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canoe country cuisine

□ by Dave Foley

Straining like a pack animal over portages, paddling into wind-whipped waves and searching for a campsite, you've quite forgotten it has been several hours since lunch, but your body hasn't. Suddenly, as you step onto a granite slab to check out your overnight home, hunger pangs well up. You are starving for dinner.

Though kept at bay with handfuls of trail snacks at portage landings or paddling breaks, the wilderness appetite—like some creature within you—must be satisfied. If you are hungry enough, almost any food will knock back the craving. I discovered this on a solo overnight as a Boy Scout, when ants became stuck in my gooey bread dough. Desperately hungry, I rolled the dough around a stick, thrust it into the flames of my campfire and, soon after, ate the sticky mess despite the insect garnish.

The palatability of most camp meals falls somewhere between the Donner Party menu and what you order in a restaurant where the waiter carries a chalkboard and later returns with a pepper grinder. The best camp cooks dig into dinner packs and whip together meals which, even if served at home, would draw raves.

Essentially what you put on your plate depends on how much you are willing to lug down a portage trail. *BWJ*'s publisher Stu Osthoff's trip menus feature steaks, chicken breasts, bratwurst and ground beef plus lots of fruits and produce. These are all carried between layers of ice in a food pack system which keeps food

Eating Well In The Wild



DAVE FOLEY

Eggs, onions, potatoes, garlic and cheese are fresh food supplements that add variety and taste to the standard canoe country dried food menu. (Wink Lake)



Taco Tuesday in the BWCAW. You do not have to settle for bland, expensive, measly portion freeze-dried food on your canoe trips. You can pack-in ice to keep foods fresh or select non-perishable real food. (Fourtown Lake)

fresh for almost a week. We wouldn't hesitate to accept an invitation to dine with that crew. However, even though these packs are comfortable to wear, the weight of the contents scare us.

My wife Cyndy and I are both small-framed lightweights whose bodies, while ideal for running, are pretty inadequate for assuming the role of packhorse. We begin our ten to twelve day Quetico trips with three full portage packs, each weighing about fifty to sixty pounds. Since we tend to change campsites most nights and usually portage two or three dozen times on a trip, those packs spend a lot of time on our backs and being jerked in/out of our canoe.

Even though we prepare by doing sessions in the weight room throughout the year,

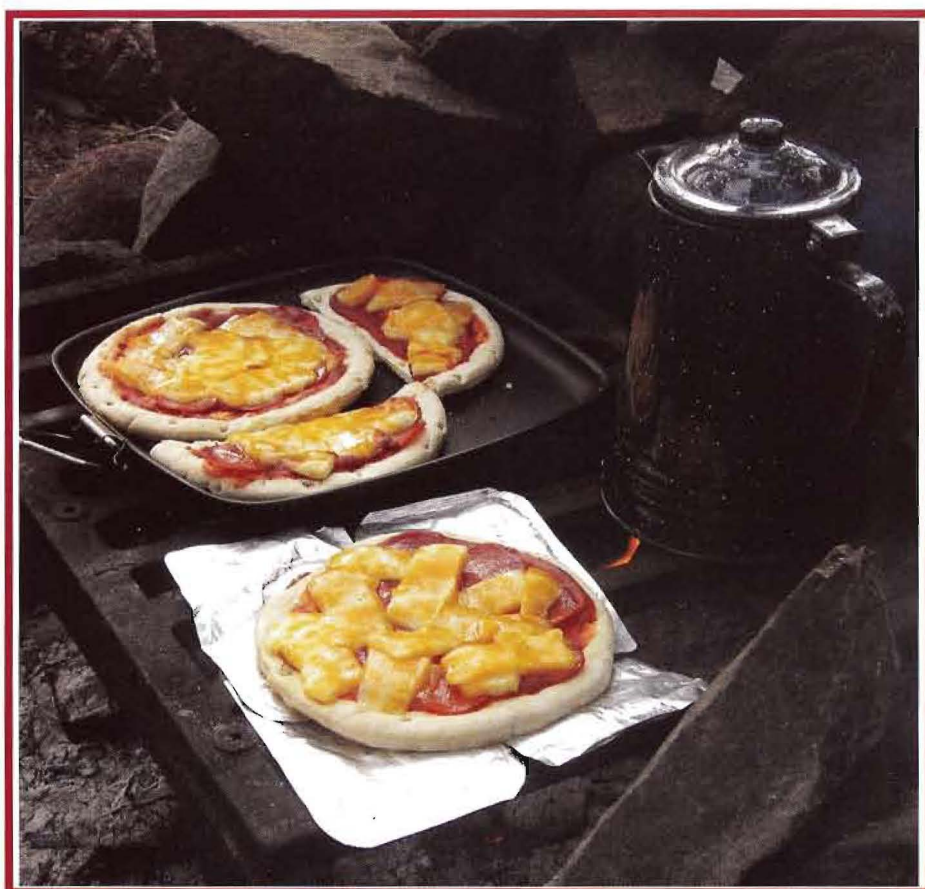
when I hoist a pack onto my shoulders or lift it out of the canoe, my back complains. As alluring as campsite dinners of steak or chicken might be, if we carried those into the bush, as well as the ice needed to keep them fresh, the extra weight and bulk in our packs would mean we would have to shorten our trip length.

When making trip food choices, if weight and convenience take precedence or you're not charmed by outdoor cooking, then the racks of freeze dried and dehydrated entrées which line the walls of outfitter and camping stores will serve you well. These just-add-water meals have come a long way since the 1970s when comments about these meals sounded like "I think this might be lasagna but it could be hunter's stew." Freeze dried

dinners of that era typically had the texture of wet papier-mâché. Today these meals-in-a-sack actually taste pretty much like they're supposed to; however, there are plenty of tastier and cheaper options available.

Our food planning starts at home, where we draw up a rough menu, inventory our kitchen, develop a shopping list and then head for our local grocery store. Into our cart go the same foods you would find in most pantries: boxes of rice, pudding, pasta, tortillas, Bisquick mixes and soup packages. The ingredients for trail mixes—nuts, chocolate, dried fruits and seeds get piled into the cart as well.

Moving into the produce section, we select hardy non-crushables like smaller potatoes, onions, carrots, cabbage, fresh garlic, avocados, apples,



LISA NEUMANN

Those who can bake up fresh pizza, muffins and cakes in canoe country are always very popular.

lemons and limes. From the dairy rack we pick up eggs, which will later be safely packed in a sturdy plastic egg carrier, and also purchase bricks of cheese which, surprisingly, hang tough even during hot summer trips. After traveling for several hot days, the cheese may begin to ooze a bit but still tastes great. Pre-grated cheese, however, can be a problem as it may develop non-eradicable mold. It is surprising how durable most foods are, even when pressed into a jam-packed portage pack.

The real work starts in our kitchen. While I'm out testing our stove, sharpening knives and collecting our camping equipment, Cyndy, with boxes of ziplocks and a bulk roll of plastic food storage bags, puts together the meals. I'm the gear guy and she's the food person, so the details concerning the packing and cooking of meals comes largely from her.

For about two days our kitchen counter and table become an assembly area strewn with containers, bags, small plastic bottles and food packets as the ingredients for each dinner are allocated and bagged. Most foods and seasonings are packed in plastic bags. Messy ingredients such as butter, cooking oils, vinegar, brown sugar, syrup, jams and salsa which can be crushed or spilled are put in high-quality durable plastic jars with screw-top lids which are made for backcountry travel.

Into each dinner bag goes the basic cooking instructions, clipped from the package or recipe, along with smaller bags of ingredients. If the ingredient isn't readily identifiable such as Bisquick, flour or powdered milk then a correctly labeled swatch of paper is dropped into the bag. It takes several hours to pack it all. If you don't have the time to devote to this task, or the eagerness to be a

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wilderness cook, you might do better buying prepackaged meals at the store.

Being sure you have everything you need on a trip is one thing; being able to put your hands on it when you want it is another. I wasted too much time rooting through food bags searching for a particular item until Cyndy finally solved the problem.

We now pack our food in colored stuff bags: drinks are in the black bag, breads and crackers are in the blue one, purple has the desserts and treats, while trail mixes, nuts and fruit are in the brown one and a series of silver bags have Magic Marker labels of "dinners," "baking materials" and "breakfast." Other distinctive bags contain spices, produce and cheeses. A chart written on sturdy cardboard in waterproof ink stuck in the top of the pack takes the guesswork out of food selection by reminding us what is found in each colored stuff bag.

A first consideration for the food preparer is the palates of the camping group. Since most of our meals are one-pot affairs, Cyndy strives to come up with a series of dinners everyone will eat. However, being a person who loves to cook, she isn't afraid to venture beyond what is considered traditional camping food. (Editor's note: I have never met anyone who actually loves to cook. Cyndy's patience and talents far exceed mine. Fresh food tastes great, provides the calories a wilderness appetite demands and is pretty quick to pack and cook. As for the weight of our food packs shortening our routes—that will be a cold day in)

When cooking at home, Cyndy experiments with meals, noting which dishes could be adapted to our one-burner camp stove or the cooking fire. Consequently, on the shores of Quetico lakes we have dined

on Thai and Middle Eastern entrées. Shopping in the "International Foods" aisle of a large grocery store you will find packaged dinners under labels such as "Simply Asia" or "Near East." Working from cooking directions she has clipped from the box and inserted into the meal package along with the addition of appropriate seasonings these meals charm even picky eaters.

With just the two of us to feed on our trips nowadays, the range of menu options is fairly extensive. When our kids, as young teens, and their friends traveled with us, Cyndy made sure the meal plan would be appealing to that group. Obviously you can't cater to every whim, but if the troops reject the meal, they will be dragging and whining on the portages the next day.

Besides this isn't the military, it's a vacation. By the end of the day, when the hiss of the camp stove starts, everyone's brain drops to their stomach. The fish may be jumping, the loons calling and the sun sinking in a reddish-orange picture postcard scene, but all eyes are focused on the dinner pot.

The transition to camp food can be tough. One day you're looking into a refrigerator or at a restaurant menu and the next you're watching someone groping in a Duluth pack for dinner. To ease the transition, when traveling with our kids and their friends, the first night's menus included foods they enjoyed such as spaghetti or macaroni. Once they became accustomed to the routines of the trip and expedition appetites kicked in, they were ready to consume just about anything set on a plate before them. No doubt this is why freeze dried dinners are still consumed.

Mindful of a week's worth of portages looming, weight becomes a consideration in

meal selection. To backs already tender from toting heavy packs overland, it becomes obvious that food fed to the stomach is that much less poundage to be carried on the shoulders. Consequently, when the cook asks what the group wants for dinner, she is likely to hear the response, "What weighs the most?" You can bet the first dinners chosen will be the heaviest.

For ten years I was trip leader at a YMCA camp. Kids are notoriously finicky eaters. Many will blanch at the thought of onions or garlic infiltrating the dinner stew. While it may be fair to justify discretely adding flavor enhancers like garlic or onions without telling the crew, I may have violated camp cookery ethics by not divulging the presence of a horsefly in one of our meals.

On that occasion I was supervising the preparation of a large pot of beef stew. As I stood next to a camper who was stirring the stew, a large horsefly suddenly dive-bombed into the mixture and disappeared from sight. Frantically we probed the thick brown liquid but could find no trace of the fly. The kid's eyes widened. He drew in a breath, and I knew he was about to announce our predicament to everyone. Desperately I shushed him, quickly pointing out that if the stew went uneaten, there was no backup plan for supper.

So we sounded the dinner call and piled the campers' dishes full. While they eagerly devoured the stew, the two of us gingerly checked every spoonful. Then we ladled out seconds; the pot washer volunteer scraped the pot clean and ate the last remnants of the meal. No fly was ever found. The vast majority of trip meals are much less dramatic.

Over the years, Cyndy and I have developed a routine.



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Typically, we try to leave camp early to improve our chances of seeing wildlife and to log a few hours of paddling time before the midday winds come up. Consequently, breakfasts are simple: coffee for Cyndy, cocoa for me, a bowl of steaming hot cereal with a layer of brown sugar on top and we are good to go. If the weather is warm, we may start the day with granola bars. If it's a layover day or raining, scrambled eggs or pancakes covered with syrup are appealing options.

As we break camp, Cyndy sets aside items for lunch and travel snacks to be carried in day packs so our main packs won't have to be opened until we make camp in the afternoon. During travel days, we try to stop at least every hour-and-a-half and grab something to eat. Favorite snack options include dried fruits, summer sausage, crackers with cheese, jam or peanut butter and jerky. (To keep crackers from getting crushed, we keep them in the box; however to save space, all other boxes are discarded when we pack for the trip.)

At home before the trip, working from stocks of seeds, nuts, chocolate and dried fruit, Cyndy makes snack mixes—some salty and others sweet. At the campsite, Cyndy may put together hummus from a freeze-dried mix and guacamole using fresh avoca-

dos which taste great on crackers or tortillas during travel breaks the next day. (Leave the pit in the guacamole to keep it from discoloring.) Another favorite lunch treat are hard-boiled eggs which she prepares at night for the next day.

By suppertime we are ready for heavier fare. Since the dinners were assembled at home, each evening Cyndy extracts one bag from the pack and follows instructions on the enclosed recipe. Vital to the operation are the seasonings. Packaged in plastic bags and small plastic bottles are an assortment of spices including oregano, cumin, basil, nutmeg, cinnamon, salt, pepper as well as curry and chili powders.

Rarely is an item like a package of store-bought spaghetti sauce left as is. Into the reconstituted sauce go a few dried tomatoes, pinches of oregano and basil, a chopped garlic clove and a bay leaf. Simmered and poured over a plate of angel hair pasta, this sauce will be comparable to that served by any Italian restaurant. (Editor: Meatless?)

Cheese is another ingredient which is essential to our menu. Bricks of pepperjack, cheddar, mozzarella and Swiss get chipped away during lunch and grated or sliced into dinner entrées like enchiladas or macaroni and cheese. Often the last dinner of the trip features

all the leftover cheese which is added to a pot of cooked macaroni and then baked.

Soup, chili and stew make regular appearances on our dinner menu. Starting with a base of rice, pasta or beans, bits of vacuum packed chicken or tuna are added along with dehydrated items like celery, carrots, green peppers, raisins, red chilies or tomatoes. Fresh produce such as cabbage, potatoes, carrots and onions often find their way into the soup or stew as well.

Cyndy, following the directions clipped from the Bisquick box, combines baking mix with powdered milk and water in a plastic bag, creating chunks of dough that when plopped into the soup become dumplings. Focaccia, a thick round flatbread flavored with cheese and pizza-type seasonings, which can be bought at deli-type bakeries goes well with soup or stew.

When the day turns cold or a lake filled with whitecaps keeps you at the campsite, the focus is on food. This was never truer than the second week of September in 2007, when the weather took an abrupt about-face from summer. Cold north winds sent temperatures diving into the forties, and intermittent rains drenched our Suzanette Lake campsite. Waves pounding the shoreline guaranteed our travel would be limited to walks around our island.

After emerging from our tent that morning, while I worked to lash down our flapping tarp, Cyndy cooked a batch of Red River cereal and served it with a layer of brown sugar on top. Soon after, the rain stopped but the wind went up a notch.


I wandered toward the island's interior looking for firewood as Cyndy pulled open the food pack and began to assemble the makings of a fruit cobbler. She selected dried

apples, cherries, apricots and golden raisins, placed them in a bowl and added water allowing the mixture to hydrate for twenty minutes. Then she shook in some brown sugar along with some of her cinnamon/sugar mixture. Setting that aside, she mixed water, Bisquick and few small pieces of butter to create a dough which became dumplings when added to the fruit mixture just after it had come to a boil. The pot was then covered and cooked for fourteen minutes. The resulting hot cobbler was an unforgettable savory treat.

In the afternoon, to escape the cold penetrating winds we hiked inland and sat reading in protected hollows beneath pine trees. With little else to occupy our minds, we began to think of food again. When Cyndy mused about baking pizza I immediately endorsed the idea.

Soon we were back under the tarp. Cyndy, using a commercially made roll mix, added yeast and made dough. Placing the mixture in a plastic bag, she had me stick it under my shirt up against my stomach where body heat would help the dough to rise. Looking a bit pregnant, I held the dough in place for about an hour until it swelled to double its original size and was ready to bake.

Baking used to be problematic for us. Aluminum cookware didn't yield the results we needed, and we didn't want to carry a heavy Dutch oven. About ten years ago, however, we discovered the Banks Fry-Bake pan, a lightweight pan that features a tight-fitting top which allows it to be placed in a fire or covered with coals for baking. The pan can also be washed with abrasives like sand or scrub pads as well as used with metal utensils without damaging its no-stick surface. Learn more at www.frybake.com.




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Our pizza dough was pressed into the greased Fry-Bake pan. Before the pan was set on the stove, Cyndy placed a metal disk on the burner and laid a half-dozen marble-sized stones on the disk. She placed the Fry-Bake pan on top of the stones. (By raising the pan above the burner and creating a layer of air and a second layer of metal between the pan and the burner, the heat was less intense allowing the dough to bake without scorching or burning.)

After baking the dough for about ten minutes, I removed the pan from the heat, popped off the lid and flipped the dough. Meanwhile Cyndy added water to a small container of tomato paste, dried tomatoes and spices to create a sauce. After spreading the mixture over the baked dough, grated cheeses were sprinkled on and pepperoni slices were added. I resealed the pan and put it back on the circle of stones on the stove top. Ten minutes later I uncovered a pizza that looked and tasted like the real thing.

On rainy, cold or blustery days when staying in camp seems more alluring than venturing out, invariably the food pack gets opened and Cyndy begins a baking project. Soon we are munching on hot bread, cinnamon rolls or, my

personal favorite, gingerbread covered with a lemon butter glaze.

For cooking gear we use pretty much what everyone takes into the back country. Our stove, a MSR Windpro, has worked well, but we have also successfully used the MSR Whisperlite and single burner white gas stoves. Being able to adjust the flame is a plus for cooking. In addition to common kitchen utensils like a spatula, ladle, wooden spoon and pots, Cyndy also takes a small grater and plastic cutting board. A pair of heavy work gloves is indispensable for lifting hot pots off the stove or moving items cooking in a campfire.

For baking projects in the campfire we use heavy duty aluminum foil. A filet of fish, small chunks of potato, carrot pieces, onion, lemon slices, and a few ounces of water all seasoned with salt and pepper then wrapped in a foil packet and stuffed in the coals of a campfire yield a tasty meal with no dishes to wash.

Over a quarter-century of backcountry cooking has made us aware that just because you are in the wilderness doesn't mean you have to put up with second rate culinary experiences. You and your appetite deserve better, and you can make it happen. □