

Chef in Your Backpack

**Gourmet Cooking in
the Great Outdoors**

Nicole Bassett



ARSENAL PULP PRESS
VANCOUVER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed their opinions, taste buds, love, and support to make this cookbook come to be. I want to thank:

Emily Kendy, Karen X Tulchinsky, Sachia Kron, Curt Bernardi, Cathleen and Jon Fulton, Brian Wawro, Lee Hoverd, Anthony Del Col, Greg LeClair, Caroline Birks, Ann McGowan, Sandy Walker, Claire Queree, Catherine Crucil, Rosalee Hiebert, Lisa Eng-Lodge, Judy Yeung, The McGowan family, and my family: Keith, Samara, Marley, Monty, Pashan, Agnes, Langie, Bill, and Pat.

I want to thank the people of Arsenal Pulp Press, especially Brian Lam and Blaine Kylo, for making this book happen.

INTRODUCTION

I got the idea for this book while on a weekend hiking trip with friends in Garibaldi Park in British Columbia. One morning they announced they were going to make pancakes for breakfast. This struck me as rather ambitious; I had always thought that camping food was special for all the wrong reasons—usually dry, not particularly appetizing but high in carbohydrates. But the pancakes they made were great, as good as if they were made at home. And then it occurred to me that there was no reason why camping food had to be bad food; that with a little know-how and creativity, you could eat well while enjoying the great outdoors.

I've always been an outdoors enthusiast. There was no way around it. I grew up on a farm outside Smithers, a small town in northern British Columbia. I spent my childhood surrounded by the beauty of nature, and my parents instilled in me a great love, respect, and appreciation for the environment. In high school, I joined an outdoor education class so that I could hang out with my friends. At the end of the year, we went on a six-day trip to the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island. During these six days spent being drenched by rain, I went from complete novice to complete wet noodle and vowed never to leave the comforts of home again. However, once we did go home, I could talk of nothing else but the adventures I had. I was hooked. As I got older, I got the bug to spend part of my vacation experiencing different natural surroundings. I've gone hiking and biking around Ireland, Scotland, and Australia, not to mention many great trips in Canada and the U.S. Backcountry skiing, hiking, canoeing, and climbing are such great ways to see the world.

When I was younger, and not the food snob I am today, my outdoor eating experiences left a lot to be desired: Mac and cheese, granola, peanut butter, dried food, and more dried food. Meals became a chore; they were so boring and no longer appetizing. But, I thought, was I overreacting—weren't camping meals supposed to be dull and uninspired? That's part of the camping experience, after all. But now, as every other aspect of camping gear has evolved, it is time for the food to evolve as well. And it can be done with little difficulty.

I've loved cooking ever since I was a kid; I often experimented with food ingredients, creating recipes on my own. After more than a few boring camping meals, and the pancake incident described earlier, I started putting together some of my favorite meals to take on camping trips. They were a huge success; at last, I began to look forward to meals after a long physical day. And boy, were my hiking friends were impressed. Yes, it can be finally said—camping food has changed, for the better!

When it came to compiling recipes for this book, the biggest challenge was coming up with dishes that could be easily made on one stove element, and usually in one pot, light enough to carry but still

comprise a full meal. The most important aspect is that the meals should be enjoyable. Hiking all day makes the act of eating all that much more important; the last thing you want after a hard day on the trail is a meal that doesn't taste very good. This means using the freshest ingredients possible, especially since you won't be eating right away (remembering, of course, the dangers of spoilage). This will make your mealtime experiences in the outdoors that much more pleasurable.

In writing this book I have kept in mind that hiking and camping trips can mean a hike, a day-long trek, or a weekend journey. (Again, if your trip is longer, keep in mind that spoilage can be an issue.) And nutrition also plays a role; it's important that the meals you make will provide the kind of fuel you will need while hiking up that mountain or through those trails. Ultimately, it's about good food that doesn't take long to make, is filling, and nutritional.

It was also important for me to keep the recipes as simple as possible and composed of relatively few ingredients that most people already keep on hand in their pantries. I also encourage you to experiment; if you don't like a certain ingredient, take it out (within reason!), or replace it with something you think might work better for you. But beware of replacing any ingredients in the recipes for baked goods; most of these ingredients are essential and the recipes won't work without them.

I believe that food feeds not only the body but the mind as well. The experience of being outdoors and witnessing nature in its absolute beauty feeds us too. The combination of being well-fed, in the company of family and friends, enjoying the sights and sounds of the wilderness, is something that I hold very dear. I hope that *Chef in Your Backpack* adds to your experiences in the great outdoors, and makes your trips more enjoyable and memorable.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In the Kitchen, At Camp

Most recipes are broken down into two parts:



In the Kitchen

In this section are instructions for recipes that are best done at home, before you leave for your trip. These include such activities as cleaning fruits and vegetables, chopping and measuring ingredients, and proper packing instructions. Use zip-lock plastic bags whenever possible; they will keep your food fresher and prevent spillage. Doing these preparations at home will make your meal-making on the trails that much easier.



At Camp

In this section are instructions for once you are in the great outdoors. Hopefully, because you've already done the preliminary work "in the kitchen," all that's left is the actual cooking.

While you can bring this book along with you on your trip, you could also use a felt pen and write down the directions on your plastic bags that contain your ingredients.

Gear

If you intend on hiking to your camping site (as opposed to, say, canoeing or driving), it's imperative that your bags be as light as possible. If you disagree, come with me and you can carry my bag, too.

Organizing your gear is very important.

Each recipe is designed with a basic cooking set in mind: one stove and two pots, each with a lid that can be used as a frying pan if so desired, and a clamp handle that allows you to pour liquids easily, which also fits inside the pots when stored. Of course, you can improvise with what you have, but just keep in mind the set I describe allows for minimal weight and fuss.

Also remember to bring dish rags, a scouring pad, and biodegradable soap for doing dishes. Place them in a plastic bag and store inside the pots.

While it would be great to bring along the kitchen stove, you can prepare these recipes with one burner. Most camping stoves only have one burner and are fueled by white gas. The smaller stove you bring, the lighter the load, but you may want to get a more powerful burning stove that will allow you to cook your meals faster. I highly recommend getting a stove equipped with a wind blocker, a piece of aluminum that wraps around the stove to block the wind and thus makes your stove more efficient.

For a lighter load or short trips, you could pare down your eating utensils to a spoon and a cup, depending on what recipes you plan to prepare. But if you have the space, you should take along a cup, bowl, plate, spoon, knife, and fork; it will make your eating that much easier and more enjoyable. You can also make great use of my Swiss Army knife, which is good for opening canned goods or slicing and cutting almost anything, including sticks for your marshmallow roasts!

You may wish to consider bringing extra utensils depending on what you've planned for your meal. For instance, a spatula is great if you are making pancakes or French toast.

(You could break off the spatula handle so you don't have to carry as much.) And while a Swiss Army knife is great for any occasion, a separate can opener is easiest for opening canned goods.

Packing

When packing your gear, remember to store the heaviest items at the bottom center of your backpack; this will help with your balance as you hike. Here's an exaggerated analogy: if you were to store pillows at the bottom of your pack and bricks at the top, and then bend over to tie your shoelaces with your backpack on, you'd fall forward (and probably get knocked on the back of the head with your gear, too).

At the same time, food is one of the heaviest items you will be carrying. If you are not carrying a separate food bag (see next page), you don't want to store your food at the bottom of your pack, where it is difficult to reach and might get squashed. Pack your food in the center of your bag, near or at the surface, where it is easily accessible; special snacks, treats, lunch and your water bottle should be packed where they are very accessible.

The Spice Rack

Having spices and condiments at your disposal can make the difference between an okay and a great meal. Empty film canisters are great for storing your spices and condiments; they are easy to transport, and keep your supplies dry. Make up your own spice rack of favorite ingredients and keep it in your food bag (see next page) so you will always have it near; remember to label the canisters so you'll know what they contain. Most of the recipes already include the spices you need (meaning you will have used them at home), so your "take along spice rack" can be very basic, consisting only of those spices and condiments you may want to enhance your meals.

Here are a few to consider including in your spice rack:

- Salt
- Sugar
- Dill
- Basil
- Cumin
- Pepper
- Garlic powder
- Oregano
- Curry powder

The Food Bag

The food bag is multi-purpose. It's where you should store all items necessary for preparing your meals on your trip: your pots and pans, utensils, dishes, spice rack, and the food itself. Keep these items separate from your other gear, so you will always know where to find your meal-making necessities.

The bag itself should be strong and water-proof (or be prepared to cover it with your pack cover when you are storing your food for the night). Once you have done your meal preparations "in the kitchen," go over the recipe ingredients again to ensure you don't forget anything. Try to split up the food with other members in your group whenever possible, because the load can get heavy pretty fast.

Once you are out in the wilderness, you will need to find a proper place to store your food bag to keep it safe from predators, who may be attracted to it by its smell. The easiest and yet at the same time the most difficult place to store your bag is in a tree. Find a sturdy tree that is away from your tent and cooking area. In addition to food, store any smelly products like toothpaste and deodorant in the bag as well. Then comes the hard part: tie a carabiner (an oblong metal ring with one spring-hinged side, available at outdoors shops) to a rope and swing it up around a branch. Don't worry if you don't make it the first time; it will probably take you a few tries before you get it. Once in place, clip the food bag on, then lift it up and tie it off.

Once you've prepared your food bag once with your basic necessities the first time, it will be easy the next time you take a trip because you already have the basics packed away.

Helpful Tips

- Don't throw away the plastic bags that you use to transport your food in. Rinse them out or just seal and bring them home with you to wash. It's environmentally responsible! (Whenever I refer to plastic bags throughout the book, I mean the resealable zip-lock ones, especially those designed for use in a freezer; they tend to be stronger and more useful for transporting food items.)
- In the recipes where water is required, first pour the water into the plastic bags in order to get any residual spices or oils that might be left behind. It will make your meal that much tastier!
- Some recipes call for canned goods. They will keep longer if you take the cans with you and don't open until you need them. But please clean them out and take them home to recycle!
- Write down the contents of plastic bags or the name of the recipe on the bags themselves. Use a magic marker or felt pen that won't rub out. Nothing's worse than not knowing what's in your bags!
- Thanks to developments in plastic technology, portable egg-carrying cases are available at outdoors stores or department stores. These allow you to bring fresh eggs with you on your trip (but be aware that eggs are considered a "high risk" food and that spoiled eggs are a prime candidate for salmonella poisoning). If you're hiking during summer or other times when the weather is projected to be hot, opt for alternative breakfast ideas.
- Use your camping cup as a measuring cup. Before you leave on your trip, measure a cup of water and place it into your camping cup to see how much it holds. You can then use your cup to measure out liquids on your various trips. Your cup is also useful when preparing rice for cooking. Use 2 cups of water for every 1 cup of rice.
- One big mistake I've made is bringing more food on my treks than I need, thinking that I will be hungrier than my stomach will allow. Before you leave on your trip, get to know yourself and your eating habits, which will allow you to estimate how much food you will need on your trip. If you still aren't sure, try bringing enough food for regular-sized meals and then light extras that you can have just in case you're still hungry, like cheese and crackers, trail mix,

muffins, or extra veggies and fruit. If you still end up with too much food, the best thing to do is to return home with it (don't dispose of it on the trails).

Animals

When I was traveling around Australia, where nine of the world's ten most poisonous snakes reside, backpackers often asked me how I could trek around Canadian backcountry "with all those bears." I had just finished thinking the same thing with the snakes and spiders and other creatures lurking around the land of Oz, but I laughed and replied that it is rare if you ever see a bear in the North American wild. In truth, however, they are out there, they are hungry more often than not, and if they smell your food they will want to eat it, without question. If you don't believe me, visit the campground in Banff, Alberta and take a look at the ravaged cooler the rangers have on display as a warning to tourists. Be careful! There are many important guidelines that one must follow when forging into the woods - remember, you are entering the animals' home turf, not vice versa, and learning to cohabitate is best for everyone (and everything) in the long run. Do your research before embarking on any journey, even day trips, as to what dangerous wildlife might be present, and what you should do in the event you encounter something. Think of it this way: would you tease a snake?

Setting Up the Cooking Area

The way you set up your camp is important. If you only keep one thing in mind, make sure that you cook away from your tent. A good distance is about 200 meters (about 650 feet) and down wind. It can be awkward having your cooking area so far away, but it's important to physically separate yourself from what may attract bears and other creatures. With this in mind, it's also vitally important to keep your cooking area clean. Pick up any food that maybe spilled because it only invites critters to come around.

Washing Up

There comes that time in the evening when you're sitting back, your meal sitting nicely in your belly while you watch the stars shoot across the sky, or flames flicker up from the fire pit, and you realize it's your turn to do the dishes. What's the best way? Well, if your meal was so good that everyone licked their plates clean, you're in the clear. If not, store any leftovers in a sealable container, otherwise add it into your garbage that you will take out of the woods with you.

You can use biodegradable soap but remember to keep the soap (or the food, for that matter) away from water sources - streams, rivers, lakes. Fill a pot with water and wash the dishes in the pot. Once you are finished, dig a hole away from your camp and any water source and dump out the dish water.

Use a dish rag to dry the dishes.

If you don't have any sponges or scouring pads, use your natural surroundings to aid in dish washing. Sand and snow are excellent for cleaning dishes. When washing, remember to keep a fair distance away from your campsite because the food residue will attract animals.

Store your dishes with your food gear, and not with your camping equipment. Even though the dishes are clean, they still carry an odor that could attract unwanted wildlife. If you want to be extra careful with regard to keeping bears away, don't even bring the clothes you wore while cooking into your tent.

With these tips and suggestions in mind, you should now be ready to embark on your hiking and camping trips confident in the knowledge that it will be a great dining experience. Bon appetit!

Breakfast



I consider breakfast the most important meal of the day, especially when camping, as it is the meal that will set the tone of your entire day. I know it can be difficult to eat substantially in the morning, but your body needs fuel to keep warm and give you enough energy to get you through your busy day (or at least until lunchtime!).

Hot Chocolate from Scratch

- ½ cup cocoa powder**
- ¼ cup dry milk powder**
- ⅓ cup sugar**
- Mini-marshallows (optional)**
- 4 cups water**



In the Kitchen

In a plastic bag or container, combine all the ingredients, including the marshmallows if desired.



At Camp

Boil the water. Add a couple of tablespoons of the dry mixture and stir well.

Makes 4 servings.



For an extra kick, a splash of Kalua or Irish Cream in your hot chocolate does nicely after a long day of hiking (just remember, “everything in moderation” if you want to be able to hike the next day). You can bring a small - or large - amount in a small plastic water bottle or a bladder.

Breakfast Couscous

1 cup instant couscous

2 tbsp brown sugar

1 tsp cinnamon

pinch ground ginger

½ tsp nutmeg

½ cup fresh berries (e.g., raspberries, blueberries, blackberries or a mixture)

2 cups water



In the Kitchen

In a bowl, combine the couscous, sugar, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and dried berries (if not using fresh; see note below). Place mixture in a resealable plastic bag. Fresh berries should be stored separately.



At Camp

Boil 2 cups of water. Once boiled, add in couscous mixture, cover and let stand for 5 minutes or until all the water has been absorbed, then add fresh berries if using.

Makes 2 servings.



Dried fruit can be used in place of fresh; try raisins, dried cranberries, apples, bananas, or apricots.



Pancakes

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup powdered egg
2 tbsp dry buttermilk powder
2 tsp sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water
2 tsp butter or oil



In the Kitchen

In a bowl, combine all the dry ingredients and store in a plastic bag or container.



At Camp

In a pot, pour in dry mixture and add water. Mix well. In a frying pan or on the lid of your pot, melt butter or oil, then add a scoop of pancake batter and spread out evenly. After edges are cooked, flip pancake until golden.

Makes 2 servings.



Here are some variations on the tried and true pancake:

Cinnamon: Add one teaspoon of cinnamon per cup of dry mix.

Fruit: Add a handful of berries or fruit slices to your wet mix (blueberries work best, but try raspberries, strawberries, bananas)

Chocolate chips: Add two tablespoons to the dry mix

But I need my syrup ...

Use your handy film canisters to carry syrup; place them in zip-lock plastic bags for extra protection. You could also buy small travel containers at the drugstore that one might use for shampoo but are perfectly usable for syrup.

Eggs

I used to think that eggs are the worst possible food to bring hiking because of their fragile nature. But it's possible to enjoy eggs in the great outdoors with a little care and know-how.

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