



## What's in your lunch bucket?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SUSAN CONRAD

**A** bone-chilling rain pelted my face as a northeasterly wind formed annoying, stern quartering seas. Oily, rolling waves laced with whitecaps and black and blue clouds matched the sea's ornery mood. Dealing with the ill-tempered waters of British Columbia's Johnstone Strait, my two paddling companions and I were about halfway through a long day paddle in search of orcas. The weather wasn't cooperating and neither were the whales, but we hoped we could console ourselves—with an energizing hot lunch.

We landed at a small pocket beach and within minutes we were sitting in

our camp chairs cradling mugs of steaming tea and shoveling spoonfuls of hot minestrone soup. My view of the distant islands was temporarily obscured when the steam of my meal fogged the lenses on my glasses. I wasn't about to complain.

It took me years—and far too many cold sandwiches—to realize that hot comfort food on foul-weather paddling days and cooler fare on balmy days is the perfect equation for lunchtime refueling. I've been on a quest for imaginative ways to create ambrosial meals—hot or cold—while on the water trail. I've done my own experimentation and rifled through friends' lunch bags and

come to the conclusion that whether you are a grazer or a give-me-something-to-sink-my-teeth-into-NOW sort of paddler, there are many healthy, delicious, satisfying midday meals you can prepare at home or in camp, and pack in your kayak for single or multi-day adventures.

Prepackaged camping meals are expensive and loaded with sodium and often nitrates and other chemicals. And just as bad, they make for generally humdrum cuisine void of any inspirational qualities. They're designed with weight-conscious backpackers in mind, but our kayaks are essentially spacious floating coolers, so why not take

Above: Dehydrated fruit and nuts provide easy and tasty sustenance while paddling.

advantage of their carrying capacity and bring along a variety of tasty and mojo-producing edibles, ranging from fresh food to homemade favorites to dehydrated delectables?

Let's start with the hot stuff. A high quality, stainless steel, wide-mouthed thermos is an essential part of a kit for hot food. I also recommend a smaller, standard-mouthed thermos for hot liquids such as tea, coffee and hot cocoa. My preferred strategy is to make a huge pot of my favorite soup, stew, chili, goulash or any one-pot meal the night before my paddle trip and have some of it for a nutritious dinner paired with crusty bread and fine boxed wine. The next morning I simply heat the leftovers to piping hot and immediately place them into my wide-mouthed thermos.

If you want coffee or tea at your rest stops, now is the time to prepare them in a small-mouthed thermos. For extra style points with hot cocoa, tuck a few mini marshmallows in a snack-size baggie and float them on top of your warm chocolate elixir at lunchtime. Make sure your friends are watching.

If you're on a multiday camping trip, you can still enjoy a hot lunch en route between camps—it just takes a little more effort. I recommend dehydrating your own food. The space and weight savings is fantastic, it's relatively inexpensive and can add unusual flavors, colors and textures to your meals. (See "Food for Thought," *SK*, Aug. '12). In camp, multitask at breakfast and place your dehydrated lunch meal in a thermos, add boiling water, secure the lid



Soft-sided coolers and thermos bottles easily fit into hatches and allow for temperature sensitive meals, which can be a pleasant treat in hot or cold weather.

and stash in an accessible area of your kayak. By the time you break camp and paddle all morning, your meal will be reconstituted by lunchtime. Similarly, lunchtime provides the perfect opportunity to add hot water to an ingredient you're planning on including at supper. This strategy gives you a running start in the evening, and saves you time and fuel in camp. Preheat your thermos by filling it with hot water and letting it stand for a few minutes. Pour that water out (or into another container if you need to conserve water in camp) and then add your hot food or liquids—they will stay hot longer. For winter paddling, go a step further and wrap your thermos in a layer of closed-cell foam or a bath towel for additional insulation.

For quick and easy thermos meals, most food co-ops and health-food stores carry bulk dehydrated soup mixes not laced with trans fat, MSG, preservatives or fillers, to which you simply add boiling water and *voilà*, you have a nourishing lunch alternative. These can be especially satisfying on wet or chilly days. Sprinkle some shredded Parmesan cheese on top for extra zing.

Just between you, me and the bilge pump, I once served instant mashed potatoes, laced with butter and fresh ground pepper, at a Thanksgiving dinner in my home and no one was the wiser. Hence, these instant potatoes are one of my favorite thermos specialties—especially when I'm pressed for time or lacking inspiration. They require very little water or time, and they're comfort food at its finest! For extra pizzazz, add some cubed ham or fowl, a sprinkling

of dehydrated veggies, and/or a handful of shredded cheese.

One advantage of day paddling versus overnight trips is that your cargo compartments have plenty of space available, enabling you to carry your food in soft-sided coolers, which come in a variety of sizes. In addition to keeping your foods colder longer (and therefore safer), they also help prevent your softer, more vulnerable foods, such as nectarines and avocados, from getting bruised or squished. These coolers are waterproof up to the zipper and feature a waterproof liner that prevents ice-melt water from saturating the insulation.

I use frozen water bottles as an alternative to ice; my home freezer is bulging with various sizes and shapes. Listerine mouthwash bottles are one of my favorites as they are relatively flat and don't waste space like round bottles. (Note that no matter how many times you rinse these out, they will retain a hint of mouthwash—not necessarily a bad thing.) These bottles keep food items cold, avoid the mess of melting ice and provide cold drinking water as they thaw. Frozen individual yogurts, puddings and juices do double duty, functioning as ice packs and offering sustenance later in the day when they thaw. Keep in mind that unless you're paddling in warm tropical water, your kayak is a floating cooler. I've stored small tubs of butter and perishable items in my kayak, directly in contact with the cool hull, and they fared well for up to a week.



Bottles of frozen water make for great ice-pack substitutes, and provide ice-cold drinking water as they melt.

## COLD STUFF

I have a fond memory of a particularly satisfying and enjoyable meal while paddling a long, lazy stretch of the Flathead River in northwest Montana a few years back. My friend Tanya was in charge of lunch that day, and in the short amount of time it took me to sponge out my cockpit and stow my spray skirt and PFD, she had miraculously laid out a build-your-own bagel sandwich buffet. As I approached her artfully composed wilderness spread, the first thing I noticed was the wide and appealing range of colors. Pink flakes of smoked salmon framed with a sliced purple onion and ruby-red tomatoes, a heap of vibrant green clover sprouts, and a mound of soft white goat cheese speckled with herbes de Provence. All this, along with two hearty multigrain bagels graced a large flexible plastic cutting board—an elegant spread in the middle of nowhere. Brilliant.

Cold pasta salads are generally a crowd pleaser and a cinch to make the night before. Don't get stuck in a one-pasta rut: experiment with tubes, wheels, tortellini, capellini, soba noodles, Japanese udon noodles, penne, rotini; the list is nearly endless. Cook them al dente, then add your favorite chopped veggies. Pour on some olive or sesame oil and sprinkle with your favorite herbs and spices. Add cooked fish, fowl or ham if desired and you're set. Stash a supply of multicolored tortilla chips in a plastic container, a few extra forks to pass around, and you'll be the most popular kayaker on the beach.

I've noticed a variety of flavored tuna appearing on grocery store shelves in both the U.S. and Canada. They generally come in single-serving cans or pouches and are handy to throw in a lunch bag. After sampling a variety of brands and flavors, I found I prefer the Canadian options, with spicy Thai sweet chili being my number one choice. The cans are quite pricey, averaging about two dollars for a three-ounce can, so I decided to come up with my own recipe. This easy-to-make dish is often my go-to food when planning a midday paddling meal. If you like tuna and appreciate the flavor combination of spicy and sweet, give it a try and decide for yourself. I give it two paddles up!

## Susan's Spicy 'n Sweet Thai Chili Tuna:

### Ingredients:

Two five-ounce cans of high-quality chunk light or wild albacore tuna (drained)  
2 sprigs of green onion, finely diced  
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper  
½ teaspoon paprika  
¼ teaspoon coriander  
¼ teaspoon fresh ground black pepper  
3 tablespoons tomato paste, thinned with 3 tablespoons of water  
2 tablespoons sesame oil  
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil  
3 tablespoons rice vinegar  
1 teaspoon minced fresh ginger  
½ tablespoon brown sugar  
½ tablespoon agave nectar  
A pinch of fresh ground sea salt  
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice  
2 tablespoons sweet chili sauce

### Directions:

Mix tuna and onion together. Combine remaining ingredients in a separate bowl and add to the tuna mix. Place in a sealable plastic container and enjoy with crackers, chips, pita bread or wraps. Stuff a handful of sprouts and diced tomatoes in your wrap for more lip-smacking delight. Enough for two hungry paddlers.

## NIBBLES AND TIDBITS

On a cold, dismal day, a hearty and hot meal is comforting and welcoming, but sometimes, especially if we're on the move, we don't want to be weighed down by a heavy meal: a busy digestive system will shunt blood away from the muscles. Munching along the way may be preferable to stopping for a more elaborate lunch.

Our bodies are the engines that drive our skinny boats, and how we fuel them will greatly impact our performance, energy level and enjoyment. Contending with the forces of the marine environment burns a lot of calories, so what's important is to keep refueling the engine—unless you enjoy plummeting blood sugar levels, fatigue and being a crabby paddling partner.

Carbohydrates are the body's easiest source of energy and the body requires them in order to perform all of

its functions. While protein is the raw material that muscle is built with, the building cannot commence without carbohydrates. Think of your body as a construction site; the carbohydrates are the workers and the protein is the raw material to build with. (For more on the science of diet see: "Nutrition for the Long Haul," *SK* Oct. '13)

My favorite food combinations and snacks for paddling:

- My homemade spicy Thai tuna with crackers
- A handful of chocolate-covered almonds and a juicy run-down-your-elbows nectarine
- Chocolate milk and a banana
- Dates stuffed with cream cheese and pistachios
- Homemade salmon jerky
- Hard aged cheeses, such as Kerrygold's Dubliner, made from the milk of grass-fed cows
- Multigrain crackers with Swiss cheese and spicy mustard
- Nut butters, honey and chopped dried apricots on an English muffin
- Wraps filled with anything that floats your boat. Wraps rule and hold up well for days.
- String cheese, fig bars and cashews
- Olive tapenade spread generously on pita bread
- Individual tapioca pudding with a handful of pine nuts

Pre-packaged trail mixes are common fare with kayakers. They contain important fats, the fuel we need to sustain the repetitive, calorie-burning motion of paddling, but many leave much to be desired in terms of taste, variety and overall appeal. I prefer to make up my own big batches in large bowls, then divvy them up into quart-size Ziploc bags. I start by drying apples and bananas with a sprinkling of cinnamon and raw brown sugar. To the dried fruit I add a generous supply of nuts: cashews, pecans, pistachios and almonds. I'll throw in some candied ginger to add sweetness and ward off seasickness, dehydrated organic strawberries, unsulphured dried mangoes, and a healthy handful of dark chocolate chips. This flavorful mix is scrumptious, satiating and frankly, hard to put down. The nuts offer a substantial amount of protein and the dried fruit supplies quick energy. And the chocolate, well, that just feeds my addiction.



Adding some chocolate to your lunch bucket is an easy way to be the most popular paddler in your group.

#### ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE

On a recent paddling trip in British Columbia's southern Gulf Islands, I seized the opportunity to snoop, poke and prod through twelve companions' lunch bags on four consecutive days. They graciously endured endless queries about what they chose to eat and why. My off-the-cuff research revealed a wide spectrum of opinions, preferences and choices. Some folks chose very basic fare and old standbys such as peanut butter and jelly, cheese and crackers, salami and canned "mystery meats." Others were quite creative and successful at accenting their meals with a variety of appealing and inspiring edible add-ons. Some were even downright competitive. I offer my findings here to give you more ideas to chew on.

Remember Dagwood Bumstead's ridiculously enormous multilayered sandwiches? One paddler religiously grabs a Dagwood-type sandwich from the local deli for her first day of paddling. One couple opted for a slightly less decadent array of multigrain bread, almond butter and nonfat yogurt. Another buddy loves to layer sardines and Swiss cheese on multigrain crackers, with a dab of spicy mustard. To ward off bad breath after his sardine finger sandwiches, he nibbles on crystallized ginger. Another group member prefers a healthier, preservative-free route and

chose a colorful mix of thinly sliced red cabbage and carrots, doused in fresh lemon juice, which he meticulously assembled that morning in camp.

Wraps were popular on this excursion. I saw individual tuna pouches emptied into spinach wraps, followed by sliced cabbage, lemon juice and a dab of yogurt. I also spotted a neatly rolled tortilla with softened Jarlsberg cheese seeping out both ends, studded with pistachios. Other wraps were bulging with feta cheese, sun-dried tomatoes and fresh veggies. In another lunch bucket I wasn't surprised to discover a stash of mini Snickers bars, along with an assortment of peanuts, cherries and almonds. A hard-boiled egg, julienned carrot sticks and hazelnuts appeared. A grab bag of smoked jerky nuggets, dried fruit and nuts was shared among the group. An unscathed avocado surfaced and soon creamy green slivers were spread on Triscuit crackers and passed around. For "medicinal purposes" one paddler packed dark chocolate-covered pretzels, washed down with chocolate milk. These folks didn't forget dessert. One friend had homemade gluten-free chocolate chip cookies. I ate five of them. Foods chosen for midday meals doesn't have to involve a tradeoff—they can fuel your body *and* satisfy your taste buds. With a little forethought, grocery store sleuthing and ingenuity you can

be the rock star on the beach when it's time to refuel and rehydrate. Have additional foods on hand for unexpected delays, and if also catering to other palates, be sure to take into consideration food allergies, finicky eaters, those with tyrannosaurus appetites and, obviously, the number of people in your party.

Remember to stay hydrated, and above all, have fun. When a fellow paddler sidles up to you on that driftwood log and peers forlornly into your lunch bucket, or sniffs the air wondering what smells so darn good, maybe you can negotiate a handful of chocolate for a few spoonfuls of your (instant—Shh!) steaming mashed potatoes. **SK**

*Susan Conrad is a wilderness foodie with a passion for expedition paddling and good eating. She's always on the prowl for ways to liven up meals in the backcountry, and shouldn't be left alone on the same beach with dark chocolate, cashews or dried strawberries. You can reach her through her website at [www.paddle4ever.com](http://www.paddle4ever.com).*

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