

The Backcountry Cupboard

Stock these 25 essentials for grab-it-and-go meals.

By [Dorcas Miller](#), May 1998

Want to join us for a trip to the mountains? We're leaving tomorrow after work," the voice at the other end of the phone says. No doubt they want me along for my sterling company. I look at the clock-7 p.m., just enough time to organize my gear before hitting the hay. "Oh, one other thing. Sally can't go, and she'd volunteered to bring the food. Can you handle it?"

I swallow hard. The truth is they only want me for my grub. "Sure," I answer with confidence. "No problem." And it's not, because my cupboard is stocked with the 25 backcountry essentials. At a moment's notice I can scramble together meals for a weekend on the trail, all lightweight, good-tasting, and anything but monotonous. No need to hurriedly inventory what's on hand, frantically dash to the supermarket to fill in the holes, then stay up into the wee hours measuring and bagging ingredients.

Why just 25 ingredients, especially when there's a universe full of foods suitable for backpacking? Because through years of practice, I've noticed that many of the same ingredients keep showing up in most of my backcountry creations. By narrowing the list and designing recipes around these 25 ingredients, I've simplified my life without sacrificing taste or variety.

You'll find most of these backcountry essentials at your favorite supermarket and local health food store, although some specialty items can be hard to track down. I've offered suggestions on where you can get these through mail-order.

If you're the overly fastidious sort, you might consider keeping an inventory list that shows when you're running low on any one item. When you're scraping the bottom of the barrel, you add the items to your household shopping list and scratch them off as you make your usual rounds. Or you place an order with a specialty food company through the mail. Last-minute shopping becomes a thing of the past.

A note about storage. I keep backcountry-only ingredients in a large pretzel tin and stow it in a cool, dry area. If you have shelf space to spare, then reserve room for your camping food supplies. I also store powdered eggs, powdered dairy products, dried or freeze-dried meats or seafood, and anything with a high fat content in a bag in the refrigerator or freezer.

1. Quick oats. Make your own no-cook oatmeal by running 1-minute (a.k.a. "quick") oats briefly through a food processor. You want them to be the consistency of the instant oats you find in store-bought packets of instant oatmeal. Team them up with powdered milk, fruit, and brown sugar or other sweetener. On the trail, pour the oatmeal mix (3/4 cup feeds one hungry hiker) into a mug, add boiling water, stir, and let stand.

2. Powdered milk. No breakfast cereal is complete without it. Powdered milk supplies calcium, protein, and flavor. The instant, nonfat variety is easy to use, it doesn't lump, and it stores for a long time.

3. Coffee, tea, And hot choco-late. Would you be able to start or finish the day without them?

4. Quick-cooking hash browns. At the grocery store, look for hash browns that rehydrate with boiling water. If the store doesn't stock them, you might buy a package of instant latkes and use the dried potatoes. Hash browns are the foundation of a sticks-to-your ribs breakfast.

5. Dried fruit. Branch out from plain old raisins and prunes to exotic mango, papaya, pineapple, cranberries, and other dried fruit. They taste great in cereals, curries, and desserts. Dried cherries with chocolate pudding is a favorite of mine.

6. Powdered eggs. For breakfast on the first day, go ahead and use EggBeaters or a similar egg white product. After that you'll want powdered eggs, which can be doctored quite nicely. Some outdoors stores stock powdered eggs, as do mail order companies AlpineAire and The Baker's Catalogue.

7. Bagels and tortillas. Keep a supply of these ready to go in the freezer, or pick up fresh ones on the way out of town. Bagels and tortillas are the backbone of any trail lunch and a good source of complex carbohydrates, which replenish your store of glycogen.

8. Quick-cooking grains. For fast dinners you'll want a supply of instant rice, couscous, and small-grained bulgur to choose from. Freeze-dried wild rice is available through AlpineAire.

9. Chinese or instant Ramen noodles. These are precooked and dried, so they're ready in a flash, which saves stove fuel. They are good with vegetables and soup mixes. Many supermarkets stock these in the international foods aisle.

10. Pasta. Small shells and elbows are easier to drain and eat than are long strands of spaghetti. No-cook pasta is available through AlpineAire.

11. Instant mashed potatoes. Allows you to make shepherd's pie, potato pancakes, and a quick, hot lunch on soggy, cold days.

12. No-cook refried beans. A real boon for Mexican meals. Just add boiling water and Presto!-you have seasoned refries for burritos. Look in the international foods or instant soup section of your supermarket. Black bean powder can be substituted if they're not available.

13. Lentils. Place in a screw-top bottle with water at the start of the day, and come dinner time the lentils will cook up in about 5 minutes (1/2 cup dried lentils + 1 cup water = 1 cup of ready-to-eat lentils). Use in stews, burritos, curries, and other dishes.

14. Dried vegetables. Carrots, cabbage, bell peppers, mushrooms, onions, and tomatoes enhance dinners and create the impression you're eating "real food" rather than trail food. Beware of veggie mixes that contain dehydrated peas, corn, chunks of carrots, and squares of potatoes, all of which may take more than 30 minutes to rehydrate. Health food stores and supermarkets have some dried veggies. Order carrots, cabbage, bell peppers, mushrooms, onions, and tomatoes through AlpineAire. For tomato flakes and dried tomatoes, check out The Baker's Catalogue. Just Tomatoes, Etc. and Backpacker's Pantry sell several mixtures of freeze-dried and dehydrated vegetables.

15. Freeze-dried corn and peas. So good-tasting, these gems are worth making the effort to order through the mail (AlpineAire).

16. Canned turkey, chicken, shrimp, and tuna. Because of their weight, these meats should be used sparingly, but a little goes a long way toward adding heft and flavor to dinners. Freeze-dried meat and seafood is much lighter than canned, and makes a viable alternative on extended trips, but high cost can be a deterrent. Shop for freeze-dried meat and seafood at your local outdoor store or through AlpineAire or Backpacker's Pantry.

17. Dried ground beef. The only way to stock up on this light, extremely versatile ingredient is to make it yourself. Buy extra-lean ground beef, and crumble into very small pieces as you cook it, being careful not to leave any rare meat. Dry the cooked meat in a dehydrator or oven at 130° to 140°F. If you use an oven, leave the door open an inch or two to circulate the air. Dry two to four hours, or until ground beef is dry and hard to the touch. Store in a plastic bag in the refrigerator or freezer.

18. No-cook soups. Supermarket shelves brim with delectable offerings that require only adding boiling water, but watch out for astronomical sodium levels. These soups are great as an appetizer and help you rehydrate. Combine a quick-cooking grain and extra seasoning for a simple dinner.

19. Nuts. Peanuts, cashews, almonds, and other nuts add flavor, texture, and lots of calories (in the form of fat) to trail meals. Toasting nuts in an oven set at 350°F for 10 minutes enriches their flavor.

20. Cheese. Cheese is loaded with calories, and it gives your taste buds a soothing sensation that carbo-rich foods can't come close to. Parmesan keeps well under trail conditions, as does mozzarella. Plastic-wrapped mozzarella "strings" in single-portion servings must have been designed with backpackers in mind.

21. Powdered dairy products. It's incredible what you can find in convenient powdered form, like cheddar cheese, blue cheese, butter, and sour cream. Use these as flavor enhancers to make a mundane meal marvelous. Powdered cheddar (order through AlpineAire or The Baker's Catalogue) goes with almost anything. Blue cheese powder (The Baker's Catalogue) makes pasta or a rehydrated vegetable salad special. Butter powder (The Baker's Catalogue) adds smoothness to grits, cereal, and dinners. I recommend pure butter powder over butter-flavored sprinkles like Butter Buds or Molly McButter, which are available in the baking goods section of most supermarkets. Powdered sour cream (AlpineAire and The Baker's Catalogue) makes a mean beef stroganoff.

22. Exotic fruit powder. Use coconut cream powder in Asian dinners, backwoods smoothies, and desserts for intense flavor and lots of additional calories. You'll find coconut cream powder in Asian markets. Coconut powder can be ordered through The Baker's Catalogue. Pure orange powder, also available through The Baker's Catalogue, weaves a distinct flavor into cereals, smoothies, and desserts.

23. Single-serving condiments. Praise the fast-food giants for neatly packaging trail-size portions of catsup, mustard, sweet and sour sauce, mayonnaise, lemon juice, relish, salsa, soy sauce, and honey. Get your supply from leftover fast-food meals or negotiate with the folks behind the counter.

24. Seasonings. Spices, herbs, and herb blends are obvious choices, but I pack along hot sauce, wasabi (powdered horseradish), bouillon, and good old salt and pepper, too.

25. Comfort food. Treat yourself to whatever you really love-chocolate, miso, tapioca pudding, salmon jerky, graham crackers. Buy quality products and don't skimp on portions.

Resources

AlpineAire Foods, P.O. Box 926, Nevada City, CA 95959; (800) 322-6325; <http://www.alpineairefoods.com>.

Backpacker's Pantry, 6350 Gunpark Dr., Boulder, CO 80301; (800) 641-0500.

Just Tomatoes, Etc., Box 807, Westley, CA 95387; (800) 537-1985.

The Baker's Catalogue, P.O. Box 876, Norwich, VT 05055-0876; (800) 827-6836; <http://www.kingarthurfLOUR.com>.

Recipes

Dinner Entree

Beef Stroganoff

Recipe Ingredients

- 3 Tablespoons powdered sour cream
- 1 Pinch nutmeg
- 6 Tablespoons dried ground beef
- 6 Tablespoons thinly sliced dried mushrooms
- 1/2 Teaspoon dried chopped onion
- 1 1/3 Cups Chinese noodles

Serves: 2

If you don't have sour cream powder on hand, a packet of cream cheese saved from your last trip to the bagel store makes a fine substitute.

At Home: Place sour cream powder and nutmeg in their own bag. Remaining ingredients go in a separate zipper-lock bag.

On the Trail: Place beef mixture in an insulated bowl or pot and add 2 1/4 cups boiling water. Cover and let stand 10 minutes. Drain off (and drink, if you like) the broth. Add nutmeg and sour cream powder and mix well.

Breakfast Entree

Breakfast Burrito

Recipe Ingredients

- 2 Cups dried hash browns
- 2 Tablespoons dried onion
- 1 Tablespoon dried tomatoes
- 1 Tablespoon dried red and green peppers
- 1 Tablespoon dried mushrooms
- 9 Tablespoons egg (powdered)
- 2 Tablespoons powdered cheddar cheese
- 2 Tablespoons oil
- 5 flour tortilla

Serves: 2

At Home: Package hash browns and veggies in the same bag. Eggs and cheese go together in a bag.

On the Trail: Place dried hash browns and veggies in a pot or bowl, cover with boiling water, and let stand 5 to 8 minutes. Drain any excess water, using the liquid to reconstitute the eggs. Heat the oil in a frying pan and add the potatoes and veggies. Cook undisturbed for 3 to 7 minutes until brown and crispy (a nonstick pan is a godsend on this duty). Turn with a spatula and fry the other side for about a minute. Pour egg mixture right in with the potatoes and cook until the eggs set. Warm the tortillas and wrap around about 1/2 cup of the hash brown/egg. Serve with salsa, ketchup, or hot sauce.

Dinner Entree Lunch Entree

Cashew Chicken Wrap

Recipe Ingredients

- 3/4 Cup dried cabbage
- 3/4 Cup thinly sliced dried mushrooms
- 1/4 Cup dried pineapple without sugar added
- 2 Tablespoons dried onion
- 2 Tablespoons flaked coconut without added sugar
- 8 tortillas
- 1 1/2 Cups toasted chopped cashews
- 10 Ounces canned chicken

Serves: 2

If you can't find unsweetened dried pineapple and coconut in your supermarket, try the health food store. You can substitute 1 1/2 teaspoons coconut cream powder for coconut flakes, but package it with the cashews rather than with the fruits and vegetables.

At Home: Package veggies and fruit in a zipper-lock bag.

On the Trail: Pour fruit/vegetable mix into an insulated bowl or pot and add 1 1/2 cups boiling water. Stir well, cover, and let stand 10 minutes. Meanwhile, briefly heat tortillas in frying pan or pot lid. When the filling has rehydrated, drain excess water. Add cashews, chicken, and salt to taste. Spoon 1/2 cup of filling onto each tortilla, turn in the ends, then roll.

Breakfast Entree

Cranberry-Orange Cereal

Recipe Ingredients

- 3/4 Cup bulgur
- 6 Tablespoons dried cranberries
- 3 Tablespoons orange powder
- 4 Tablespoons toasted chopped walnuts

Serves: 2

This cereal is a not-too-sweet change of pace from oatmeal that requires no fuel to make. You can substitute orange-flavored breakfast drink for pure orange powder, but it doesn't taste the same.

At Home: Place all ingredients except nuts in a zipper-lock plastic bag.

On the Trail: Add 1 1/2 cups cold water to the bag and let stand overnight. In the morning, add walnuts.

Drink

Hot Ginger-Coconut Smoothie

Recipe Ingredients

- 1/4 Cup powdered milk
- 1 Tablespoon coconut cream powder
- 1 Teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 Teaspoon ground ginger

Serves: 1

This hot drink is delicious as a pick-me-up when you first reach camp. Or, savor it as a yummy dessert. The powdered coconut provides fat calories and keeps your taste buds happy. If you are a real sugar hound, add more to taste.

At Home: Combine and bag ingredients.

On the Trail: Place dry mixture in an insulated cup and add 1 cup boiling water. Stir well.

Dinner Entree

International Couscous

Recipe Ingredients

- 3/4 Cup couscous
- 4 Teaspoons dried cranberries
- 4 Teaspoons raisins
- 4 Teaspoons thinly sliced dried carrots
- 4 Teaspoons dried onion
- 3 Teaspoons chicken bouillon powder
- 3 Teaspoons chili powder
- 1 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/4 Teaspoon brown sugar
- 1/2 Teaspoon butter powder
- 3 Tablespoons toasted sliced almonds

Serves: 2

This quick recipe produces a lively and unusual dinner.

At Home: Package all ingredients except almonds in a zipper-lock plastic bag.

On the Trail: Place the couscous mixture in a pot or bowl and add 1 1/4 cups of boiling water. Mix well, cover, and let stand 10 minutes (insulate from the cold ground with a fleece jacket). Before serving, add almonds and, if you like, a dash of hot sauce.

Desert

Some More S'Mores

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Cup graham cracker crumbs
- 1/2 Cup chocolate chips
- 1/2 Cup toasted chopped walnuts

Serves: 2

This dessert packs all of the taste of s'mores, and then some, without the mess.

At Home: Combine ingredients in a small oven roasting bag.

On the Trail: Drop the sealed bag in hot water until the chocolate melts. Remove from water and spoon contents into bowls.