

BACKPACKER

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Camp Pastas: Use Your Noodle

It's tasty, nutritious, and will survive being crammed in a pack. Might pasta be the perfect trail food?

Liz Rusch · Updated: Feb 14, 2017 · Original: Sep 30, 1999

After my fourth dinner of peanut butter and jelly, a serious case of taste-bud boredom set in and my body began revolting. The redwoods of Sequoia National Park, California, suddenly resembled huge sun-dried tomato rigatoni reaching skyward, and I mistook rocks underfoot for gnocchi. I yearned for the nutty smell of garlic, even the overripe, sharp odor that wafts from sweat glands after an evening of Italian gluttony.

I was a pathetic case, really—a pastaphile wandering hungrily in the wilderness. That delusional experience taught me one thing—find a way to eat what I like when I'm burning calories fast in the wilderness. Since then, I've endured gummy noodles, burnt sauce, and a few other disasters, but I finally adapted some of my favorite pasta dishes for the pack. It was well worth the effort. What culinary delights you can create with one burner, two pots, and the right lightweight ingredients! But, as Mama says, it's all in the technique. So let's start with the basics.

Picking Pasta

When it comes to pasta, you really can't go wrong no matter what type you choose. This food, which isn't much more than flour and water, is crammed with the energy-boosting carbohydrates backpackers need and crave on the trail. All pasta has about the same amount of calories, fat, carbs, and vitamins, give or take a few grams. Buying the right trail noodles comes down to personal taste and trail convenience.

Most dried pasta, like the spaghetti you eat at home, must boil for 10 to 15 minutes—a long wait after a long haul, not to mention a waste of precious fuel. My suggestion? Scan the label of every brand of pasta at the store to find one that cooks in 7 minutes or less.

Thin pasta generally cooks faster, but skinny spaghetti and delicate angel hair often look like the flour they're made of after a few days in a backpack. I recommend sticking with the thicker, bite-size kinds that'll hold up to the bumps and bruises of backpacking and are easier to handle when you have to make a separate sauce (see "Juggling Pasta and Sauce" on page 32). Try classic macaroni or shells, fusilli (spirals), penne (tubes cut short at a slant), rigatoni (ridged tubes), rotini (twists), or ziti (thick tubes).

If you're dedicated to your linguini or like the salty taste of Japanese somen noodles, it'll take a little effort to keep the long strands in one piece until dinnertime. A dry, empty water

bottle makes a good spaghetti safe. Or place pasta in your cup, cookpot, or bowl.

Flavored pastas, like lemon pepper, garlic basil, or sun-dried tomato basil, can add pizzazz without adding weight to your load. Cooking time also slims to 7 or so minutes. I found a tasty brand, Mendocino Pasta, that cooks in 4 to 6 minutes. Most pasta companies now produce a line of these specialty noodles that rest on grocery store shelves alongside the traditional spaghetti types. Just watch the sodium content, which can increase by as much as 20 percent.

Also consider traditional pastas' more nutritious cousins: egg pasta packs a lot of protein and whole-wheat pasta contains more fiber than regular pasta, usually made from semolina. Noodles made from corn meal, rice, or spelt boost your potassium, which regulates your electrolytes and minerals. DeBoles's corn pasta and VitaSpelt pasta both cook in under 7 minutes. Some large grocery stores carry these specialty pastas, but a health food store is your best bet.

On trips where you need to conserve fuel, try no-cook pasta, available from AlpineAire Foods. Just add water, and the noodles reconstitute in 10 to 15 minutes. They taste better than you might expect. Couscous provides similar results in just 2 to 3 minutes of boiling. You can even skip boiling the couscous and let it sit in hot water for 10 to 15 minutes until all the water is absorbed.

Practical Premixing

Backpackers know that repackaging food sheds extra pounds, and pasta is no exception. Repackage noodles in a zipper-lock bag.