cook over hot coals. Serve with butter and jam.

Irish Bread

- 1 ♦ c whole wheat flour;
- 1 ♦ c all purpose flour;
- 1 ♦ c milk;
- 3 tbsp brown sugar;
- 2 ♦ tsp baking powder;
- ♦ tsp baking soda;
- ♦ tsp salt.

Mix dry ingredients thoroughly and add milk to make stiff batter. Put into a well-greased 48 oz. juice can and bake 1 ½ hours at 350 degrees F. Cool on a rack on side for 10 min, then stand tin to cool thoroughly. You can also bake this in a loaf pan.

Granola

- 5 c oatmeal;
- ½ c sesame seeds;
- ½ c oil;
- 1 c powdered milk;
- ½ c sunflower seeds;
- ½ c molasses

Combine dry and liquid ingredients in separate bowls. Add liquid to dry and stir well. Bake until golden at 300 degrees F, stirring once or twice during the baking period.

You can make any variation of the recipe using the following ingredients, as long as you keep the ratio 7 cups dry to 1 cup liquid.

- Dry ingredients:
wheat flakes,
nuts,
wheat germ,
coconut,
bran,
soy flour,
cornmeal,
spices (cinnamon, nutmeg)
- Liquid ingredients:
honey,
peanut butter.

When mixture is cool, you can add chopped dried fruit.

Trail Foods

Trail foods are high energy nibblers for between meal snacks while hiking or canoeing.

Granola Bars:

The commercially produced bars tend to be rather dry. Try making your own. Mix a granola cereal with honey and peanut butter and form into bars or rolls on waxed paper.

Gorp:

Can be a mixture of almost anything. I recommend:

- 2 c salted nuts;
- ½ c sunflower seeds;
- ½ c shredded or string coconut;

◆ - 1 c smarties (chocolate chips melt in hot weather);
1 c raisins.

Mix thoroughly and put one cup portions into small plastic bags.

Energy Bar:

Mix together equal portions of raisins, dates, figs, coconut, prunes, pecans, walnuts and filberts.
Put mixture through a food chopper or blender, or chop finely with a sharp knife.
Pack tightly into bars on waxed paper and wrap in foil.

It may be easier to cover a cookie sheet with waxed paper, pack down the mixture until it's 6--12 mm thick (1/4--1/2"), cut into bars and wrap in waxed paper and foil.

Resources

Many excellent resources are available to those who want imaginative camp food. I've listed some that I've used.

The Hungry Hiker's Book of Good Cooking by Gretchen McHugh;
Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982

Nols Cookery, the National Outdoor Leadership School;
Emporia State Press, Kansas 1980

The One Burner Cookbook by Harriett Barker; Coles Publishing, Toronto

Roughing It Easy by Dian Thomas; Warren Books, New York
Roughing It Easy II by Dian Thomas

Simple Foods for the Pack by Vikki Kinmont and Claudia Axcell; Sierra
Club Books, San Francisco, 1976

Supermarket Backpacker by Harriett Barker; Contemporary Books Inc.,
Chicago, 1977

Fur-Fish-Game magazine July 1980; "How to Make Jerky"; article by J. Wayne Fears.

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Last month, Doug Cunnington talked about camp foods you can make yourself. In this issue, Russ Kempling discusses camp foods from the supermarket as alternates to expensive specialized freeze-dried foods.

Russ, a former member of the National Program Committee, is a teacher and active outdoorsman in the Muskoka area of Ontario. He is at present an active trainer in the province.

Camp Foods from Supermarkets

Although there is a place for specialized freeze-dried backpacking foods, most camping needs, even lightweight needs, can be met in your local supermarket. In smaller outlying centres, supermarket shopping is considerably more convenient than specialty store shopping. In practically all locales, supermarket prices are more acceptable than those of specialty stores.

I've chosen items which are generally available in supermarkets and will point out the advantages and disadvantages of each, as I see them.

Magic Pantry

This company produces a variety of main dishes in steri-seal pouches. The pouches will keep for months with no refrigeration and require only boiling in water, pouch and all, for five to 10 minutes. Although they get full marks for ease of preparation, being neither concentrated nor dehydrated, they are not lightweight.

Although taste ranges from acceptable to good, all dishes, except Salisbury Steak and Swiss Steak, contain more sauce than solid pieces. Servings are adequate for an adult.

Pasta

This comes in many forms, but most popularly as macaroni or spaghetti. I find that linguini cooks more quickly than spaghetti and can substitute for it in any recipe.

Pasta is lightweight, will keep indefinitely, and cooks in 10-15 minutes. Macaroni and cheese is a simple dish that requires only powdered milk, a bit of butter or margarine, and some grated cheddar or powdered cheese. You can make the meal even more substantial by adding chopped wieners or a drained can of tuna.

Make spaghetti by adding a spaghetti sauce mix, a can of tomato paste and chopped onion and green pepper. For an even heartier meal, supplement the sauce with browned, drained hamburger. The hamburger and wiener additions, unfortunately, are not lightweight and must be used on the first day if refrigeration isn't available.

Noodles

Noodles make another easily prepared dish. They are lightweight and keep well when dry. You can add them to a broth for soup and use them to fill out a thin stew. They work well with the Magic Pantry main courses.

Hard Meats

Salami and pepperoni fall into this category. Although not lightweight, they do keep well and a little seems to go a long way. You can use them in sandwiches for lunch, or as part of a supper dish when chopped. Camp pizzas made from pancake mix in a frying pan and topped with Swiss cheese, tomato paste and pepperoni or salami are very tasty.

Fresh Vegetables

Although firm vegetables like potatoes, carrots, onions and turnips are not lightweight, they keep and carry well. They also lend themselves to a wide variety of preparation and add flavour and variety to other dishes.

Eggs

Although fragile, eggs keep for a few days and are not very heavy. They are also versatile and cooking time is very short. Even for lunch, a hard-boiled egg prepared at breakfast time makes a good base for a meal.

Cheese

The block cheeses like cheddar, Swiss and gouda are a tasty supplement to any meal and can form the base of lunch or mug-up. Cheese is also an excellent meat substitute. Cheese squeeze tubes are convenient and very handy for lunches.

Dried Vegetables

Beans, especially yellow eye or lima beans, can form a substantial base for a supper meal. They also are a meat substitute. Beans are lightweight when dry but do require a day's soaking before you cook them. Each cup of beans must soak in three cups of water, and the container needs to be big enough to allow for expansion, so they're definitely not lightweight during this process. They also need a cooking period of an hour or more.

Some supermarkets carry dried green beans, corn and mushrooms. They are definitely lightweight, the flavour is good, and they are easy to prepare. You can also find various forms of dehydrated or powdered potatoes, but check the directions. Many of them need to be done in an oven. A reflector oven will work, but you have to plan on taking one.

Bread

Bread tends to be very squishable except for heavy rye, which weighs about 1.5 kg (3 lb.) a loaf. You can bake bread at camp with a reflector oven or frying pan, or on a stick as a twist. Use a bannock mix prepared at home, or a biscuit mix of the "add water only" variety.

Pancake mix is also very versatile. Fried thin it makes taco shells. Don't forget dried breads like melba toast and crackers. They are fragile but very light and can substitute for bread.

Rice

This forms a base for a night meal or can create a more hearty soup.

It is easy to prepare and lightweight, and keeps well when dry.

Soup

Dried soups come in a wide variety of forms. Individually packed instant soups like Cup-A-Soup are very handy. You can use packaged soups as soups or add them to other dishes for flavouring (e.g. onion soup mix in stew).

Bouillon cubes or powder and dried soup vegetables round out the list. Experiment with soups to make them a hearty main course by adding macaroni, noodles or rice.

Peanut Butter

A good hole-filler. Carried in a squeeze tube, peanut butter provides a hearty snack and is another meat substitute. Combine with jam or honey to give yourself an energy boost.

Spices

These are lightweight and can add much to an otherwise bland diet.

Carry a selection in used 35 mm film canisters.

Cans

Meat spreads and fish make good sense when canned. It's the water in which many products are packed, not the tins, which is the main source of weight.

Canned tuna or salmon provides sandwich fillings or a casserole base. Canned luncheon meats can be part of supper or lunch. Spreads like Paris pate are excellent for lunch or late snacks. Although none of them are truly lightweight, they are compact and non-perishable. Remember to pack out your empty tins.

Desserts

Many fresh fruits like oranges, apples and lemons travel well. They provide vitamin C for your diet and are thirst quenchers. A bit of lemon juice brightens up flat canteen water.

You can eat dried fruits like raisins, apricots or prunes out of your hand. They do tend to make you thirsty but, if you drink large quantities of water, they swell in your stomach. If you soak them overnight or in a bottle in your pack during the day, they recover many of the characteristics of ripe fruit. They are light and compact and keep well if kept dry.

Puddings of a no-cook, add-water-only variety make a nice change. They are light and compact and keep well. If preparation requires milk, use powdered milk.

Powdered Milk

Milk powder can substitute for whole milk in any recipe. If you need a creamier whitener, try Coffee-mate. Test out coffee whitener at home. Some kinds go scummy when they stand a while.

Drinks

Besides powdered milk, coffee, tea and hot or cold chocolate make alternatives. Introduce some excitement with exotic teas and coffees, but pretest them at home. What about mocca (coffee and chocolate)? Fruit drink crystals provide a good source of Vitamin C and may be served hot or cold.

Fresh Meat

For the first day or two, you might consider fresh meat. You should keep only solid beef or bacon for the second day. All fresh meats should be frozen solid, wrapped in newspaper and bagged in plastic. Although definitely not lightweight, they might be worth the effort.

Final Thought

Keep exploring your local supermarkets. I am constantly surprised at what my imagination and the supermarket can come up with. Instead of dismissing a favourite dish as impractical, rise to the challenge and try to find a way to take it to camp.

Newsgroups: rec.scouting

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