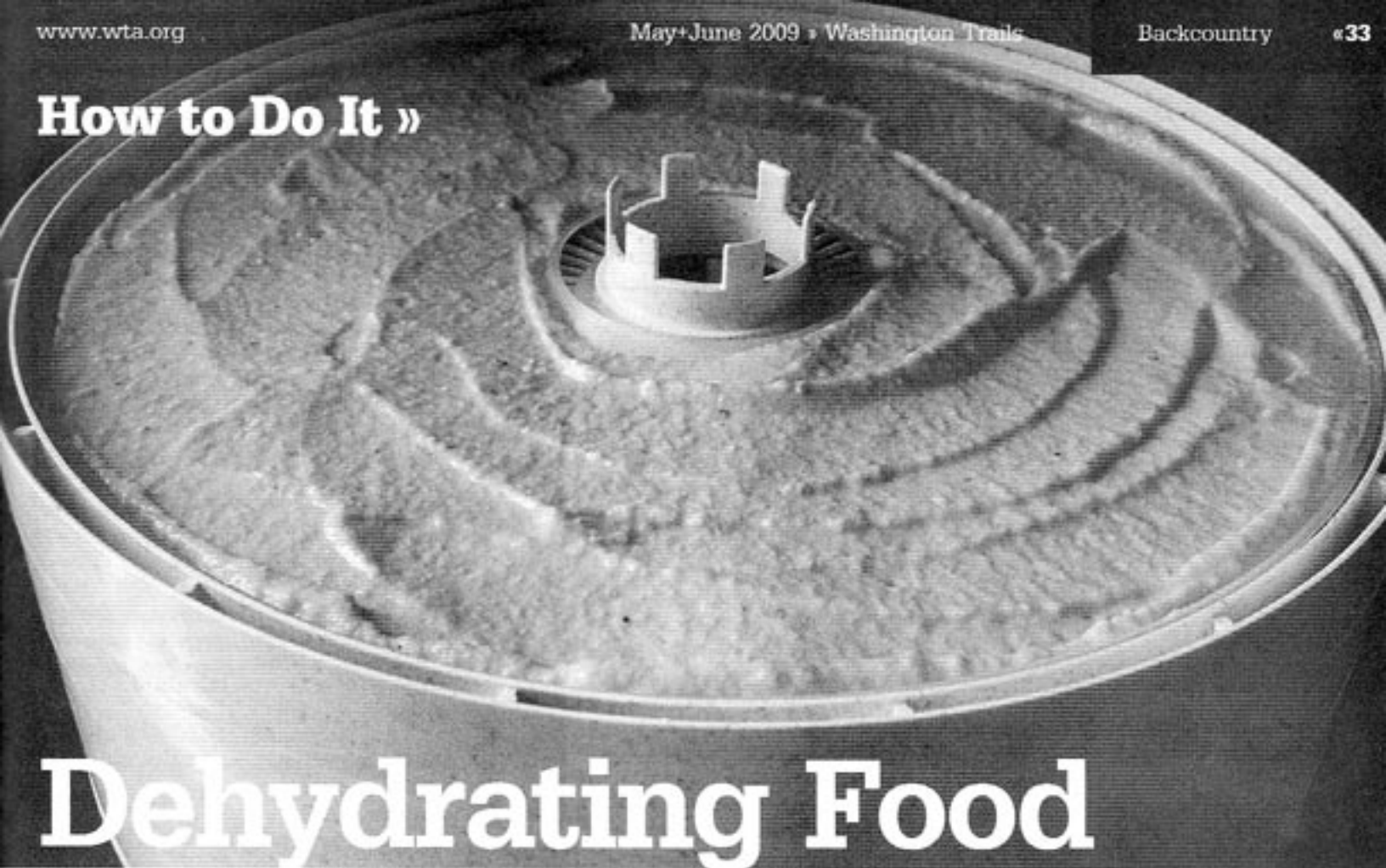


How to Do It »



Dehydrating Food

Make your own backpacking food—it's tastier and cheaper than prepackaged meals

As the author of a wilderness cookbook, I often get the opportunity to talk with people about food for the backcountry. I've noticed over the years that many people are intimidated by the thought of dehydrating their own foods. Some feel that the task would be too difficult, while others are concerned that the equipment is too expensive or the results unsafe. In this quick primer on food dehydration, I will alleviate some of these concerns and start you on a journey that will make food in the backcountry more enjoyable.

Food dehydration is like any other method in the kitchen—it's only as difficult as you make it. There are two ways to dehydrate foods. One is to dehydrate ingredients separately and then create the dish by packaging the ingredients together afterwards. Some people prefer this, but I prefer to do things a little differently by drying whole meals. This can be as simple as putting leftover stew or chili on lined dehydrator trays or as involved as creating a special meal just for your trip.

Most people have everything they need in their home kitchen. While you can dry foods with your oven, it's more efficient and cost effective to do so with a food dehydrator. There are several companies that make these and they can cost as little as \$40. I recommend that you choose a unit that has at least 500 watts of power and has a temperature control that

goes as high as 160 degrees F. A top or side fan is preferable because it makes clean up much easier. You might also consider purchasing fruit leather trays specifically designed for your unit. If you can't find these trays, parchment paper is a great alternative.

The way you dry a meal depends on the ingredients. Sometimes it's better to dry ingredients separately. An example would be a beef stew, where the vegetables dry at a different rate than the meat. In that case I recommend separating the meat for drying and putting everything back together when you pack it for camp. Other meals, like minestrone, can be dried without separating. It is also best to keep pieces small and uniform.

Meats and seafood can be dried successfully but there are some special considerations. Beef and salmon can be made into jerky. For beef jerky, you need to choose a lean cut, such as the flank or skirt, and make the slices uniform. For salmon jerky, use smoked salmon instead of fresh. For the best flavor, marinate overnight.

Beef, as well as pork and chicken, can be dried as part of a meal. It is best to use a moist method of cooking that involves a sauce and cook the meat until it is fork tender. Pork and chicken will do better if shredded before being dried. If you are using chicken for something like a wrap or chicken salad you will find that canned chicken gives you better results. Ham

Dehydrating hummus (above) is just one easy way to add tasty, inexpensive foods to your next backpacking trip.

Photo by Laurie Ann March

Laurie Ann March

Laurie is the author of *A Fork in the Trail*, a collection of more than 200 tasty recipes for backpackers and outdoor adventurers. Find more recipes or order the book at www.wildernesscooking.com.

can also be shredded and dried.

The best way to tell if food is dried is to look at it. Fruit and vegetables will appear leathery and when torn you should not see any beads of moisture. Ground meat will resemble gravel, as will feta cheese. Jerky will crack as you bend it. Spaghetti and other sauces will have the texture of fruit leather.

Not all foods can be dried. Avoid raw

meats such as pork and poultry as well as raw fish. Do not attempt to dry raw ground meats unless you are using a jerky cure. Yogurt can be dried into a treat similar to fruit leather or as a minor ingredient in a meal; however, it will not reconstitute as creamy yogurt. The same goes for cottage cheese. Sour cream works well when dried as a minor ingredient but does not come back for use as a topping.

Dehydrated foods are safe, provided you practice good kitchen hygiene, dry the food thoroughly and store foods properly. Dried foods should be stored in the freezer or other cool, dark, dry place until you are ready to leave for your trip. If stored properly, expect a shelf life of eight months before there is flavor loss. Sweet potatoes are the exception and start to lose flavor after three months.

Rehydrating a dish depends entirely on what you are reconstituting and the temperature of the water. Recipes such as Sunny Garlic Hummus can be quickly rehydrated using enough cold water to reach your preferred consistency. Meals that contain meat should be rehydrated with very hot to boiling water and placed in a cozy until fully rehydrated. Rehydration time can vary—meats such as chicken take the longest. You can also start rehydrating a meal for lunch by adding cold water at breakfast. This way you don't have to take your stove out at lunch time. This works well for meals such as Citrus Lentil Salad.

Once you've dehydrated and rehydrated your first meal you'll see that it's quite easy and you will find that the taste is much better than the

expensive, pre-packaged fare found in outdoor equipment stores. By learning the techniques for drying your own meals you'll open up a whole new world of possibilities and you'll be the envy of your fellow backpackers.

Citrus Lentil Salad

Dehydration Time: 5–7 hours

Makes 2 servings

Salad

1 cup of canned green lentils, well drained and rinsed

1 small carrot, coarsely grated

2 cloves garlic, minced

3 tablespoons celery leaves, chopped

1/3 cup roasted red pepper

1/8 cup fresh chives or scallions, chopped

1/8 cup fresh parsley, chopped

1/4 teaspoon dried thyme

1 tablespoon lemon zest

Salt and pepper to taste

3 tablespoons feta cheese, crumbled

Dressing

1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil

1 1/2 tablespoons lemon juice

1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/4 teaspoon cumin

1/2 teaspoon dried sweet basil

At Home

Chop roasted red peppers into 1/4-inch pieces. Combine all the salad ingredients in a medium-sized bowl and toss. Spread out the salad mixture on lined dehydrator trays. If your unit has a temperature control, set it for 135°F. Dry the mixture for 5 to 7 hours. Pour the olive oil and lemon juice and olive oil into a leakproof container such as a small Nalgene bottle. Pack the cayenne, cumin, and basil in plastic wrap or a small ziplock bag. Put the salad, bottle of dressing, and spice packet inside a medium ziplock bag and seal.

At Camp

Rehydrate the salad in the plastic bag using a formula of 1 1/2 parts dried mix to 1 part water. Wait 5 to 10 minutes and then add a little more water if needed. If you accidentally use too much water, be sure to drain the salad well before adding the dressing.

While the salad is rehydrating, put the contents of the spice packet into the bottle containing the olive oil and lemon juice mixture. Shake vigorously. Pour the dressing on the hydrated salad and stir gently to combine. Serve the salad with lightly toasted pitas.

Sunny Garlic Hummus

Dehydration Time: 5–7 hours

Makes 2 to 4 servings

1 19-ounce can chickpeas - rinsed and drained

1/4 cup orange juice

1/2 teaspoon lime juice



Above: chili after being rehydrated in camp. Start simple: try dehydrating chili or spaghetti sauce.

Photo by Laurie Ann March



Above: Citrus Lentil Salad is a zesty lunch-time treat.

Photo by Laurie Ann March

- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 heaping teaspoon orange zest
- 2 tablespoons tahini
- Pinch of kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cracked black pepper

At Home

Combine and blend all the ingredients using a food processor or hand blender until you have a thick paste. Spread evenly on lined dehydrator trays, keeping the mixture about 1/4 inch thick. Dry for 5 to 7 hours or until the mixture crumbles and is thoroughly dry. Store in a medium ziplock freezer bag.

At Camp

Rehydrate the hummus using a formula of 1 1/2 parts dried mix to 1 part water. Wait 5 to 10 minutes and then add a little more water if it's too dry. Serve as a dip with pitas or your favorite crackers or use as a spread in a wrap.

Tip

If you need to increase your fat intake for cold-weather hiking, drizzle a little olive oil on the hummus just before you eat it.

Minestrone

Dehydration Time: 7–10 hours

Makes 4–6 servings

This hearty and flavorful minestrone has been one of my family's favorites for years.

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 5 thin slices pancetta, chopped
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 medium carrots, chopped
- 1 russet potato, peeled and cubed
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 2 tablespoons celery leaves, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cups canned diced tomatoes (with juice)
- 1 tablespoon parsley
- 1 sprig fresh rosemary
- 1-ounce rind of Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound Swiss chard, stemmed and chopped
- 2 cups plus 1/2 cup low-sodium beef or vegetable stock
- 2 cups cannellini or white kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Parmesan cheese (optional)

At Home

In a large pot sauté the pancetta in the olive oil until it is crisp. Remove the pancetta and set aside. Pour the onions, carrots, potatoes, and celery in the pot and stir. Cook until the onions are translucent. Add the celery leaves and garlic and sauté for another minute. Add the tomatoes, parsley, rosemary, and cheese rind and let simmer for about 10 minutes.

Add the Swiss chard and 2 cups of the stock. Purée half of the beans with the 1/2 cup remaining stock in a blender or food processor. Pour into the pot and simmer until the potatoes are cooked. Then add the remaining whole

beans to the pot and heat through. Remove the cheese rind and the rosemary spring. Allow the soup to cool.

Measure the soup and write this measurement on a sticky note. Pour the soup onto lined dehydrator trays and dry for 7 to 10 hours or until no moisture remains. Put the dried soup in a ziplock freezer bag along with the sticky note.

At Camp

Add enough boiling water to the soup mix to equal the measurement on your sticky note. Do not add the water first or you will have too much liquid. Once the soup has rehydrated, heat it through and serve. Garnish the soup with some shaved Parmesan.

Chipotle Sweet Potatoes

Dehydration Time: 8–10 hours

Makes 2 servings

- 2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 1/4 cup low-fat sour cream
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- 1 teaspoon lime zest
- 1 canned chipotle pepper, chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon sauce from the can of peppers
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper, freshly ground
- 1/4 cup light brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1/8 teaspoon cinnamon (optional)

At Home

Place the potatoes in a pot of water and bring to a boil. Simmer until the potatoes are tender when forked, about 15 to 20 minutes. Drain the water and pour the potatoes back into the pot. Add the sour cream and lime juice and zest. Mash the potato mixture. Add the chipotle peppers, adobo sauce, salt, pepper, and mix well. Spread the sweet potato mixture on lined dehydrator trays and dry for 8 to 10 hours. When the sweet potato mixture is dry, it will be leathery.

Break the dried mixture into small pieces by hand and run it through a blender or coffee grinder until it has broken up into small flakes. Put the cinnamon in a piece of plastic wrap. Package the sweet potatoes and the cinnamon bundle in a ziplock freezer bag. Store the sweet potatoes in the freezer until your trip. For each serving, pack some cinnamon and 2 tablespoons of butter to stir in.

At Camp

Add equal amounts of potato flakes and boiling water in a pot and let reconstitute for 10 to 15 minutes or until fully hydrated. Add 2 tablespoons of butter and stir. Sprinkle with cinnamon if desired. ♦

Dried chipotle sweet potato bits prior to being made into a powder in the blender. Home-dehydrated food is more nutritious and better tasting than more expensive packaged meals.

Photo by Laurie Ann March

