

OUTDOORS

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Cooking over the fire

There are a few ways to get the perfect meal



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

One of the outdoor skills I never really mastered is the art of cooking over a campfire. The main reason I never mastered it is that I lack patience. To be a great camp chef takes much planning, skill and patience. I lack all three, especially patience.

I have a buddy in Florida who owns one of those Monaco motor homes, complete with a gourmet kitchen, to include granite countertops, two microwaves, and even a pastry oven. When we camp



Steaks like these are perfect for a campfire but be sure to build a proper fire and take your time. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

fire. Somehow, the food always tastes better in the woods after a full day of hunting, fishing, hiking or what have you.

The obvious rules of fire

rather than hoping to find it. Green and unseasoned wood burns poorly and creates too much smoke for a proper cooking fire. I have even brought a couple

right utensils for the job. Don't bring along anything with plastic handles. Stick with basic cast iron or aluminum pot lifter. Most importantly, wear a set of


sorting it out at camp is a big mistake. Think about each dinner separately, and pack for that meal. Be sure to bring extras because all the fresh air and outdoor

flames of a campfire usually means more heat for longer periods of time. The excess cooking temperatures will cause the food to continue cooking after you remove it from the fire.

This is especially true in foods that are fire-roasted, such as corn or potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil. Remove the foods sooner than you think they are done and they will probably be "just right."

I used to think outdoor cooking was just punching a stick into a hot dog, holding it over the flame, and when sufficiently charred, sticking it on a slice of bread. Three or four of them, followed by half a bag of chocolate chip cookies, and I was good to go.

My wife does not let me eat that way anymore, insisting that we must eat healthy, even when in the great outdoors. I have argued that calories don't count when you are fishing, hunting, or camping, but the argument falls on deaf ears. In the interest of marital bliss, I quietly eat



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I have a buddy in Florida who owns one of those Monaco motor homes, complete with a gourmet kitchen, to include granite countertops, two microwaves, and even a pastry oven. When we camp together in that rig, we starve to death because he does not know how to use any of the equipment in the kitchen.

Modern day camping allows us the luxury of propane or white gas stoves. Some folks lug along a generator so that just about any kitchen appliance can be used that runs on electricity. Usually, I have neither the ability, nor the desire, to lug along all that equipment. Simpler is better, and much easier on the back to lug around.

I admit that some of my best outdoor memories are involved with an evening meal being prepared over the coals of an open camp-



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fire. Somehow, the food always tastes better in the woods after a full day of hunting, fishing, hiking or what have you.

The obvious rules of fire safety apply here, like pay attention to fire bans and any other restrictions. Be sure to have a deep and well built up fire ring, completely clear of overhead obstructions that could be ignited by sparks.

To start out with, use the right firewood for fuel. You can spot the rookie from a mile away by the smoke pouring out of his campfire. Everyone around is hacking up a lung as the rookie tries to prepare dinner in the smoke infested campfire.

To get it right, use only very dry and seasoned wood. Sometimes it means you have to bring the wood with you to the campsite,

rather than hoping to find it. Green and unseasoned wood burns poorly and creates too much smoke for a proper cooking fire. I have even brought a couple bags of charcoal briquettes along, just for the evening cook fire.

Never be in a hurry. Start that fire at least an hour before you want to start cooking. What you are looking for is a bed of glowing coals, not a pile of burning logs. Keep the coals in the center for the cooking, and a few logs burning along the edges, as these are future coals.

Don't start out with too much fire. A towering inferno burns down too quickly, never producing the large bed of coals you are seeking. Take your time, remember, patience is the key.

You have to bring the

right utensils for the job. Don't bring along anything with plastic handles. Stick with basic cast iron or aluminum pot lifter. Most importantly, wear a set of heavy-duty gloves for moving around those pots and pans, lest you learn about blisters and burns the hard way.

Try and cook on the sides of the campfire, avoiding the open flames. Hot coals can be used to cook foil packets of vegetables, potatoes or biscuits in a Dutch oven. A grill over the center of the coals is where you cook your meats and grilled vegetables. Placement is everything to prevent a burnt meal.

Plan ahead for the meals you will make on the trip. My method of running through the store, loading the cart with everything that looks good, and

sorting it out at camp is a big mistake. Think about each dinner separately, and pack for that meal. Be sure to bring extras because all the fresh air and outdoor activity really builds up an appetite.

We do a lot of grilling at home, and I have learned to stay away from foods that create hot and drippy fat as they cook. With the flare-ups these foods, like steaks, pork chops and bacon create, the flames will make your meal a chunk of coal in no time.

Using an aluminum foil boat, preventing the dripping grease from reaching the fire, really helps prevent the flare-ups. I usually bring along a few of the foil pans, specifically designed for grilling, along for cooking the fatty foods in.

Pay special attention to your cooking times. Open

such as corn or potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil. Remove the foods sooner than you think they are done and they will probably be "just right."

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My wife does not let me eat that way anymore, insisting that we must eat healthy, even when in the great outdoors. I have argued that calories don't count when you are fishing, hunting, or camping, but the argument falls on deaf ears. In the interest of marital bliss, I quietly eat my roasted vegetables; and sneak the cookies later.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and the Delta County Independent, an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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