



Troop 54

Worcester, MA

Cooking on Camping Trips

The ideal meals on camping trips are lightweight, nutritious, tasty, non-perishable, foolproof to prepare, and easy to clean up. It is the rare menu which satisfies all of these criteria, but the experienced camper will find that he can eat very well while carrying no more than two pounds of food per day.

The active hiker needs lots of carbohydrates, which are usually supplied by cereals or pancakes for breakfast, crackers and breads for lunch, granola bars and fruit for snacks, and large dinners built around rice or pastas. Protein and fat come from cheese, peanut butter, stick pepperoni, and small cans of chicken, turkey, tuna fish, and processed meat. The key on light weight camping is to take large quantities of dried food, and add water when cooking, and limit the amount of canned or fresh food.

Cooking over an open fire can be tricky. Not only is heat difficult to regulate, but cooking gear for camping is lightweight, and doesn't spread the heat very well. Food can quickly stick to bottoms of pots and burn. The easiest cooking is based on a large pot of boiling water. The most difficult cooking involves frying pans.

The Boy Scout mess kit (and a host of similar mess kits made by Camp Trails, Palco, and others) is not a good cooking kit. The mess kit really provides personal utensils out of which to eat food prepared with a cook kit. (Actually, my personal eating gear usually consists of only a wide mouth Sierra cup and a spoon!) The "frying pan" and the "pot" in the mess kit are really too small, too thin, and too tippy for effective cooking, even for one or two boys. A much better arrangement is to buy a coffee pot (used for heating and pouring water rather than making coffee) and a 2 quart kettle (used for cooking pastas and rice meals). These can be purchased as separate items, or as part of a 4 person or 6 person cook kit, leaving at home the bigger pots and frying pans unless the trip menu needs those utensils.

Breakfast

Breakfast starts the day! Particularly in Winter camping, breakfast should be a hot meal. A scout warms up not just by eating the hot food, but by preparing the meal over the camp fire and holding his warm cup or bowl.

Tang	canteen/water bottle
Hot chocolate/tea	coffee pot
Hot cereal	Sierra cup
Raisins/brown sugar	spoon
Possibly some powdered milk	

With instant oatmeal or cream of wheat mixed in a Sierra cup, this breakfast can be prepared using one coffee pot of boiling water as the source for water for the oatmeal (add the brown sugar and raisins after mixing), water for the hot chocolate or tea, and wash water for cleaning up. Some instant oatmeals come with sugar or fruit already in the mix.

Tang	canteen/water bottle
Pancake mix	bowl/small kettle for mixing
Powdered milk	frying pan
Oil	spatula
Syrup/Jam	plate (optional)
Tea/Hot Chocolate	Sierra cup
	spoon/fork

This is a breakfast for a leisurely morning, when there is no hurry to break camp and start on the trail. Pancakes take lots of time to cook, particularly because some of them will burn, or will be dropped while turning. It is also a meal that requires lots of utensils, and more elaborate clean up. Still, it's fun to make pancakes!

Other Breakfasts. Don't bother with eggs. They are heavy, tricky to carry unbroken, and almost impossible to cook satisfactorily over the uneven heat of a camp fire.

If you insist on meat with breakfast, consider Spam or a small canned ham (to be shared among five or six campers) rather than bacon. Cooking bacon over uneven heat is tricky, and bacon has a high percentage of grease which is heavy to carry and lost in cooking. (If you expect to catch fish, you will want to take bacon and fry your fish rolled in corn meal in the bacon grease.)

Lunch

When hiking, breakfast and dinner are the big meals. Lunch is a heavy snack, or a series of snacks, eaten during breaks on the hike, along with plenty of water. If water sources are of questionable purity, and water is treated with purification tablets, adding powdered lemonade, koolaid, or gatorade to the canteen is a good technique, but wait 30 minutes so that the purification tablets can work.

Sandwich	canteen/water bottle
Fruit Drink mix	
Carrot sticks	
Fresh fruit	
Chocolate bar/Granola bar	

This menu works well when you pack a lunch at home, to be eaten later in the day. Put your sandwich in the top of your pack, where it won't be crushed.

Crackers	canteen/water bottle
Cheese/pepperoni/canned luncheon meat	knife
Jam/peanut butter in plastic jar	
Fruit Drink Mix	
Dried fruit	
Granola bar	
Peanut/raisins/M & Ms	

When you are packing a lunch for the next day, or the end of the week, you need food which will not spoil. Crackers have a much longer shelf life than bread, and weigh less. Cheddar cheese, pepperoni, deviled ham, or jam or peanut butter in small plastic jars are good to spread on crackers. Some hikers take sardines. In the Summer, chocolate bars may melt, but a mixture of raisins, peanuts, and M & M's (and possibly other nuts or seeds) will last very well. Dried fruits can be substituted for apples and oranges, but avoid fruits coated with sugar, such as pineapple. After a few days in the bottom of a pack, they're too sticky

Particularly in the Winter months, soup, tea, or hot chocolate can be a satisfying addition to a break on the trail. Only a very small fire (or a small backpacker's stove, such as the Peak 1) is needed to heat a coffee pot of water, or to boil a small kettle of soup. Of course, this means taking a coffee pot or kettle and cup with you on a day hike, or packing them so that they're accessible when you're on an extended backpacking trip.

Dinner

When Scouts are on camping trips, they need to drink lots of liquid. Most dinners should begin with a soup course: a kettle of soup if several boys are cooking together, or an instant cup of soup (or two) made with hot water from the coffee pot if a Scout is cooking alone. The soup is usually ready quickly, while the dinner may take 20 minutes to half an hour to prepare. The dinner can be followed by tea or hot chocolate.

Dinner should be the biggest meal of the day. By building a dinner around rice or a type of pasta, vast quantities of food can be carried which have very little weight. Meat or cheese added to the pasta, and maybe a soup or seasoning mix put into the pot for extra flavor, will result in an easy to cook, nutritious, very filling meal.

These meals are based on cooking the rice or pasta, with the added soup or seasoning mix, until the rice or pasta is almost done. Then any excess liquid is drained off and the meat is added. The only exception is pasta with spaghetti sauce. For that meal, a separate kettle is needed to make the sauce.

Rice pilaf	small kettle
Canned chicken	cook spoon
Chicken bouillon/soup	Sierra cup/spoon
Pasta	medium kettle
Tomato paste	cook spoon
Spaghetti sauce mix	small kettle
Grated Parmesan cheese	Sierra cup/spoon
Rice pilaf	small kettle
Pepperoni	cook spoon
Instant tomato soup	Sierra cup/spoon
Pasta	medium kettle
Canned chicken	cook spoon
chicken bouillon/soup	Sierra cup/spoon
Pasta	medium kettle
Mushroom soup mix	cook spoon
Tuna fish	Sierra cup/spoon

A package of freeze-dried green beans or peas will add color, texture, and taste to these meals. Be sure to pack some extra salt and pepper to season to taste. Some backpackers become quite skilled on bring dried seasonings to add to meals. A 3 oz. container of grated cheese can also be "worth its weight" to sprinkle over a tuna/pasta or chicken/pasta dinner.

Desserts on backpacking trips are mostly limited to stewed dried fruit or instant puddings made with dried milk -- until a Scout masters the art of baking in a reflector oven. Then the possibilities for gingerbread, brownies, cakes, and muffins are limited only by the imagination of the Scout and the amount of weight which he is willing to carry. Brownie mixes are heavy!

Planning quantities for camping menus is a little tricky. Scouts usually eat more on camping trips than they do at home, partly because they are physically very active on camping trips, and partly because there is no kitchen cupboard or refrigerator for a mid-afternoon snack which might take the edge off the dinner appetite. As a general rule of thumb, double the quantities of hot cereal, rice, and pasta which a Scout would eat at home.

A final note: keep a record! What worked well? Was anything a total, never-to-be-repeated disaster? Why? What quantities were a little skimpy? Did you have any food left over? What did you see other campers use that you would like to try? These records help you to plan for your next successful trip.

Author: John Mirick