

COOKING IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

Packing, Preparation and Nutrition

by Kevin Jackson



After several hours on the trail, in the raft, or on the rock, the main focus on most outdoor enthusiasts' minds is FOOD. "What am I going to eat today?" It is often our primary thought for most of the day, and the last thing we want to do is disappoint ourselves or our team – who are depending on us to prepare a healthy, nutritious and tasty meal. When cooking in the backcountry, there are several things you should consider when planning out the menu for your adventure. There are three main aspects of cooking to take into consideration prior to every trip:

1. **PACKING** – How much food can I carry for each day I will be away?

2. **PREPARATION** – What am I going to cook with, and do I have all the necessary disinfectant items?

3. **NUTRITION** – Have I packed enough of a variety to keep my energy levels high... and will I enjoy eating this food at the end of each day?



Packing

When packing your food for a multi-day adventure, it is a good rule of thumb to stay away from glass, aluminum cans, plastic, and foods that require large or oddly-shaped packaging. Cut down on the amount of unwanted trash you'll be taking in, and more importantly, packing out. A great way to save room in your pack and reduce the amount of trash you have to carry is to repack all your foods. Take the contents out of the box and put them in a zip-lock sealed bag – and don't forget to include the directions in the bag. This not only makes it easier to remember how to cook the food, but also acts as a label if the bag is nothing more than a powdered mix.

Another useful packing technique is to buy small plastic bottles at your local sporting goods store for liquids like syrup or cooking oil. Try to schedule approximately two pounds of food per day and use that as a benchmark when packing.

Preparation

What doesn't have germs on it? Unfortunately, bacteria thrive on food as much as people do. The key to bacteria prevention involves proper food handling and camp hygiene. Be sure to carry foods that last a long time before spoiling, and always try to eat everything in your pot. The bacteria that can grow in leftovers will themselves be killed by reheating the food, but the toxins produced by them are virtually unaffected by heat. Always wash your hands with soap and water, or hand sanitizer, before and after preparing food. Religiously wash and dry all community cooking gear after each use.

Before you start preparing your meal, begin by disinfecting all wilderness drinking water with boiling, filtration, or halogenations. Boiling is the safest way and water needs only to reach the boiling point to be rendered free of most bacteria. Filtration is most effective when the device has been proven to remove bacteria as well as viruses. Halogens (iodine and chlorine) are the least effective because of the variable results, based on such things as the concentration of the halogen, contact time with the germs, the clarity of the water, the temperature of the water, and the questionable efficacy of iodine and chlorine against *Cryptosporidium*.

Preparing your meal and the time it takes to cook depends solely on the type of stove you use. There are several stoves out there that offer a wide variety of benefits for the modern backpacker. Until recently, the Jetboil PCS (Personal Cooking System) was the most effective stove on the market, offering an all-in-one rapid boiling system. Now there

are two others, the MSR Reactor and the Primus EtaPower. Over several days of use in the backcountry, all three have multiple advantages: primarily the high level of efficiency over a standard stove, the ability to boil a liter of water in under three and a half minutes, and an easy-to-pack system.

A large advantage for the Primus was its versatility – it can be used with almost any pot or pan. This is particularly important for cold-weather use when the unattached canister can be flipped over for better performance (the pressurized fuel stays in a liquid form so it doesn't draw as readily from the top). Overall, the Jetboil PCS came out ahead as the leader in the fast and light backcountry cooking systems. This stove is excellent for a solo hiker but if you plan to hike with a larger group, or might encounter harsh conditions, either the Primus EtaPower or the MSR Reactor are great versatile year-round alternatives.

Nutrition

Your meal selection is critical to ensure your energy levels stay high on multi-day expeditions, and that you are keeping your calorie count up to prevent muscle fatigue. It takes a lot of energy to scale mountains and forge rivers.

It's very important to make sure you replenish your body to keep you energized and help you feel better in the long run. You need foods that will help your endurance. These kinds of foods can be found in complex carbohydrates. No cutting carbs in the backcountry! You will want to make sure you have a good mix of carbohydrates, protein, and fat. For example, a 170-pound male will burn on average 2,200 calories over a four-day trek with a medium sized pack on. GORP ("Good Old Raisins and Peanuts") is a great source of energy and calories and it's easy to pack and carry. Eating consistently throughout the day, at least every three hours, will keep your energy levels high and allow you to push through a long day on the trail.

You don't have to be a worldly chef to cook amazing food while hiking around in the backcountry. With so many ready-to-cook meals available, it's easy to eat like a king on the trail. There are a few things that will make your cooking experience stress free.

Keeping these three components of backcountry cooking in mind will provide you, and your team, the opportunity to have safe, healthy and tasty meals throughout your entire backpacking adventure.

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My Favorite Healthy Meal

Noodle Vegetable Delight

- 1/4 cup dried onions
- 1/4 cup dried peas
- 1/4 cup dried carrots
- 1/2 cup dried broccoli (if available)
- 8 ounce package of noodles

Dressing

- Two tablespoon of dark sesame oil or olive oil
- 3–4 tablespoon of good quality soy sauce

Instructions:

Boil the noodles until al dente. Rehydrate vegetables by adding them to the noodles just before they are fully cooked. Drain off excess water. Pour dressing over and toss to mix.