



Food for thought

BY SUSAN CONRAD

Dehydrators bring decadence to outdoor dining

Enjoying a splash of spiced rum while nibbling on dried strawberries, nectarines and a few squares of dark chocolate, I peered out from beneath my low-slung tarp and marveled at the scenery of the Tongass National Forest. It was day 55 of my 66-day solo trip along the Inside Passage and I was camped in a small cove on Mitkof Island, just north of Wrangell, Alaska. The huge expanse of Frederick Sound loomed before me. Hundreds of icebergs, having escaped from LeConte Bay, floated along the opposite shore, riding the northerly current toward Petersburg.

I caught a whiff of what was simmering on my camp stove and after a long day on the water I was ready to chow down. The evening's fare consisted

of a delicious stir-fry with rehydrated tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, broccoli, snap peas, pineapple and tofu. My meal was seasoned with coconut milk, red curry and a pinch of tarragon and served over a bed of whole-grain rice. I washed it down with a glass of merlot and reveled in my good fortune—and my full belly.

Kayakers love to eat—that's one of the many reasons we paddle. Making up for a well-earned calorie deficit is part of the journey. Yet some paddlers still sadly subsist on preservative-laden canned mystery meats, lifeless sodium-saturated ramen noodles and bottomless jars of peanut butter and stale crackers. Boring. With a little creativity and effort, your camp meals can be as memorable as

the paddling itself. After all, food is not just for fuel, it's also for taste and enjoyment—something to look forward to, to savor and delight in.

I've always been committed to having quality food choices on my paddling trips, whether long expeditions or short weekend excursions. Food can play a huge role in your emotional well-being and even your safety, so why not eat right?

I'm a big fan of dehydrating my own food. It's downright fun to do and the possibilities for creating elegant meals are endless. It can add an element of style to your camp dishes, providing unusual flavors, colors and textures, even late in your trip. By drying your own food you can create tasty and healthy meals with minimal effort and

OPPOSITE: Dehydrated beefsteak tomatoes dusted with Herbes de Provence add a gourmet touch to any camp dish.

get a good ratio of fats, carbohydrates and proteins. A little experimentation will yield some nutritious, wholesome and pleasant additions to your camp cuisine.

Running my two electric food dryers 24/7 for months at a time helps me prepare for and eagerly anticipate upcoming adventures. If the thick aromas of pineapple, banana and cinnamon wafting through your home sound appealing to you, then give food dehydrating a try. Bone up on your urban hunting and gathering skills and soon your friends will accuse you of making entire buildings redolent with cinnamon and spice. Regular sleuthing journeys to food co-ops, Asian markets and wholesale grocery stores oftentimes turn up unusual or hard-to-find specialty items not generally found on shelves at ordinary supermarkets. Frequenting farmers markets and pillaging friends' gardens and orchards are favorite pastimes that turn the sometimes mundane chore of grocery shopping into an adventure.

Food preservation by way of dehydration has been around for thousands of years and is one of the easiest and cheapest methods of long-term food storage. Many methods have been employed over the years, including burying the food in hot sand, smoking it, or drying it in the sun and wind. The basic principle is for hot, dry air to drive moisture out of the food without cooking it. The dry air inhibits the growth of bacteria while the low heat preserves enzymes. Proper drying extends shelf life up to a year or more.

Dehydration offers substantial savings in weight and packing volume—valid issues when attempting to pack more than a week's worth of food in your hatches. Many fruits and vegetables are about 80 percent water, and once this water is removed by dehydration, the savings can be nothing short of amazing. An entire pineapple fits in a snack-size baggie and ten medium-size tomatoes end up weighing in under one ounce when dried.

These days, the drying process is made considerably easier by electric food dehydrators. The appliances have heating elements for drying, fans and vents for air circulation, and trays to hold food. The stackable trays generally have a mesh or perforated base, allowing the warm air to rise through them. A lid at the top of the stack completes the system, containing the airflow and safely covering the food.

Oven drying is an acceptable method of dehydrating food for some, but it isn't very energy efficient, and foods aren't as flavorful compared to using an electric food dehydrator. Most ovens won't maintain temperatures below 160°F, which means you'd end up cooking your food rather than dehydrating it.

Food dehydrators have come down in price over the years. I've recently spotted good quality units priced as low as \$35. The average range for the round stackable models is \$50 to \$100. You pay up to \$300 for the deluxe square versions, with pull-out shelves instead of stackable trays. With these, the air flows from the side across the trays rather than through them, as it does with the stackable dehydrators. This allows for faster drying times and more uniform drying results, and flavors aren't as apt to mix, either. Checking on and removing food in a shelf dehydrator is a snap as each tray pulls out individually, much like the trays in your conventional oven. Simply slide the trays out rather than having to remove the trays on top.

How-to books and websites loaded with recipes and useful information about dehydrating abound. (See sidebar/resources.) Most dehydrators come with a simple cookbook full of helpful advice. My focus here is to spark your curiosity and inspire you to adopt a more hedonistic approach to stocking your paddling

pantry. Choose wholesome, healthy foods, experiment with your own recipes and reap the benefits of a home-cooked meal in your camp kitchen. Awaken your inner foodie!

A FEW TIPS AND TRICKS: DEHYDRATED STAPLES

Choose high quality, ripe, but not overripe fruits and vegetables. For best results, blanch your veggies to reduce the growth of microorganisms, which cause food spoilage. Blanching helps to retain vitamins, preserves color and makes the skin porous, allowing the food to dry and rehydrate faster. Blanching entails a bit of science and timing is crucial. There are excellent resources on the web for more details. More delicate vegetables or those that cook quickly, such as tomatoes, onions, mushrooms and peppers, do not need to be blanched.

If you're drying messier items, sauces or small ingredients like rice or peas that could slip through the dehydrator tray vents or screens, you'll want to use solid plastic sheets, which can be purchased separately. Parchment paper also works well. Don't use wax paper—it melts.

DEHYDRATED DISHES

Another strategy is to dry home-cooked dishes. Make big batches of your favorite stews, chili, stroganoffs or other hearty main dishes, and then dry them. Drying times will vary, but plan on longer sessions since you are starting off with a fairly thick, saturated layer of food. Measure the volume of your fully cooked meals before and after drying, note the difference

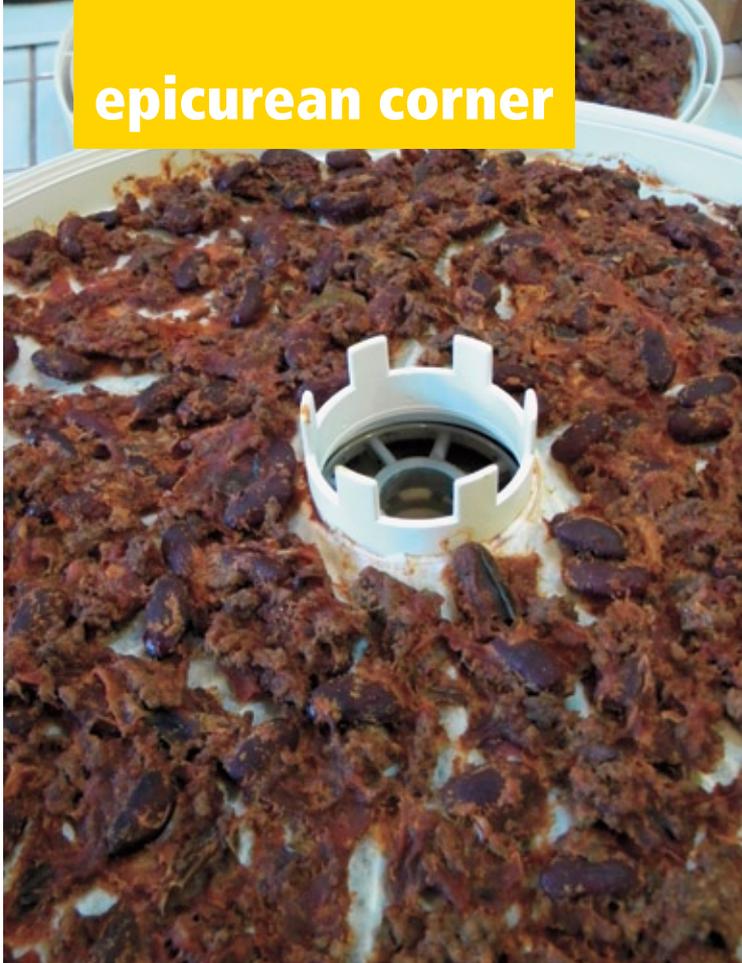


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One-pot meals prepared at home are easy, affordable and downright satisfying in camp. This huge pot of chili was loaded with meat, veggies, beans and spices, and once dehydrated, fit into two quart-size storage bags.

and mark it on the bag with the dehydrated meal. In camp, reintroduce the same amount of water that was removed during the drying process. For example, if you've cooked up a batch of your grandma's beef goulash and it filled four measuring cups before dehydrating and two after, then you would need to add two cups of water to your pot in camp. Bring the mix to a boil, lower the heat and simmer just long enough to soften all the ingredients. With a little practice and imagination you can dehydrate any of your usual at-home recipes and enjoy the ultimate in campside comfort food.

GOTTA BEEF WITH VEGGIES?

Noshing on platefuls of steaming rehydrated veggies, tofu and piles of carbs can be nutritious and rewarding. However, the carnivores in your group may start rebelling unless you occasionally buck up and provide some meat options. Sometimes you just have to have a hunk of meat or fowl on your plate and a tin of canned ham or chicken, or another dish involving texturized vegetable protein isn't going to cut it.

The previous instructions for home-cooked dishes apply when using meat, but plan on longer drying times—up to 16 hours. For best results, choose the leanest

cuts available and cube them into bite-size pieces before drying. Follow the preparation guidelines for measuring before and after quantities noted above, and in-camp dehydration will be smooth sailing.

Drying hamburger or ground sirloin is relatively straightforward. Use extra lean beef and simply cook it at home until well done, breaking it into small pieces in the frying pan. Next, rinse the meat in a strainer with hot water to purge as much grease as possible, then blot with paper towels. Purging the grease also removes much of the flavor, so consider adding some taco seasoning, salt and pepper, or any spices you prefer. Transfer the cooked meat to your dehydrator trays and dry until rock hard—about 6 hours. Let it cool, place in freezer-quality storage bags and store them in your freezer until you're ready to pack for your trip. In camp, cover the meat with hot water to rehydrate, and in about ten minutes you can add it into your meals.

It probably won't be accompanied by a crunchy kosher dill pickle and potato salad, but you can have deli-style meat on your trips, as well. Ask your favorite deli server to slice turkey, ham or roast beef thick, about $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch. At home, slice the meat in one-inch strips and place on your dehydrating trays for

about 6 hours. On the sea, snack on these crunchy treats as is, similar to jerky, or at mealtime quickly rehydrate them in a small amount of water to enjoy with one of your in-camp dinner recipes.

STORAGE

Vacuum-bagged or seal-a-meal type food sealers work well to store your dried goodies. Freezer-quality Ziploc bags are another option. Allow all your dried items to cool thoroughly before bagging, and gently squeeze out every bit of air before sealing the bags. Most paddling adventures involve sand, salt, rain and moisture. Double-bagging your food will improve its longevity in these environments. Consider marking the date, contents and any other pertinent information on the bags and then store them in your freezer until your departure.

IN CAMP

Reconstitute your dried delicacies in warm water or cold—cold just takes more time. Soaking dehydrated foods in a poly bottle or thermos while you're paddling will speed up prep time in camp. For a special lunch treat, before leaving camp in the morning, place a dehydrated meal in your thermos and add boiling water. It will be piping hot and

ready to eat when it's time to stop for your midday meal. You can also quickly reconstitute veggies by adding them directly to the water as you boil pasta, rice or instant mashed potatoes. They will be plump and tender in no time.

You don't necessarily need to rehydrate all your dried foods. Certain veggies, such as sweet red peppers and zucchini, can be eaten dry right out of the bag. Sprinkle them with Parmesan cheese, salt and pepper before drying and you've created homemade veggie chips.

ALMOST SUN-DRIED TOMATOES

How many times have you craved fresh fruits and veggies just a few days into a kayak trip? Most fresh fruits such as bananas, pears and tomatoes don't see the inside of a kayak hatch due to the bruising

and squishing factor. They're also space hogs. Sun-dried tomatoes will add a wonderful flavor and gourmet touch to many a camp dish. Drying tomatoes concentrates their flavor, rendering them sweeter and more intense.

Roma tomatoes work great because they have very few seeds, but fresh-from-the-garden beefsteaks or heirlooms will pack a much bigger flavor punch. Remember, tomatoes come in a rainbow of colors—purple, white, orange, yellow and red. Buy them ripe, but still firm. Slice them thick, about a quarter inch. Lightly spritz your trays with a touch of oil and place the tomatoes on them a smidge apart. Sprinkle with Herbes de Provence and a dash of sea salt and dry for 8 to 10 hours. When done, the tomatoes should be flexible, not brittle.

In camp, add these gems directly into soups or stews, or steep in water for ten minutes and then add to stir-fries, pasta or rice dishes. For a truly festive and special snack or appetizer, before leaving camp put some olive oil and diced fresh garlic in a Ziploc bag or Nalgene bottle. Gently add the tomatoes to the mix and let soak while you're paddling. Bruschetta, anyone?

THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOR

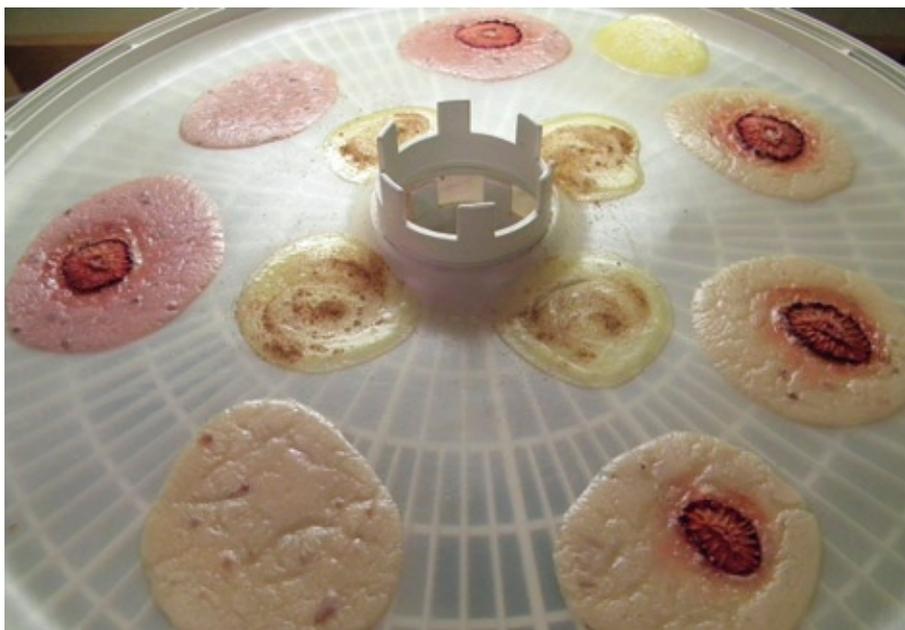
Dehydrating fruits concentrates their natural sugars, so your apples, cherries and kiwis will taste especially sweet on the water or in camp. I was enamored with the aesthetic results I achieved while drying fruit for my Inside Passage trip. Dried kiwis, strawberries and oranges resembled delicate pieces of stained glass. Apples picked from a friend's orchard, thinly sliced and dusted with cinnamon and raw sugar, were a treat when dried. Nectarines and peaches were almost too pretty to eat but they had incredible flavor.

Dehydrating fruit is fun and easy. Simply slice them thin, about an eighth-inch for a crisper treat, or about a half-inch for something chewier, and arrange in a single layer on the drying trays.



ABOVE: Resembling stained glass, an array of dehydrated fruit makes for a tasty snack on the watery trail.

BELOW: Sweet, delicious and nutritious dried yogurt drops will be the crème de la crème at snack time.



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Depending on the juiciness and thickness of the fruit, it can take from 8 to 24 hours to completely dry. To avoid discoloration, dip bananas and apples in lemon juice.

In camp, make these vibrant, vivacious edibles the star of your oatmeal or muesli—it'll motivate you to crawl out of your tent even after your VHF radio has indicated a small craft advisory. Incorporating them into your trail mix is another option, or munch on them directly from the bag. They'll satisfy your sweet tooth and boost your energy level.

Make the hunting and gathering process a part of the adventure by seeking out unusual items at your neighborhood market and produce stands. You'll thank yourself in camp when you pull out the dried kumquats, mangoes and mandarin oranges halfway through a long adventure.

YOGURT ON DAY 16? YOU BETCHA.

Milk and most dairy products are best avoided on multiday excursions because of their tendency to sour quickly. Dehydrated yogurt drops solve this problem and are every bit as good as candy—and more nutritious. About the size of a silver dollar, these sweet treats will be the *crème de la crème* at snack time.

Drop teaspoonfuls of flavored yogurt onto your drying sheets sprayed lightly with cooking oil, and dry for about 8 to 10 hours. Be sure they are well-spaced, at least an inch apart, or you'll end up with yogurt leather instead of yogurt drops. Creativity is key, so be sure to experiment with different flavors.

A self-proclaimed chocoholic, I conducted some research on Yoplait's Chocolate Mousse Style yogurt. After dehydrating a few containers, I paired the drops with slivers of dried strawberries—my eyes rolled back in my head and I knew this would be a mandatory staple on all future trips. Other favorites are raspberry, peach and orange cream, which remind me of the Creamsicle pops I devoured as a kid. Gently layer thinly sliced strawberries on top of your yogurt dollops before drying, and you'll end up with an artistic touch. If you're industrious and know how to make your own yogurt, all the better. Sprinkle in cinnamon, add a few drops of vanilla and a touch of honey and you'll have an instant remedy for low blood sugar and cranky paddling partners while on the water.

Greek yogurt has had most of the liq-

uid whey drained out, so its texture is similar to that of sour cream. It'll yield a heftier, heartier yogurt drop, which requires more drying time. Consider buying plain Greek yogurt and adding bits of strawberries and finely chopped cashews. It'll make you want to dance the Kalamatianos.

BROWNIE POINTS

On my Inside Passage solo I was about 65 miles south of Prince Rupert when I realized I was about to run out of chocolate. Dread set in, followed by near panic. "How the heck did that happen?" I asked myself. I had days to berate myself for this grim oversight.

To avoid a similar scenario in the future, I began experimenting at home with dehydrating brownies. The results were beyond delightful. I recommend a dark-chocolate fudge brownie mix; use your favorite homemade recipe or purchase a boxed mix. Bake as usual, let cool, then cut into half-inch cubes. Dry the cubes for 10 to 12 hours, let cool again, and then place them in your plastic freezer bags. You now have chocolate croutons, which are wonderful right out of the bag. Or, simply add a few drops of hot water and gently knead the contents. It will taste like warm brownies, as soft as they are straight from the oven. It's important to start with just a few drops of water and add as needed; otherwise you'll end up with chocolate mousse—though worse things could happen. For a truly decadent sweet tooth fix, substitute the water with warmed coffee-flavored liqueur or brandy. Mix in a handful of walnuts and/or dried cherries and you've just scored major brownie points with your paddling companions.

ASSORTED SUNDRIES AND OPTIONAL NICETIES

Supplementing your dehydrated camp cuisine with specialty dried ingredients and supermarket finds can complement and enhance your options and make your wilderness meals more pleasurable. Availability will vary by region, but half the fun is discovering these treasures on the shelves of your local community co-op or Asian market. A little thing called the Internet can be very helpful as well.

Here are a few items worth exploring and adding to your meals for variety, flavor and additional calories:

- Whole milk powder
- Powdered soy, almond or rice milk
- Powdered eggs
- Powdered butter
- Powdered peanut butter
- Powdered chocolate peanut butter
- Quinoa flakes
- Textured vegetable protein
- Bulk soup mixes
- Dried hummus mix
- Instant mashed potatoes
- Chia seeds
- Maple sugar and maple flakes
- Red or green curry paste
- Lemongrass powder
- Coconut cream powder

I experienced the same giddiness as my first schoolgirl's crush when a good friend turned me on to coconut cream powder. This decadent stuff is made from dried coconut that has been finely ground and can be found in Asian markets and online. One packet equals a 14-ounce can of coconut milk and has huge potential in backcountry applications. Slightly richer tasting than most other nut and seed milks, it has a subtle coconut flavor. It can be used as a milk substitute in recipes, poured over cereal or drunk by the glass. Powdered coconut milk or coconut cream powder can be added to curries to make a thick, rich coconut-curry gravy. It blends well in hot liquids and can also be used as a creamer in hot teas and coffee. Coconut milk powder is teeming with medium-chain fatty acids—the good guys that our bodies crave and need on long trips.

Enjoying a wholesome, nutritious meal at the end of a long day of paddling can be a blissful, satisfying feeling. With proper planning and a little ingenuity, your camp cuisine can be a noteworthy and fulfilling component of every adventure, allowing you to eat and play at the top of your game. Throw in a few additional luxuries and your wilderness dining experience will knock your booties off. **SK**

Susan Conrad is a writer, photographer, kayak instructor and personal trainer based in Bellingham, WA. In addition to weaving her way through the rugged waterways of the Pacific Northwest, she can be found trail running, mountain biking or whitewater kayaking. With a passion for expedition paddling and good eating, she's always on the prowl for ways to liven up meals in the backcountry. You can reach her through her website at www.paddle4ever.com.

Resources

Another Fork in the Trail
Vegetarian & Vegan recipes
for the backcountry
by Laurie Ann March
www.wildernesspress.com

Another Fork in the Trail contains beneficial information on dehydrating basics and beyond, menu and meal planning and wilderness cooking. Laurie Ann March also shares over 160 of her trail-tested recipes. Even meat-lovers will delight in her mouthwatering recipes such as Israeli Couscous with Eggplant, Walnuts and Feta, Roasted Ratatouille, or Late Harvest Soup with Saffron. This book is the sequel to *A Fork in the Trail*.

Visit www.aforkinthetrail.com for more information. Click on the "resources" link for an up-to-date list of where to buy ingredients and prepared meals online.

Kayak Cookery
A Handbook of Provisions and Recipes
by Linda Daniel
www.menasharidge.com

Kayak Cookery is written specifically for cooking while on kayak trips. It has pertinent information, as well as menu planning and outfitting your mobile kitchen, and will set you on your way to becoming a culinary master while on the water.

Food Drying with an Attitude
A Fun and Fabulous Guide to Creating
Snacks, Meals, and Crafts
by Mary Bell
www.skyhorsepublishing.com

Food Drying with an Attitude is a light-hearted and humorous food drying resource. The author has over thirty years of food-drying experience and offers expert tips on everything related to dehydrating advice, straightforward and practical instructions, recipes and inspiration.

www.backpackingchef.com
"Backpacking food for the soul" is the focus of this website, but all the ideas and recipes are applicable to kayaking. You'll find plenty of links for dehydrating tips and recipes.

www.organize-simplify-prepare.com/dehydrating.htm
This blog-style website is one of the best I've found. Unique ideas supplemented with beautiful photos are bound to pique your interest and expand your dehydrating abilities.

www.honeyvillegrain.com
Discover discount, bulk items with many hard-to-find foods, such as organic powdered eggs and organic whole milk powder.

COCONUT CURRY STIR-FRY WITH TOFU (SERVES 4)

With all the prep work done at home, this ends up being a quick and easy curry stir-fry that will please even the most discerning palate. Coconut milk and curry paste make an irresistible sauce, and bring a restaurant-quality meal to your camp.

» ingredients

- 2 tablespoons coconut oil or extra virgin olive oil
- 1 pound boxed tofu*
- 1 tablespoon red curry paste
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 packet coconut cream powder
- 3 sweet peppers (green is OK, but try other colors!), cut in strips
- 1 bunch of broccoli, including stems, cut into bite-size pieces
- 4 carrots, sliced
- 1 cup of snap peas, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 cups of mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
- 3 tomatoes, sliced
- 1 20-ounce can pineapple chunks
- pinch of tarragon

* Tofu will dry but does not rehydrate well. You can purchase boxed tofu that does not require refrigeration. Feel free to substitute meat for tofu and swap out or add any vegetables you'd like.

» at home

Dehydrate all the veggies and pineapple until crisp and double-bag in freezer-quality Ziploc bags. Pack mushrooms separately as they will overpower the other vegetables.

» in camp

Cover veggies in water and allow to soften. Melt coconut oil and sear tofu until brown and crisp. Set aside. In a large pan mix two cups of water with coconut cream powder. Dissolve the cornstarch in the coconut milk, then whisk in the red curry paste. Bring to a boil. Add veggies and simmer for a couple minutes. Serve it over rice—but not the cheap, nutrient-stripped instant type. Buy quality whole-grain or long-grain wild rice. Cook it at home, then spread it evenly on your solid sheets and dry. In camp, boil your rice for a minute or two, then let it stand for about 10 minutes. Voilà, you have healthy, "instant-style" rice without the time and fuel expenditure.



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