

Be a Dried Gourmet

Create tasty trail meals like fish chowder, lasagna, and seafood with pasta.

By Linda Yaffe. Backpacker Magazine, May 2001

What a day. Monarch Divide in California's Kings Canyon National Park was tougher than we'd expected, and our 10-hour hike stretched to 12. By the time we dropped our packs against white pines atop the upper basin, we were beat—and ravenous. My partner and I like to eat well, but this wasn't the time for slicing and sautéing and simmering. Even so, just minutes after firing up the stove, we dove into hearty portions of Southwestern Pasta loaded with juicy tomato chunks, Italian salami, and mild green chilies.

Our secret? Complete one-pot meals we cook at home, then dehydrate and pack for the trail. In camp, we simply add water and boil.

Most meals you prepare at home—beef stew, lasagna, even ham casserole—can be popped into a dehydrator and turned into quick-and-easy camp fare. Granted, you'll need to spend some time at home in your kitchen, but you'll eliminate food-prep hassles (and use less stove fuel) on the trail, where all you really want is hot grub in your grumbling belly.

Here's how to turn your favorite dinner into your favorite trail dinner.

1. Cut vegetables and other ingredients into small pieces so they'll dry quickly and easily. We're talking mincing here, not cubing.
2. Cook the meal as you normally do at home. Many soups, stews, and casseroles make great one-pot trail meals, although only trial and error will reveal which best translate to backcountry use. Line your dehydrator trays or cookie sheets (if you're using an oven) with parchment paper or clear plastic wrap. Leave 1 inch of space between the wrap and tray edge for better air circulation, and anchor the wrap with small squares of masking tape. Preheat the dehydrator or oven to 145°F for 10 minutes; if you can't select the temperature, use the lowest possible setting and check the food often. Spread the freshly cooked meal as thinly as possible over trays.
3. Turn and crumble the food often to ensure fast, even dehydration. Most of the meals I've made take about 5 hours or so to dehydrate, but drying times vary according to your dehydrator and the fat and moisture content and density of the ingredients. The food is done when it looks and feels dry and crumbly.
4. Cool the meal completely by letting it sit for several hours on the dehydrator trays or cookie sheets.
5. Package the dried meal in doubled zipper-lock bags. On the package, write the date, number of servings, recipe name, and these simple cooking directions: Empty the contents into a saucepan, cover with water, bring to a boil, stir, and serve. Store meals in a cool, dark, dry place. If wrapped in a heavy, black plastic bag, these meals will keep in the refrigerator for up to 2 years, or in the freezer for 3 or more years.
6. Reduce, reuse, and recycle. The plastic wrap, parchment paper, and plastic bags can be washed, dried, and reused many times.

Drying Foods Using an Oven (taken from *High Trail Cookery* by Linda Frederick Yaffe)

Foods can be dried using a gas or electric oven.

To prepare your electric oven for drying, remove the top heating element. If this element is not removable, place an empty baking sheet on the oven's top shelf, and dry food on the lower shelves.

Turn the oven to its lowest setting, 140-150 degrees Fahrenheit. Place an oven thermometer next to the drying food to keep the temperature within this range. Leave the oven door partially open to allow air to circulate: 1 to 2 inches for an electric oven, 5 to 6 inches for a gas oven. An electric fan placed just outside the oven door, blowing air over the food, will greatly improve circulation.

To dry solid foods, such as sliced vegetables, fruits, and jerky, place food on several layers of fine mesh nylon net or nylon organdy, available at fabric stores. Set the nylon material on your oven racks.

To dry liquid foods, such as soups, spread them in a thin layer on oiled baking sheets.

Oven-dried foods must be checked and shifted frequently to prevent scorching, particularly during the last one-third of drying time. To reduce heat, open the oven door a few more inches.

Recipes

The following recipes provide instructions for preparing and drying the meals at home. On the trail, pour the dried meal into a pot, and add enough water to cover. Bring to a boil, stir, and serve. Each recipe feeds four people generous 2-cup portions.

Recipes

Black Bean Chili Mac

Recipe Ingredients

- 10 Ounces small shell pasta or small elbow macaroni
- 15 Ounces canned black beans, drained and rinsed
- 3 Cups spaghetti sauce
- 1/2 Cup salsa
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt
- 3 Tablespoons finely grated fresh Parmesan cheese

At Home: Cook pasta in a large saucepan according to the directions on the package, then drain. Pour the pasta back into the saucepan and add the beans, spaghetti sauce, salsa, garlic, salt, and Parmesan cheese. Heat briefly. Spread on dehydrator trays. Dehydrate for 5 = hours.

Serves: 4

Calories: 483

Dietary Fiber : 5.1

Saturated Fat: 2.0

Carbohydrates: 87.1

Fiber: 6.6

Sodium: 1944

Cholesterol: 3.7

Protein: 19.0

Total Fat: 9.8

Fish Chowder

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Cup clam juice
- 3 Cups water
- 1 Pound boneless fish fillets (cod, haddock, halibut, or sole)
- 8 small russet potatoes, diced

- 1 Teaspoon minced fresh thyme or 1/2 teaspoon minced dried thyme
- 2 Teaspoons canola oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 10 saltines, crushed
- 2 Cups skim milk
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt
- 1/2 Teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 Teaspoon cayenne pepper

At Home: Bring the clam juice, water, and fish fillets to a boil in a large saucepan. Cook, covered, for 5 minutes, or just until fish flakes easily. Remove the fish with a slotted spoon, crumble it, and set it aside. Add the potatoes and thyme to the stock and cook, covered, for 10 minutes, or until the potatoes are tender. Heat the oil in a skillet over medium heat, then saute´ the onion until light brown. Add the cooked fish and onion to the potatoes in the large saucepan, along with the crackers, milk, salt, and black and cayenne peppers. Stir and cook for 5 minutes longer. Spread on dehydrator trays. Dehydrate for 5 1/2 hours.

Serves: 4

Calories: 503

Carbohydrates: 82.5

Cholesterol: 53.2

Dietary Fiber : 0.9

Fiber: 4.41

Protein: 34.4

Saturated Fat: 0.7

Sodium: 800

Total Fat: 4.4

Mexican Corn Pie

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 whole eggs or 6 egg whites
- 2 Tablespoons corn oil
- 30 Ounces (2 cans) creamed corn
- 1/3 Cup coarse cornmeal
- 1 large onion, minced
- 1/3 Cup whole wheat flour
- 4 Ounces canned mild green chilies, diced
- 1/2 Teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt
- 1/2 Teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1/2 Cup finely grated Parmesan cheese

Serves: 4

At Home: Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch glass casserole dish. Beat all of the ingredients together in a large bowl. Pour the mixture into the casserole dish and bake for 45 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the pie's center comes out clean. Spread on dehydrator trays and dehydrate for 5 hours.

Calories: 440

Carbohydrates: 59.9

Cholesterol: 223

Dietary Fiber : 6.4

Fiber: 8.49

Protein: 18.1

Saturated Fat: 5.0

Sodium: 1609

Total Fat: 17.1

One-Step Lasagna

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Cups spaghetti sauce
- 9 no-cook lasagna noodles
- 15 Ounces ricotta cheese
- 3 Tablespoons minced fresh basil or 1 tablespoon minced dried basil
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 Pound firm tofu, drained and crumbled
- 8 Ounces mozzarella cheese, grated

Serves: 4

At Home: Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch glass casserole dish. Layer the ingredients in the dish in this order: 1 cup of spaghetti sauce, 3 noodles, and a third of each of the remaining ingredients. Repeat until all ingredients are used, topping the casserole with the last cup of spaghetti sauce. Cover the casserole and bake for 30 minutes. Uncover and bake for another 10 minutes, then remove from the oven and let stand for 10 minutes. Using a spatula, break up the noodles and spread the lasagna on dehydrator trays. Dehydrate for 5 hours.

Dinner Entree

Quick Hoppin´ John

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Cup dried black-eyed peas
- 6 Cups water
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 Tablespoons salsa
- 1/2 Teaspoon liquid smoke
- 1 1/2 Cups orzo
- 3 Cups spaghetti sauce
- 1 1/2 Teaspoons salt

Serves: 4

At Home: Rinse the black-eyed peas and put them in a large saucepan with the water, garlic, onion, bay leaf, salsa, and liquid smoke. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 50 minutes. Remove the bay leaf. Cook the orzo according to the directions on the package and drain; add the orzo to the bean mixture, along with the spaghetti sauce and salt. Stir and simmer for 5 minutes. Spread on dehydrator trays and dry for 5 hours.

Calories: 433

Carbohydrates: 77.6

Cholesterol: 0.0

Dietary Fiber : 12.8

Fiber: 14.35

Protein: 18.3

Saturated Fat: 1.1

Sodium: 2040

Total Fat: 7.8

Dinner Entree

Quick Seafood Capellini

Recipe Ingredients

- 8 Ounces capellini (angel hair) pasta
- 4 Tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 Cup whole wheat flour
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 Cups vegetable, beef, or chicken stock; milk; or water
- 12 Ounces canned tuna, crab, or chopped clams
- 4 Tablespoons minced fresh basil or 2 tablespoons minced dried basil
- 3/4 Teaspoon salt
- 1/4 Teaspoon cayenne pepper

Serves: 4

At Home: Cook the pasta according to the directions on the package, drain, and set aside. Heat a heavy skillet over low heat. Add the olive oil. When the oil is hot, add the flour and garlic and saute´ until very lightly browned. Slowly add the stock, milk, or water, stirring constantly. Stir in the seafood, basil, salt, and pepper. Cook for 5 minutes. Blend pasta with sauce. Spread on dehydrator trays and dehydrate for 5 hours.

Calories: 448

Carbohydrates: 41.6

Cholesterol: 91.6

Dietary Fiber : 3.2

Fiber: 3.71

Protein: 31.6

Saturated Fat: 3.1

Sodium: 893

Total Fat: 17.5

Dinner Entree

Southwestern Pasta

Recipe Ingredients

- 12 Ounces linguine, vermicelli, or other thin pasta
- 3 1/2 Cups spaghetti sauce
- 4 Ounces Italian dry salami, minced, or tofu, crumbled
- 15 Ounces canned ranch-style baked beans
- 4 Ounces canned mild green chilies, diced

Serves: 4

At Home: Cook pasta according to directions on package until tender, then drain. Return pasta to pot and add spaghetti sauce, salami or tofu, beans, and chilies, and heat on low for 5 minutes, until all ingredients are heated. Spread on dehydrator trays and dry for 5 = hours.

Calories: 685

Carbohydrates: 110

Cholesterol: 22.4

Dietary Fiber : 10.1

Fiber: 13.36

Protein: 26.1

Saturated Fat: 4.7

Sodium: 2777

Total Fat: 18.7

Dinner Entree

Sweet and Sour Pan-Fried Noodles

Recipe Ingredients

- 16 Ounces Chinese rice stick noodles
- 1 Tablespoon canola oil

- 2 Teaspoons sesame seed oil
- 1 onion, minced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 12 Ounces mushrooms, finely chopped
- 1 carrot, grated
- 1 1/2 Cups crushed tomatoes
- 3 Tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
- 1/4 Cup rice vinegar
- 3 Tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 Tablespoon honey
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt
- 1/4 Teaspoon cayenne pepper

Serves: 4

At Home: Cook the noodles for 5 minutes, then drain. Heat the canola and sesame seed oils in a large wok or Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the onion and garlic and saute´ for 3 minutes. Add the noodles, mushrooms, and carrot. Saute´, stirring occasionally, until browned. Add the tomatoes, ginger, vinegar, soy sauce, honey, salt, and pepper, and stir over low heat for 5 minutes. Spread on dehydrator trays and dehydrate for 5 hours.

Dinner Entree

Tofu Vermicelli

Recipe Ingredients

- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 1 Pound firm tofu, squeezed dry and crumbled
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 2/3 Cup finely chopped cashews
- 12 Ounces vermicelli
- 1 Pound (1 bunch) spinach, washed, stems removed, and finely chopped
- 4 Tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 Tablespoons dry sherry
- 1/3 Cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 Cups tomato sauce or crushed tomatoes
- 1 Teaspoon salt

Serves: 4

At Home: Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy skillet or Dutch oven over low heat. When the oil is hot, add the tofu, garlic, and cashews and saute´ for 5 minutes. Cook the vermicelli separately according to the directions on the package and drain. Add the pasta and the remaining ingredients to the skillet. Stir for 5 minutes to blend well. Spread on dehydrator trays and dehydrate for 5 hours.

Dinner Entree

Vegetable Frittata

Recipe Ingredients

- 10 small russet potatoes (4 1/2 pounds), diced
- 1 Pound (1 bunch) spinach or Swiss chard, washed, stems removed, and finely chopped
- 1/2 Cup water
- 8 whole eggs or 10 egg whites
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 Teaspoon salt
- 3/4 Teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2/3 Cup milk

- 4 Teaspoons minced fresh thyme or 2 teaspoons minced dried thyme
- 2 Tablespoons canola oil
- 1 Cup finely grated Parmesan cheese

Serves: 4

At Home: Place the potatoes in a saucepan. Cover with water, bring to a boil, then cook for 10 minutes or until tender. Drain and set aside. Place the spinach or Swiss chard in a large saucepan. Add 1/2 cup water, cover, and cook for 8 minutes or until tender; drain. Preheat a large ovenproof skillet over medium heat. Whisk the eggs, garlic, salt, pepper, milk, and thyme in a large bowl. Stir in the cooked potatoes and spinach or chard. Heat the oil in the skillet on the stove, then add the potato mixture. Cover, reduce heat to very low, and cook for 12 minutes. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese and place the uncovered skillet beneath a preheated broiler. Broil for 4 minutes or until light brown. Spread on dehydrator trays and dry for 5 hours.

Calories: 756

Carbohydrates: 94.7

Cholesterol: 451

Dietary Fiber : 3.1

Fiber: 8.29

Protein: 39.0

Saturated Fat: 9.3

Sodium: 1274

Total Fat: 26.7