

# A Guide to Cooking on that First Campout

## By Doug Fisher

Welcome to Boy Scouts. And you're rarin' to go camping and light some fires and do some cooking.

Well, let's stop a second and think about things.

Yep, there's nothing better than a good Dutch-oven cooked beef stew or upside-down cake made over an open fire. The smell of bacon and eggs in the morning in the woods can't be beat.

But we're not going to start that way. We want to start you thinking of light, quick ways of doing things. This is to prepare you for backpacking, where every extra ounce counts. Bacon and eggs requires cold to keep them – that means bulky coolers and ice – and you don't want to be hauling that or a Dutch oven around on your back.

Instead, we're going to start with an old saying in cooking ... and on the trail:

**You can always add more, but once it's in, it's hard to take out.**

Once that weight's in your backpack, it's tough to take out if that's the food you've planned on. Once you've built a roaring fire, it's hard to turn the heat down, though it may scorch your food. And if you first learn to haul everything in the back of a truck, it'll be harder for you later to think about how not to haul all that for backpacking.

What's suggested on the following pages is a menu for the first time out. It tries to take things you can find in the grocery and look at them in a new way. In fact, every time you shopping with your parents, take a look around at what is available dried, concentrated or in small cans (especially those with self-opening lids). You'd be surprised what kind of ideas you can come up with.

We also look for things that we can open on the trail without a can opener. Yes, we may have one, but if it breaks, we'd still like to eat. In some cases, this may mean repackaging things from cans to plastic airtight jars. Don't use glass and don't use Rubbermaid or similar containers unless they have a screw top or an extremely tight seal. Put a piece of plastic wrap over the top before you screw on the lid to ensure a good seal and then put it in a plastic bag so that if it leaks, it doesn't get all over your clothes. The large jars that spices come in are often perfect. (The tightness of the seal is important for several reasons: prevent leakage, prevent spoilage – air oxidizes many things in food – and BEARS. Bears have a real keen sense of smell. A little whiff and they'll be at your food, which is why we use bear bags at night hoisted into trees on the trail.)

And we're trying to keep the cost and time down. Sure, we could buy some of those prepackaged noodle dinners – but they're expensive and don't feed many people from one pouch. And we could go buy specialty backpacking dinners, but they're expensive. So let's see what we can put together on our own. You'll have more fun experimenting anyhow (and you probably want to try those experiments at home first!).

What you'll notice about a lot of things below is that we are using a lot of carbohydrates for energy on the trail, but we're also still trying to keep some balanced nutrition with fruits and vegetables and some dairy. We don't go heavy on the meats or dairy – what we want is the flavor to make the food appetizing without all the complications that come with such things. In short, we're selling the sizzle, not the steak. We'll have the steak when we get back.

A final note on buying food. Don't overbuy. Be brutally realistic in what you need for nutrition. You don't want to overfeed on the trail because it's hard to walk much if you've overeaten.

Also, remember this second rule: **Buy two where one will do.**

Sounds cockeyed, doesn't it? Haven't your parents always told you not to waste things, not to buy two where one would do?

Well, what we're talking about here is not quantity so much as breaking down our load and, heaven forbid if we got in trouble out there, being able to stretch our provisions. Once you open a can or jar of something, you often have to use all of it. So better to open a small one and, if needed, then a second (remember the first rule: You can always add more ... ?) No, we won't get the cheap quantity discount of buying it in a larger can or jar, but I'd rather be able to stretch five days of food to 10 than have five days' worth I have to use in six or seven at the most before it goes bad.

Finally, a word about Fire. Aside from all the safety stuff that you'll learn, let's concentrate on cooking over a fire – or more correctly coals. We're not talking charcoal here, though if you use that, this pretty much takes care of itself. But if you have a wood fire, remember that cooking on an open flame is a sure way to burn things (including yourself) and create a black mess no one wants to eat (and, though I know you won't believe this, coals are hotter than flame and water boils faster on them). It's important you let the fire burn down and then shovel the coals into two or three smaller pits to cook. That way you can keep creating coals in the open area and moving them into your cooking area. I usually create a two- or three-“burner” stove, shaped sort of like a dog paw. The big part of the paw is for my fire. I create two or three pits about 4 to 6 inches deep and 6 to 8 inches around (surrounded by rocks on which to put my pots, with one side open to my main fire). As I get coals in the main area (even when I'm using charcoal), I push them into the pits. That also concentrates the heat. Remember, in the open, unless you are using propane or a trail-gas stove, the only way to regulate the heat is to take things on an off of it, so you want things to cook a little more slowly so you have time to do that. This also means, however, that you have to think ahead and leave time for that fire to burn down (in other words, if you want to be eating at 7 a.m., someone needs to be up and building that fire at 5 or 5:30 a.m.; if you want to eat at 5 p.m. whoever is in charge of the fire is going to have to give up some playtime at 3 or 3:30 so all of you can eat.)

And remember, before cooking, wipe the outside of the pots you will use with soap (preferably liquid dish soap. Any soot will rise right off. Without that – well, let's just say I hope you like scrubbing.

And always remember to have a large pot of water on one of those “burners.” You can dip some out for cooking as you go along, but more important, you need it for cleanup. You can't wait for water to get hot after you eat or you'll need a chisel to get the food off your plates.

### **Suggested Friday night meal: Troop 15 surprise**

One pot meal. Easy, quick to make and easy cleanup. Cooking time about 20 minutes over hot coals.

You need:

- \_ One package of Ramen noodles for every two boys (plus one extra) (get shrimp or oriental or chicken flavor. Not beef, it's too strong).
- \_ One can of chicken or tuna or a can of vienna sausage for every 3-4 boys.
- \_ One small can of vegetables for every 3-4 boys. (or you can use a dry vegetable soup mix, but make sure it does not have beans that take a long time to cook. Knorr has some soups that fit the bill.)
- \_ About a quarter cup powdered milk and a quarter cup grated parmesan cheese (get the kind that is not refrigerated). Add some oregano to this mixture, too, whatever you think your taste may like. The quarter-quarter mixture fills up about one large plastic spice jar (the ones about 6 inches tall by about 2 inches wide). A jar that size will season enough for six to eight boys. You can cut back for fewer.

Boil water in a saucepan large enough to accommodate all your noodles (but don't put those noodles in yet). You want to use just enough water to make them soft but not soup. For four packages of noodles (six boys' worth) an inch and a half to two inches on the bottom should do. You always can add more (and you will have more from the chicken and vegetables). When the water is boiling, or at least very hot, put the noodles in. Be careful – most noodles come with a seasoning packet. We don't want that in the water just yet.

Stir the noodles til soft. Add just one or two of the seasoning packets (we don't want a lot of salt), but this does add some taste. Add your vegetables, water and all. Stir a couple times. Add your meat, Stir again to get it warm. Take the pot off the heat and slowly add your seasoning mix while stirring. If it is steaming hot, it should start to thicken fairly quickly. Add enough to make it somewhat gooey, then call chow and dish it out.

As a variation, you can add some dried fruit to this recipe as well when you add the vegetables. Some folks like that little sweetness. Or you can eat it for dessert.

For a stronger meat taste, beef jerky or beef sticks can be used, but be prepared to chew.

## **Saturday Breakfast: Spamcakes**

Takes a fry pan (or inverted Dutch oven lid) and a pot to mix batter (unless you want to mix it in a heavy plastic bag), and a pot to make the sauce

You need:

- \_ A box of Bisquick, Krusteze or similar (that does not require eggs) to make pancake batter (for six-eight boys)
- \_ A can of Spam or similar meat (for six-eight boys)
- \_ A small can of Mandarin oranges (or, if you don't want to mess with a can opener, a couple of those little lunch-pack fruit cans)
- \_ 3-4 tablespoons of brown sugar.
- \_ Butter-flavored oil (popping oil for corn works – stay away from the ones that have to be refrigerated. Spray oil also works, but it can take a lot of it.)
- \_ A couple tablespoons of corn starch or arrowroot (arrowroot should be in every trail cook's bag of tricks. It cooks up quicker and clearer than corn starch, you can use less of it and it's the secret to many Oriental sauces.

Cook your Spam until it is warm, then drain it on a paper towel, then slice it into thin strips. Get most of that meat fat out of the pan (it has a lower burning temperature than other oils). Mix up your pancake batter and add to it a tablespoon or two of brown sugar. The slight sweetbread taste seems to go well with Spam. Make the batter a little thick so it will rise somewhat.

Start making your sauce by putting about a tablespoon of oil in the bottom of a small pot or saucepan. Add the rest of the brown sugar (you need some for the step below) and stir it in. You must do this over low heat so the sugar does not scorch and caramelize (don't use white sugar. It will tend to burn.). Add the fruit and mash it up into the sugar/oil mixture. Add about a half-cup of water (a little more if needed). Let the mixture come to a boil, or close to it, while stirring occasionally.

Put in a small amount of oil in the fry pan on a LOW fire or coals. Put half the Spam strips back in so they go from the center of the pan to the outside, like a sunburst. Pour your batter over it and cook one big pan-sized cake. Take it off the fire and cut it into cake-like wedges. Finish your sauce by adding about a tablespoon of arrowroot (or corn starch). It should start thickening in a minute or so. If not, add a little more. Once you get thickening, take it immediately off the heat. Sauces thicken further as they cool and if you put too much starch in it, you'll have glue.

Let each person take a wedge and some sauce.

Make another Spamcake with the rest of your batter and meat and use the rest of the sauce on it.

### **Saturday lunch: Pizza Rollups**

Takes aluminum foil and a fire burned down to coals. Some fire-resistant gloves also help. Very quick.

- You need:
- \_ Enough small flour tortilla shells to have at least two for each boy. (Must be soft flour shells, not corn)
  - \_ Couple small cans pizza sauce
  - \_ Grated parmesan cheese (small can for six boys)
  - \_ “String” or “farmer’s” cheese (two per boy). Though this is refrigerated, the little “logs” come vacuum packed, which means they can last for some time without cold.
  - \_ Enough pepperoni (non-refrigerated) to provide about 10 slices a boy.
  - \_ Oregano (optional).
  - \_ Aluminum foil.

Lay out a sheet of aluminum foil with the dull side out (in other words, you’re going to be making the food on the shiny side. Lightly spread or spray oil on one side of the tortilla shell and then put that side on the foil. Take pizza sauce and spread it around the other side – you just need a thin layer, not dripping. Put in 5 pieces of pepperoni, sprinkle some parmesan cheese, then roll the tortilla up around a piece of string cheese. Roll the foil around it, being careful to seal the ends. Put it on the coals. Turn a couple of times. Remove after 3 to 5 minutes and it’s ready to eat.

### **Saturday Dinner: Ham stew**

One pot. Medium cooking time.

- You need:
- \_ Some strong-flavored meat that is preserved and does not need refrigeration. I like a good slice of country ham, diced up. Beef jerky will work, too.
  - \_ A yellow or green apple, not too tart.
  - \_ A half-pound of dried apricots or pineapple, or a mixture.
  - \_ Instant rice (one box per three to four boys – check the package for servings and adjust accordingly)
  - \_ Onion soup mix

Use enough water as the rice directions call for, but don’t add the rice just yet. Add the meat and let it simmer to get it flavorful (make sure you cut the meat up into bite-size pieces). Add the fruit and soup and let it simmer for 5 minutes until the fruit gets tender. Add the rice and cook it per the instructions. Serve.

Dessert: Baked apples. One green or yellow apple per boy.  
A mixture of half cinnamon and half cocoa.  
Teaspoon of brown sugar per apple.  
Some of that buttery-flavored oil  
Aluminum foil

Core the apple, but don’t go all the way through. Coat it lightly with oil and put brown sugar and oil in center, then dust with cinnamon/cocoa mixture. Double-wrap in foil to keep steam in and bake on coals 10-15 minutes, turning to prevent burn. Open and eat.

### **Sunday breakfast: Instant Oatmeal.**