

Food Thoughts

General

I currently plan on between 1.3 and 1.6 lbs. of food per day. Breakfast and dinner tend to be heavy, so I adjust the total day count accordingly. Ironically, I find for more relaxed, easier trips, I eat more than on more strenuous trips. I pay strict attention to the weight, because, well, what else is there but weight... but I know that if I pack more than about 1.4 lbs. per day, I will bring food back. My ideal food packing is to come off the trail hungry.

I prefer to eat a vegan (no animal products) diet, so this affects my food choices in town, and also in the backcountry. I do make some exceptions for backpacking, mostly by taking some string cheese for lunch, because I like the taste and they keep well in the heat. In many cases, my food choices are integrated into choices on clothing, shelter, and hiking style. So it may not make sense to implement just a recipe without at least understanding the integration. Generally, variety is key for me to avoid boredom. Food choices are by nature, a matter of personal taste. I'm always watching what others are eating, for new ideas (as long as it doesn't weigh more).

I like to package things so snacks are easy to drop into my pocket, but I don't make complete packages per day. I prefer to make selections as I go, so I'm always eating what I feel most like at that time. I do like to use the thin plastic produce bags from the grocery store to 'group' like items, so all the breakfasts end up together, all the dinners, snacks and lunches, etc. It just makes it easier to find stuff than if it's all floating around in my food bag. Typically in the morning before setting out, I'll pull out a breakfast for the day, maybe a bar, any small energy gel bits, a small snack Ziploc, and put them in the outside pocket of the pack, with the snack bag in my pants pocket for easy access. I figure on getting into my food bag at lunch and dinner, but not other than that. My hiking style favors movement over sitting, so I'm geared to snacking without having to stop.

Breakfast

For breakfast, I have a bag with 3/4 cup or so of granola cereal, 1/4 cup of some dried fruit bits (different ones in different bags for variety, some favorites are blueberries, pomegranate seeds, cherries), 3 tbsp of powdered coconut milk for calories, 2 tbsp of brewers yeast, and 2 tbsp of powdered soy milk (or if I can't find it, powdered whole milk or goats milk). Sometimes I have half a Probar to start, because since I'm carrying minimal insulation, I like to get up and get moving in the morning, then stop after a couple of hours of hiking, in a nice sunny spot, for a leisurely breakfast. But I can usually go for an hour or so with nothing. I pour some water into the Ziploc bag, fold down the top for easy access, and happily spoon out my breakfast.

If people are stopping and cooking, I may make some hot coffee. I usually keep it simple using the Starbucks Via packets. Actually, I often take some cold water in my Smart Water bottle, add a Via packet, shake it, and enjoy some cold coffee in the morning.

Lunch

For lunch, I like a stick of string cheese, maybe a vegan jerky strip (Primal Strip) or a squeeze package of Justin's almond or peanut butter, and some flavored Triscuit crackers or other hardtack kind of bread. I'm still experimenting, but about 3 oz. of crackers per day seems about right. I've also done tortillas, and Dr. Krackers are awesome. The Triscuits are easy to find, they travel well with minimal breakage, and they come in different flavors to keep it exciting.

Snacks

Variety is a great thing, but I never get tired of a small snack Ziploc of either Chex Party Mix or Cheezit Snack Mix. Something about the different textures, the spices... I eat a small bag of this as snacks every day I'm on the trail, and have for years. I sometimes take some Clif shot blocks, or similar products, to have one or two a day as a little boost/treat. But sometimes I go without.

The one thing I NEVER go without is Emergen-C powdered drink mix – the Joint Health version. Buy it at Trader Joes, they have the best price. This has a gram of vitamin C, plus glucosamine and chondroitin. I mix it weak, and will down generally 3 – 4 packets a day, in a liter of water each. I use a one-liter Smart Water bottle for this purpose, so it doesn't gunk up the tube on my hydration bladder. I often hike in heat, and often go from sea level, where I live, to high altitude. As long as I stick to my Emergen-C regimen, I NEVER get cramps or stiffness, in spite of long days with high mileage on an aging body that generally doesn't get much exercise between trips. Ron Moak is a convert, he says this tip changed his life.

Other potential snacks are nuts, flavored almonds or peanuts are nice, although I haven't taken them in awhile. Dark chocolate covered espresso beans are a nice morning snack, so you don't have to stop and make coffee. I love having a Probar or two during the day when I can fit them into the weight limit. The taste and food value is awesome (and they are vegan), and they have a lot of flavors that I never get tired of. When I hike with Henry Shires his huge bag of flavored sesame snacks always looks good, but I forget before the next trip.

Dinner

Helping Andrew Skurka lead a Wilderness Trekking School trip changed my life. Of course, hiking with Skurka is like drinking from a fire hose, but the thing that had maybe the most impact was being introduced to Mike Clelland's dinner plans. There's an article on BackpackingLight called Groovy-Biotic Cooking, and Mike goes into detail (about dinners plus anything else ultralight you need to know) in his excellent book [Ultralight Backpackin' Tips](#). Anyone who doesn't have this book should order it right now, before reading further. Anyway, the general gist of the plan is 3 – 4 oz. of dry food, like instant potatoes, couscous, dried black bean flakes/instant rice, freeze-dried lentils, dehydrated sweet potatoes or polenta. To that you add 1.5 to 2 oz. of sauce, based on olive oil with a variety of spices. Mike has a variety of recipes in his book, and in the BPL article. I never

really looked forward to dinner before this, and now dinner is a high point every day. The flavors are awesome, especially with some experimentation on the sauces. The olive oil and salt base keeps very well in heat, I've never had an issue.

I make up sauce batches in the beginning of the season, and store them in small plastic water bottles in the back of the refrigerator where my wife doesn't look. At the same time, I'll measure out some dry ingredients into Ziploc bags and store them in a cool dry place (my closet in this case). That way, to prepare for a trip, it's a simple matter of decanting the appropriate amount of the sauce into a small water bottle and grabbing a couple of 'dry' bags. I always pack the sauce bottle inside a pint freezer Ziploc bag to avoid spills.

Mike advocates cozy cooking, I have a slight variant. I cook in a Heineken can, supported by a Trail Designs Caldera, using esbit tabs. For the some dry items like instant potatoes and couscous, I just pour the hot water into the freezer Ziploc, stir it up, and eat, there's no need to wait. I'll typically drop the bag into my possumdown hat to use as a cozy, just to keep it warm, and make it easier to hold. Personally, I find for the rice/beans, polenta, lentils, and sweet potatoes, while I can make them just by letting them sit in the cozy, they are MUCH enhanced by some time simmering in the pot. So, for those, I pour the dry ingredients into the water and bring to a boil. Then I cover the esbit to let the pot simmer. The trick is to make it a little runny, actually pretty soupy, to avoid a nasty cleanup. Then when done simmering, I remove it from the heat, take my small bag of instant potatoes (plain, or just roasted garlic, to avoid to flavor conflicts), and stir in an ounce or so to thicken it up. That way you get the satisfying thickness, without the burnt food on the bottom of the pot. Then of course, I have to wash the pot, but that's a matter of dropping some water in, doing a scrap with the spoon, drinking the swill, and repeating once or twice. In my experience, it's well worth the extra trouble.

One of the richest meals I ever had was dehydrated sweet potatoes. I didn't follow Mike's instructions somehow, I cooked them and dried them (for days), then took those hard shreds and ground them in a Vitamix blender. It made so much noise the dog ran for the door, and I had to wear ear protection. I ended up with a fine orange dust. But when I added hot water to that dust, oh *my* was that delicious with sauce.

It's nice to add some enhancements to the dry ingredients. Depending on the meal, pines nuts, dried mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes, even freeze-dried tofu (or for an omnivore, some meat) can all add flavor and/or protein. A favorite, which I picked up from Brian Frankle, is Frito bits. Buy a small bag, stick a pin in it to let the air out, crush into bits for easier packing, then put a piece of tape over the pinhole to preserve freshness. I like to stir in the Frito bits at the end for a crunchy treat that adds calories. It's good with potatoes, rice/beans, and sweet potatoes, from personal experience. Brian also uses Funions in a similar manner.

My dinners are weighted with fat calories, which helps keep me warm at night with minimal clothing, sleeping bag and pad. Recently, to provide my muscles some extra protein at night for recovery, I've been adding a protein bar as dessert. There are a lot of bad tasting ones out there. So far I like the Stinger or Raw Revolution ones best, they really taste like dessert.

Routine

I already discussed under Breakfast how I get up in the morning and start hiking, then stop later for breakfast. This minimizes the amount of clothing I have to carry, since I don't need the added insulation for sitting around in camp in the cold morning air. Likewise, I prefer not to eat dinner at my campsite. It is much superior to make dinner in the late afternoon/early evening, then hike on for awhile before setting up camp. This allows you pick a dinner spot for it's beauty and water, and it doesn't need to be a good camping spot, in fact can be a spot that you're not allowed to camp. You don't need a lot of extra insulation because the chill of the day hasn't set in. As you continue, your work to set up camp is reduced, because you no longer need to cook dinner. You don't have the cooking smells in camp to attract attention of bears or other varmints. Those last miles of the day are usually easy, because you're charged up from a good dinner, and the day has cooled off. You often get to enjoy the wildlife starting to become active. That's really what it's all about, enjoying the backcountry.