

Feeding the Alpinist

Eating in the high country poses certain problems and paradoxes for the alpinist. On the one hand, meals are both physiologically essential and an important part of our social life. On the other hand, cooking and eating in high places--particularly in severe weather--can be quite a chore. Consequently, the alpinist strives to keep this very fundamental function as simple and utilitarian as possible. Still, eating, like climbing itself, sustains both body and soul. Although climbing generally doesn't permit epicurean extravagance, even the simplest meal is a chance to savor the special bonds of comradeship that only mountains can forge. So learn to cook efficiently and every meal will become a pleasant social event rather than a monumental ordeal.

Here, for your consideration, are a few highly opinionated and somewhat idiosyncratic comments about my approach to eating in the mountains. If you're a novice, perhaps you'll find here a useful starting point for developing your own culinary style. If you are already an expert alpinist, I'm sure you'll at least get some passing amusement out of it. But whoever you may be, I hope you will always remember that the feast is not the fatted calf; rather it is in the friends that share whatever fare there is.

PRINCIPLES

Calories count. A steady supply of calories to stoke the fires is more important than a "balanced" meal. Or perhaps "balanced" in this context means sugar for immediate energy (not too much), starch for the near haul (next two hours), fat for the intermediate haul (next five hours), and protein for the long haul (overnight). Fresh vegetables are nice, but probably not in the picture. Anything that spoils, or produces scraps, or leaves grease in the pot, or is difficult to prepare, or scorches, or weighs too much, just doesn't make the cut. It is calories that are indispensable.

Water is precious stuff. It's heavy to carry, so you have to get it where and how you can--whether by dipping it from streams or springs, or by melting ice or snow. Don't waste it! Efficient use of water is a central principle of meal preparation technique. Make your water work twice if you can, and have as much of it as possible end up in your belly rather than getting poured out on the ground.

Once upon a time hikers and climbers drank freely of the waters found in the mountains, savoring the unique flavors of favorite streams and ponds. Nowadays, however, the risk of imbibing contaminated water is too great to take such rash chances. Although, in fact, the risk of contamination might be quite small, all water supplies are suspect, and the consequences of inviting a family of friendly *E. Coli* or *Giardia Lamblia* to take up residence in your gut are too severe to be worth the risk. Basically (and, indeed, sadly) the rule for today is to purify *all* water. Happily, purification is a fairly simple matter. There are three methods: filtering, chemical (iodine) disinfection, and boiling.

Filters are nice, and very effective. But they are also expensive, heavy, and subject to mechanical

failure. I don't personally own one.

Boiling is good--and happens automatically in cooking. Just bringing water to a solid boil is all that is required at altitudes below 4,000 feet. The problem with boiling is the expense--measured in fuel consumed. In the winter, however, I like to fill my water bottles with hot water, both because it delays or prevents freezing, and it warms me up whenever I take a drink. So winter water purification is more or less free.

Disinfection with iodine is excellent except for the taste. The easiest method is the use of hydroperiodide tablets ("Potable Aqua"). Drop a tablet in a water bottle and wait 30 minutes, then squeeze a little water out through the threads of the cap to sterilize the mouth of the bottle. Best (and cheapest) for long-term use is supernatant aqueous iodine solution ("Polar Pure"), but this approach is a little complex for casual use. In any event, rest assured that, contrary to popular belief, iodine is *not* poisonous: an overdose won't hurt you, and long term consumption of iodated water is not dangerous (provided you don't have goiter). Problems: hydroperiodide tabs must be used within six months after opening the bottle. And don't get 'em wet! Iodated water turns blue when mixed with starch. Blue oatmeal is a little weird, but it's harmless.

Many experienced climbers like to add Kool-Ade or some other disgusting adulterant to their water bottles--ostensibly to mask the taste of iodine. Personally, I like to keep plain water in my water bottle so it may be used for other things than just drinking. Adding flavoring can be done in the cup easily enough. I'm also wary of too much sugar in one shot.

Efficiency is essential. Cooking and eating and cleaning up can be quite a chore--particularly in severe conditions. But nourishment is extremely important: you *must* eat. Learn to plan lightweight, easily prepared meals that require a minimum of equipment, fuel, and effort.

BREAKFAST

The big problem with breakfast is always the time it takes to get it done and get moving. The solution to this problem lies with efficiency. In winter the problem is compounded by cold, but the solution is still efficiency. Obviously you want something that requires minimum preparation and negligible clean-up, but you also want something that is hot and that delivers calories. Many adults also appreciate a caffeine fix. My breakfast is hot cereal: Carrie's Super Granola if I can get it, some other granola-type cereal or just plain old Quaker Instant Oatmeal if I can't.

Before departing, measure one serving of cereal (Granola, Mueslix, Alpen, etc.) and add a quarter cup or so of powdered milk. Seal the whole thing into a baggie. At breakfast time you just rip open the baggie, empty it into your cup, add boiling water, and eat. (You may want two.) After the cereal, fill your cup again with hot water and stir it around to clean out your cup. If you like, you can flavor your dishwater with instant coffee or a tea bag before you drink it. The remaining hot (sterile) water in the pot goes into water bottles.

No water is wasted--particularly not that dearly extracted from snow. In winter, the whole breakfast

routine revolves around adding snow to the pot at appropriate moments so that hot water is available at the right times with minimum waiting, you end up with a full pot of hot water for the water bottles, and you only have to light the stove once.

Some people like to add a few chunks of cheese to the breakfast menu to increase the protein and fat content; I find that the powdered milk provides a good enough protein hit, and if I want extra fat (a good idea in extreme conditions) a shot of margarine does the trick--and really improves the flavor of oatmeal. If you can't start your day without some vitamin C, take a tablet. Or try hot Tang. This stuff is surprisingly good, and easy to prepare. My only reservations about it are that it can be a little messy (those sticky orange crystals get into everything if they escape captivity), and that I like to be careful not to get too big a sugar dose all at once. A big hit of sugar sets up your metabolism for a crash later on. But if you aren't a caffeine bibulist, Tang-flavored dishwater is great stuff. Instant hot chocolate is also good, gets you fed in a hurry, and contains milk that will continue to keep you going later in the morning. I confess that I'll often have my cocoa first simply because it's so delicious and warming, and then after my cereal I just down my dishwater neat.

If this isn't enough breakfast, get moving anyway and have an early tastybreak after you are under way and warmed up.

LUNCH

There are two prevailing philosophies about lunch. One is that at noon you stop and have lunch. The traditional lunch break is emotionally satisfying, gets you a major rest break, gives you a chance for conversation, planning, dreaming, savoring the scenery, savoring the food... and getting cold and stiff. The other major school of thought is that stopping for any length of time is foolish because it mainly gets you cold and stiff, and eating a large meal is physiologically inefficient, messes up your metabolism, and damages your karma. Adherents to this point of view nibble all day, spreading out the calories and never stopping. Recognizing the virtues of both views, I prefer a compromise, but one which leans rather in favor of the traditional lunch break. I absolutely refuse to hike and eat at the same time--as is required by certain extremists among the spread-out-the-calories faction. In my view, the practice is just plain dangerous. Still, the eat-and-walk folks have a point about the physiological benefits and the fact that sitting around is how you get cold. So when I stop for lunch at midday, I make it a small stop. I do take the time to find a good spot; I get out my warm clothes; I will often get out the stove and "brew up"; and when I'm done I get moving again promptly. But several times during the day I'll also stop for a "tastybreak"--a brief, usually stand-up, affair where the party huddles around to share a granola bar, a square of chocolate, or a handful of gorp, and a few companionable words.

Lunch is usually a slice of Carrie's oatmeal raisin bread, or a bagel, or a pita loaf, or a bannock, or a couple of biscuits, together with a handful of gorp, and a chunk of cheese. If it isn't too cold, and I'm not too heavily loaded, I might also take along an apple or an orange. Many people have little delicacies that they like to include, like beef jerky or a little salami.

DINNER

Although the eat-and-walk crowd sometimes claim that one of the advantages of the method is a diminished requirement for a big dinner, I've never found this claim to be true. I've tried all sorts of approaches to the major hassle of making a meal in the evening, but except in the most severe conditions, there is no substitute for actually cooking something. Again, though, success lies in efficiency: you want a one pot main course that can be supplemented with a little snitching from the lunch bag. Nutritionally, carbohydrate packing is the main idea. The dish is called "glop" or "hoosh" and you can basically make it two ways: with rice or with noodles. First, you cook the rice or noodles (using much less water than normal for the noodles, and a bit more than normal for the rice), then you add a couple packages of the powdered soup mix of your choice along with a package of freeze-dried peas or green beans. On the first night out (or longer in cold weather) you can bring along a little precooked hamburger or chicken. Some people carry small cans of additives, but I prefer not to carry chunks of steel around in my pack.

When the glop is done, you put some in your cup along with a little piece of cheese, and eat with gusto and good humor. There are many variations depending on taste, imagination, and your willingness to carry the ingredients. Some people swear that the only politically correct formula is flat noodles, Knorr Spring Vegetable Soup, and Swanson's canned chicken. But you can join whatever political party you want.

A viable alternative to glop (and very cheap and available when you are stocking up in some convenience store a thousand miles from home) is packaged macaroni and cheese. For about fifty cents you get some macaroni and a little envelope of "cheese food sauce mix." You're supposed to add milk and margarine, and it's not too bad. It's even better if you add some real cheese and some mustard. But it's still edible even if you add nothing but a good shot of powdered milk and about ten miles of hiking. It makes a nice break from glop, too, but not on the night I do the dishes, thank you.

I like to finish dinner with a cup of hot powdered milk (yes, made with dishwater). It sounds gross, but in the mountains at least, it's actually pretty good and makes me feel very satisfied and well fed.

EMERGENCY MEALS

There are times when the weather is too bad to cook, or when you just want to have a little something extra in your pack for the unexpected. When you can't cook, just eat off your lunch stuff, and make glop for lunch one day. The eat-and-run crowd may gasp at the sacrilege of a cooked lunch, but it will look like luxury to everyone else. The easiest emergency meal to carry around for the unexpected is ramen noodles. They're cheap, don't weigh much, prepare easily, and last forever. You can even eat them raw--right out of the package. I usually have a couple packs squirreled away, just in case.

I've always got a few granola bars stashed away in convenient places, ready for a quick calorie boost.

Carnation Breakfast Bars have devolved a bit towards candy in recent years, but they're quite palatable and pack a significant nutritional wallop. The in thing these days (and with good reason) are Power Bars and their ilk. They're good, but a bit pricey. The beneficial effects of chocolate are probably more psychological than nutritional, but a tiny square of Hershey's gives strength where nothing else will.

LUXURIES

Tradition demands that, back in the car, you keep hidden a few delicacies for celebrating the success of your outing. The required traditional items are canned peaches, kipper snacks, saltine crackers, and a chocolate bar, but as high orthodoxy fades, doubtless other comestibles will invade these hallowed spaces. *Chacun a son gout*, but do have something waiting to call out encouragement over the last few miles of your return. I have no fonder memory than that of huddling in my old VW with my incomparable companion Christopher Stubbs, exhausted after a hair-raising, blizzard-blasted descent from Huntington Ravine, headlamps barely glowing in the subzero cold, mittened hands chipping merrily away with my pocket knife at a can of absolutely delicious frozen peaches.

EQUIPMENT

My cooking bag contains the following items:

- . Cup
- . Spoon
- . Pot
 - . . One quart pot for solo trips
 - . . One two- or three-quart pot for a party of three
- . Stove
 - . . Fuel bottle (if required by the type if stove or length of trip)
- . Salt (in a 35mm film can).
- . A one-ounce squeeze bottle of liquid detergent
- . Matches (wooden safety matches in a 35mm film can, *with strikers.*)

RECIPES

Breakfast:

Instant Oatmeal (2 envelopes per person) fortified with powdered milk
Hot Chocolate (1 envelope) fortified with powdered milk

Lunch:

Non-crushable bread (1-2 bagels per person per day)
Cheese (3 oz per person per day)

Gorp ("Trail Mix" from the grocery store or mix peanuts, raisins, and M&Ms to taste. Easy on the M&Ms.)

Dinner: (serves 3)

Glop: 10 ounces of pasta
3 envelopes of Lipton "Soup Secrets" chicken noodle soup
Freeze dried vegetables (optional)

Boil 4 cups of water in a 2 quart pot. When the water boils add noodles, soup mix, and vegetables if you have them. Return to boil and then reduce heat and simmer 8 minutes. Keep the pot covered, but watch out for boiling over while the lid is on. Serve into cups and add a chunk of cheese.

Supplement with bread and cheese, and make hot milk or hot chocolate (a little cocoa, a lot of powdered milk) for dessert.

Snacks:

Extra gorp (about 1 sandwich-sized baggie per person per day)
Granola bars or Breakfast Bars (3 per person per day)

Emergency rations:

1 pack Ramen Noodles.