

MAKE YOUR OWN TRAIL FOODS

By Scott Stoddard

JELLY-filled donuts, a bag of Doritos and a case of soda pop will usually get you through an easy weekend over-nighter of rabbit hunting or target shooting - and that's if the weather's mild. Long expeditions to remote areas of the each however, usually require dehydrated or freeze dried food that are as light as air but came heavily spiced to overcome the cardboard factor.

The first few days of eating commercial backpacking foods aren't bad. You're tired, hungry and anything tastes good. It's the same principle with outdoor furniture. Any flat rock will do when you're dog tired. Just being outside in gorgeous surroundings tends to block out the negative. Yet something happens to backpacking foods after the third, or at the very latest, the fourth day - everything begins to taste the same. The Turkey Tetrazzini tastes just like the Beef Stroganoff, and the Stroganoff just like the Alpine Minestrone. Is it the plastic/foil cook-in-their-own pouches, the infamous spice concoctions or something about the butane cook stove that causes this taste-the-same syndrome?

On one lengthy backpacking trip I can remember drooling as I watched a fellow hiker plop sections of real navel orange into her mouth while I sat there munching on gorp (peanuts, M&Ms and salty raisins), and swilling down warm Tang. After a week of living on dehydrated meals you'll give just about anything for some "real" food.

Our early U. S. astronauts experienced somewhat the same problem. Space food consisted of pureed gunk packaged in plastic squeeze tubes along with their famous orange-flavored Tang. Meanwhile, Soviet cosmonauts were dining on caviar, black breads, salami and other delicacies. Today shuttle crews are favored with shrimp cocktail, teriyaki chicken, tomato eggplant casserole (one of their favorites), and many natural foods like fruits, tortillas and peanut butter.

If today's astronauts can eat more normally, certainly modern backpackers can enjoy eating foods that taste good, won't spoil, and are easy to prepare. The key to this is pre-trip planning and proper packaging. Before getting into making your own gourmet hiking meals, it's a good idea to learn how our predecessors did it.

Jerky, Pemmican - The very first backpackers on this continent were the Indians and they developed some of the best trail foods known to man. Dried meat, known as jerky, is today a favorite snack found in most convenience stores. Store bought beef jerky contains lots of salt, seasonings and extra chemicals that can

make you sick on the trail. It's better to make your own so that you can control the flavor and ingredients.

Jerky can be made from venison, elk or Buffalo, but is generally made from beef. A good lean round steak or flank steak will work great. Cut the meat in long thin strips against the grain. If there's any fat or gristle, remove it and throw it away. Cowboys used to sprinkle the meat with salt and pepper, a small amount of chili powder, and then simply hang it on wire lines in the sun to dry.

For more flavorful jerky, marinate the meat in a solution of two tablespoons of soy sauce, two drops of Tabasco sauce or cayenne pepper to taste, 1/4 teaspoon of salt, ground pepper and one fresh clove of garlic, minced. Place meat and marinade in a Ziploc plastic bag in the refrigerator overnight. Then drain the meat and place on the oven racks to dry. The oven should be set at 140 degrees with the oven door partially open. Dry for about six to eight hours or until the meat turns dark and brittle.

Other marinade ingredients that add a unique taste to the meat are red wine, red wine vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, minced onion, a pinch of thyme, oregano and marjoram.

One of the best known survival foods in the history of North America is pemmican. Invented by the Indians as rations for long hunting trips, pemmican was used on the Lewis and Clark Expedition as trail food and by Admiral Peary's group as a staple food during their successful journey to the North Pole.

Pemmican was made using equal parts of jerky, wild berries, and boiled fat from animals. A modern day recipe substitutes peanut butter for the fat. The ingredients to be mixed include: eight ounces of jerky pounded into powder; eight ounces of raisins or dried apricots, eight ounces of unroasted peanuts or pecans. Heat up two tablespoons of honey and four tablespoons of peanut butter until softened and then blend together with a pinch of cayenne pepper. Add to the jerky/nuts/raisin mixture and work thoroughly through the mixture. Stored in plastic bags pemmican will keep indefinitely in a cool, dry place.

Before you attempt to make your own trail foods and meals you will need to build or acquire an important piece of equipment - a food dryer. Commercial food dryers are available for about \$100 but you can make your own for about \$30. Buy the drying racks first - they will determine the width and depth of your food dryer. Metal cake cooling racks work great. Buy the square ones with dimensions of about 10 x 10 inches.

You want the dryer to be shaped more like a tall square tower rather than a low wide rectangle. Because this unit doesn't have a fan to keep air circulating it uses the principle of "warm air rises" to create the circulation. A 100 to 500 watt bulb is located at the base of the dryer. Air enters at the bottom vents, heats up, rises through the dryer racks and exits out the top vents. The temperature inside should be at least 100

degrees for proper food drying. Build the dryer frame using 1 x 2s and use Masonite for the sides. Screw eyes are used to hold the door closed. Don't paint or varnish the dryer once you've built it.

When planning a menu for a wilderness outing it's best to plan for one or two small meals and one main meal at the end of the day. Trail snacks should also be provided for in-between-meal energy replenishment. On a piece of paper list the days you will be gone on the left-hand side and on the top of the page - breakfast, lunch and dinner. If you draw lines separating the days and each meal category, you should have a page of boxes with each box representing a particular meal of the day. To figure out what to put into each box of the menu you might try one of the backpackers cookbooks at the end of this article.

The basic principle of packing food for the trail is keep it simple and light. For quick, trouble-free meals that keep well on the trail, pack hard salami, small tins of fish - tuna, shrimp, sardines - and chicken. Don't forget crackers, cheese, peanut butter, dried fruit and granola for no cook/cleanup eat-as-you-go meals. Small cans of evaporated milk can be used full strength for coffee creamer or cut 50/50 with water to use as whole milk. Yogurt is ideal for shorter trips. It will hold up for about 48 hours. And of course cheeses will just continue to age.

Black breads, pumpernickel and dense whole-wheat breads travel well on the trail. Make them at home or buy them at your local bakery. Don't slice them until you're out on the trail or you'll end up with a bag of crumbs. Bagels travel very well in a backpack.

Food Packaging - When preparing meals on the trail many times you can get out of pot cleaning duty by mixing ingredients in sturdy self-locking bags like the Ziploc brand. Rehydrating dried fruits and vegetables can be done in these bags too. Use the large gallon size bags to pack each individual meal. Label the bag with a wide swatch of masking tape and mark on the tape using a waterproof marker the day and the meal (example: Saturday/Dinner). Remove unnecessary packing from grocery store bought foods (cardboard boxes, etc.) but don't forget to clip the instructions from the box and include it with the food.

If you have one of those Seal-a-Meal machines you can pre-measure mixes and powders at home, include a slip of paper with instructions, and then seal the bag from the elements. This saves time on the trail when mixing up your favorite pancake recipe or your favorite dehydrated gourmet spaghetti sauce.

Be sure to wrap individual portions of baked goods such as cookies, chews and muffins in plastic food wrap. Then place them in a plastic bag or container. When packing your pack be sure to protect your food from spoilage or contamination by other

items in the pack, such as soap, toiletries and liquid fuels. You never know when your sunscreen or insect repellent bottle will burst due to high altitude.

The weight of food to pack for each hiker varies from one to two and a half pounds per day. Of course the colder the weather, the more calories you are going to need to stoke the fires. The following are ten ways to cut down on the weight of your provisions:

1. Eat less (If you can afford to be eating less you may not be in the best shape for heavy duty exercise. Your best bet is to get in shape before you go, and then eat heartily).
2. Use recipes with only the shortest cooking times to cut down on fuel.
3. Save fuel by undercooking foods slightly and letting them sit for a few moments, covered, to finish cooking.
4. Eat heavy meals first, like canned goods, fresh eggs, and rice.
5. Pack only one pot meals.
6. Use dried soups and dumplings for dinner.
7. Pack make-ahead meals to save cooking time.
8. Substitute fruit leathers for gorp, Potato Buds for rice, pasta for rice, Butter Buds for butter or margarine.
9. Keep strictly to the pounds-per-person limit that you decide on.
10. Save water - use the one pot method in trail directions if it's offered as an alternate method.

Use your dehydrator to dry fresh fruit and vegetables. Some of the best foods to dehydrate are eggplant, bell peppers, mushrooms, carrots, tomatoes, zucchini and Gravenstein apples. I've had great luck drying vegetables out of the can. Corn and green beans dry up really nice. Avoid canned vegetables packed with heavy sodium concentrations.

We've already talked about making beef jerky. It can be added to stews and such for extra flavor. You can also bring ground beef for your meals if you dry it in your oven at home. Brown the meat in a fry pan the way you normally do and then drain off the fat. Dry it on a cookie sheet in the oven for six to eight hours at 140 degrees with the door slightly ajar. One pound of ground beef dries to six ounces, about one and a third cups. Store the dried ground beef in a Ziploc bag in the refrigerator until you're ready to go.

Meals really stand out when you use the following fresh ingredients: onions, cloves of garlic and salted butter. Fresh onion and garlic sauteed in butter will marry the flavors of anything. You can pack garlic cloves in left over 35mm film cans. In fact you can use plastic film cans for other important items such as salt and pepper, herbs and cooking oils. If you want see through film containers, buy Fuji film. Fresh cheeses make boring meals come alive. Parmesan, Reggiano, aged Gouda and dry Jack can be carried in wide mouth plastic bottles and will last for days.

If you plan activities in the fall and winter months, super

charge your meals with extra calories, so that the body has enough fuel to fight off hypothermia and exhaustion. To whet your appetite for some cold weather camping here are two recipes from the Hungry Hiker's Book of Good Cooking.

Russian Black Bread

1 square unsweetened chocolate
2 cups water
1 cup bran flakes
1 cup cornmeal
2 envelopes dry yeast
1/2 cup warm water
1/4 cup oil
1/2 cup molasses
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon salt
1 tablespoon instant coffee
1 teaspoon crushed fennel seed
2 1/2 to 3 cups white flour
2 cups rye flour
1 cup whole-wheat flour
Glaze: 1 egg white mixed with
1 tablespoon water

Melt chocolate in 2 cups water and pour this over the bran and cornmeal in a large bowl. Let cool. Meanwhile, dissolve the yeast in 1/2 cup warm water. To the cooled bran and cornmeal, add the oil, molasses, yeast, brown sugar, salt, coffee, fennel, add 2 1/2 cups of white flour. Mix well. Add the rye and whole-wheat flours, then add more white flour until you can knead the dough (It will be sticky). Knead it for five minutes, adding more flour if necessary, then put it into a greased bowl, turn, and cover with a damp towel. Let it rise until double. Punch the dough down. Divide it in half and form each half into a ball. Set these on greased cookie sheets, cover, and let rise until nearly double, about 30 minutes. Brush the loaves with a mixture of egg white and water. Bake at 375 degrees for 50 to 60 minutes, until the loaf sounds hollow when tapped - the crust should be very dark. Cool on racks.

For winter meals when you need to pack as many calories into your meals as possible, make up a soup that positively brims with delicious nutrients. As well as containing plenty of vitamins, carbohydrates, fats, and protein, Super Soup has the advantage of using up the odds and ends of dried vegetables that you have left over from making more refined recipes. And a very tasty soup it is, too! Dumplings make it a complete meal. Note: milk does not boil well - it froths and boils over and makes a general nuisance of itself, so add it only in the last few minutes of cooking.

Super Soup

1/3 cup barley
1/3 cup lentils
1/3 cup Potato Buds, or 1/4 cup
instant potato powder
2 beef bouillon cubes
1 cup dried sliced vegetables
1 tablespoon dried meat
A pinch each of thyme and marjoram
1/2 cup dry milk
3 tablespoons butter or margarine
1/4 cup grated or cut cheese
(optional) 1 cup biscuit mix packed
in its own bag for dumplings

Put into one bag everything except the milk - butter or margarine - and grated cheese. Trail directions: 1. Put the soup into a pot with 4 1/2 cups water. Bring to boil, then simmer for 1/2 hour. 2. During the last five minutes, stir in 1/2 cup dry milk and 3 tablespoons butter or margarine. Add cut or grated cheese. 3. To make dumplings add 1/4 cup water to 1 cup biscuit mix and make a stiff batter. Form into balls about the size of ping-pong balls, and float them on top of the soup. Cover so they steam and cook until done, during the last 20 minutes' cooking time.

Outdoor Foods Information Access

For more information on preparing your own trail foods and backpacking meals the following books are available:

Wilderness Cuisine, by Carole Latimer. Wilderness Press. (800) 443-7227. Carole Latimer leads women on her Call of the Wild wilderness trips. Imagine after hiking six hours at 9,000 or 10,000 feet and staggering into camp at the end of the day you are treated to Thai lemongrass coconut-milk soup, Mexican tabouli salad, a main dish of puttanesca with goat cheese and angelhair pasta, fresh-baked cornbread served with home-canned rhubarb-raspberry jam, ginseng tea and a desert of flaming cherries jubilee!

Original Cowboy Cookbook, Authentic recipes from bunkhouse, chuck wagon, cook shack, line shack, saloon, trail drive cooking and main house cooking, by Wild Wes Medley. Original Western Publications, 1020 Mt. Vernon Rd., Hurricane, West Virginia 25526. This book doesn't exactly contain backpacking food but the recipes date back to the 1840s where western outdoor cooking was born. Chapters include: Everyday Cooking, Sauces

and Gravies, Breads and Biscuits, Desserts and Candy, Curing and Preserves, Cowboy Remedies and a Special Barbecue Section (worth the price of the whole book).

The Hungry Hiker's Book of Good Cooking, The first cookbook for backpackers (and canoeists and campers) that makes possible superb meals on the trail, by Gretchen McHugh. Recreational Equipment Inc. , P. O. Box 88125, Seattle, WA 98138-2125. (800) 426-4840. Consider this the do-it-yourself backpacker food bible. Learn how to prepare ahead with fresh ingredients your own delicious, home-dried foods and mixes, and then how to transform them easily into wonderful dishes over a camp stove or fire. More than 135 recipes from hearty soups and stews with dumplings to pilafs and pastas, from delectable stir-frys to skillet-baked breads.

The Wilderness Ranger Cookbook, San Juan National Forest Association, P. O. Box 2261, Durango, CO 81302; (303) 385-4634. When you spend weeks at a time in the back country, you come up with some fairly creative and tasty recipes. So it just makes sense that the people employed by the forest service, the wilderness rangers, would come up with a fantastic cookbook of trail recipes. The 112 page collection contains 80 recipes including: Regurgitate de la Prospector con Yama, Sauteed Chantrelles, and Back country Cheesecake. The book includes the full text of The Wilderness Act, and contains slots of wilderness facts and history, with personal reflections about the wild places visited by the contributing rangers.

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