



Pliers work nicely to remove the hot lid. Be certain to set the cover downwind from the dish or you may “cowboy pepper” your meal.

Going Dutch

Camp cooking the Dutch oven way

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SUSAN CONRAD

“Stop lifting the lid!” my slightly annoyed instructor insisted for the umpteenth time. “It’s like opening the oven door at home—you are losing heat.” I was attending an outdoor expo in Montana about 10 years ago and serendipitously stumbled upon a Dutch oven cooking class. I was immediately smitten with the incredible edibles emerging from the cast iron and aluminum kettles.

During that chapter of my outdoor life I was often charged with keeping a dozen or more hungry paddlers fed and hydrated on multiday guided Missouri River trips in Montana. To avoid a mutiny, I started experimenting with Dutch oven recipes. Now I am convinced this is one of the best ways to cook in the backcountry, especially for groups of four or more.

A dutch oven is a kettle. It’s a pot. It’s an oven or a frying pan. It roasts, braises, bakes or slow cooks anything you can imagine. An all-in-one portable camp-cooking utensil, the Dutch oven is an

efficient way to rustle up any of your favorite dishes in camp with a minimum of skill. With a little back-porch practice, you can turn out tasty, gourmet, nutrient-rich meals in your camp kitchen in no time.

The classic Dutch oven is cast iron, heavy, thick and flat on the bottom, generally with three short legs to allow air to get to the coals below the oven and a tight-fitting flat lid with a lip to hold coals on top of the pot for all-around baking heat. A metal bail lets you suspend the oven from a tripod for simmering stews, soups or beans.

You might not want to plunk a heavy cast-iron pot the size of a wash basin into your kayak, but an aluminum Dutch oven is about one-third the weight of its cast-iron counterpart, it’s rustproof, requires no seasoning and is easy to clean. Aluminum doesn’t retain its heat as long as cast iron will, but it heats up faster. It costs about the same as cast iron and the difference in meal quality is negligible.

I now travel with a pair of anodized aluminum Dutch ovens. GSI Outdoors makes a 10-inch model with a smooth bottom that nests nicely inside their 12-inch oven; the 12-inch oven has feet. The anodizing makes the pots easier to clean and should allay concerns you might have about aluminum leaching into your food.

To free up precious hatch space, I’ve found the best place to transport a set of nesting Dutch ovens is inside the cockpit, snug against the front bulkhead. Purchase or make your own carrying case and you can hold the ovens and other related items in one handy unit. Make sure the ovens won’t come loose and interfere with your wet-exit and reentry routines.

I recommend cooking with charcoal briquettes as opposed to a wood heat source. This takes much of the guesswork out, provides consistent, long-lasting heat and reduces the impact of wood gathering around campsites. Buy high-quality brands for the best results.

A single briquette is roughly equiva-

LIDS OFF: WORDS TO THE WISE

If you have the pleasure of kayaking at a higher altitude, such as on a mountain lake, allow for 25 percent more fuel to maintain your desired heat. Coals will fizzle out sooner, so plan accordingly. Keep some spare coals on the sidelines for meals with longer cooking times; you'll want to replace briquettes as you cook. Timing just takes practice.

Do not pour cold water on or into a hot oven. It can permanently warp it, which makes the lid ill-fitting, destroying its efficiency.

In camp, arrange three medium-size rocks to serve as a lid holder. There's nothing worse than absentmindedly setting the lid in the sand when checking on your vittles—it adds an unappealing texture to your cherry cobbler.

For easier cleanup, coat or spray your oven with a bit of oil. If you plan on baking breads and cakes, cut parchment paper into rounds to fit your ovens. In camp, line your ovens with the rounds to prevent sticking and to make cleanup a cinch.

When baking cakes, breads or pastries, rotate the oven a quarter turn every 15 minutes to prevent hot spots.

Sleuth online for specialty items such as organic powdered eggs, dehydrated butter and organic whole milk powder. They take up little room in a kayak and add calories, taste and overall appeal to your camp dishes. One good source is www.honeyvillegrain.com.

Rather than pack big bowls to mix ingredients in for baking, use gallon-size Ziploc bags. This method is especially useful for any items requiring kneading.

The lid, turned upside down on a bed of coals, can be used for frying or grilling.

Consider using a vacuum sealer for many of your ingredients. Vacuum food storage systems remove the air from specially-designed bags, keeping food fresher, longer. Sealed bags also reduce the chance of messy spills in your cargo compartments.

For foods that require refrigeration, use your kayak as a floating cooler. Place perishable items low in the hull—the cool water underneath will help keep them fresh.

lent to increasing the oven temperature by 20°F. On a summer evening with the air temperatures at around 65°F, you should figure on 18-20 briquettes to bring a Dutch oven to between 350°F and 375°F, a temperature sufficient to bake most any dish. Colder outside temperatures and wind require an increase in the number of briquettes to reach this cooking temperature. Controlling the heat of your oven is critical to your success, and improves with practice.

The easiest method I've found to

control the heat is the "rule of threes." Take the diameter of the Dutch oven in inches and subtract 3 to determine how many charcoal briquettes to place under the oven. Add 3 to the diameter to determine how many go on the lid. For example, for a 12-inch oven you would place 15 briquettes in a ring on the outer lip of the lid and nine briquettes in a circle underneath it. Really—it's that simple. Applying heat to the perimeter above and below creates a uniform temperature and lessens the likelihood of burning the food.



Placing coals on the top and bottom of the oven creates a uniform temperature. This legless model rests on a stand over the briquettes.



photo by Neil Schulman



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I use instant-light style briquettes. They're infused with starter fluid, eliminating the need to pack a can of that smelly and volatile liquid. Count out each meal's worth of coals based on the above formula, place them in freezer-quality storage bags and store them in a dedicated dry bag (you'll never get the smell of the briquettes out of it). A 10-pound bag of briquettes divided up into freezer bags will fit into a 10-liter dry bag and will fuel a single Dutch oven for six evenings, providing dinners for as many as five campers.

Prepare your coals just as you would in your backyard barbecue. Stack them in a pyramid shape, light them and allow them to preheat. If you don't have instant-light briquettes you can use a chemical fire starter. Once your coals have a line of gray ash around them, use tongs to transfer them to the oven and start cooking your favorite dish. Avoid the temptation to remove the lid frequently to check on your bubbling dinner. Instead, wait for the aroma to tell you when it's done.

DUTCH OVEN ACCOUTREMENTS

You can keep it simple, or you can choose to accessorize your Dutch oven with optional niceties. These include long-handled tongs to distribute the charcoal, sturdy pliers or vise-grips to remove the hot lid and a pot holder or heat-resistant gloves. A long-handled lighter is helpful to get your coals going; it will provide a steady flame and keep your fingers away from the heat. A large serving spoon is useful and a small plastic scraper is handy to clean the ovens. A Dutch oven stand, a wire tripod you can get from GSI, will make the legless 10-inch models more stable over coals, or a creative arrangement of rocks can elevate the oven and keep it from snuffing out your heat source.

Consider confining your ashes in a fire pan to eliminate unsightly fire rings, help prevent wildfires and avoid spreading ash on beaches and in camps. Fire pans are required at many rivers and wilderness areas. I use lightweight aluminum roasting pans available at dollar stores. Pack your ovens inside these pans and you'll save valuable space in your hatches.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, START YOUR COALS

The secret to the art of Dutch oven cookery is simplicity. Many of your favorite at-home dishes can easily be prepared in a Dutch oven in camp—I've included two of my old standbys here. Wholesome and savory meals can bring paddlers together, satisfying them after a long day on the water. Conversely, nothing can put a damper on a multiday trip as quickly as haphazard meal planning. Your attitude controls the fun factor. My first Dutch oven instructor, in addition to admonishing me for prematurely lifting the lid, urged me to "cook for fun, cook for the joy of the adventure and most importantly, cook with love." **SK**

Susan Conrad is a writer, photographer, personal trainer, outdoor enthusiast and avid kayaker. She is currently sharing her passion and expertise in the kayak communities of Northwest Washington. When not in her sea kayak, you may also find her attempting to keep her surf ski upright somewhere in the Salish Sea. First-class paddling trips combined with top-notch food nourish her soul.

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VEGETARIAN PESTO LASAGNA (SERVES 4-6 HUNGRY PADDLERS)

Served piping hot with a loaf of hearty bread, this meal will satisfy even the most discerning and meat-loving palates. If you are planning for a shorter trip and have the luxury of additional space, fresh veggies would be delightful. For longer trips and limited space, dehydrate the veggies at home (see "Food For Thought," *SK*, Aug. '12). No-boil lasagna noodles are a tad thinner than regular noodles and simply cook in the sauce while the lasagna bakes. Ditch the glass sauce jars and either dehydrate or vacuum seal both the marinara and pesto sauces prior to your trip. If you prefer your lasagna more like a sliceable pie, use fewer tomatoes and less sauce. If you like it wetter, layer away. Experiment with this at home to achieve your desired level of firmness.

» ingredients

- 1 pound box no-boil lasagna noodles
- 1 6-ounce jar pesto sauce
- 8 ounces of your favorite marinara sauce
- 3 large tomatoes, sliced (large beefsteak tomatoes are best)
- 2 medium zucchinis, sliced
- 2 cups of button mushrooms, sliced
- 2 fistfuls of spinach leaves
- ½ pound Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 6 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated

» in camp

Arrange one layer of pasta in a 12-inch Dutch oven. Spread a thin layer of pesto on the noodles. Pour a thin layer of marinara sauce on top of this, followed by a few tomato slices. Scatter a handful each of mushrooms, zucchini and spinach. Generously sprinkle both cheeses over the veggies. Add another layer of pasta and repeat. Cover top layer with copious amounts of Parmesan cheese and bake for 40 minutes, or wait for the aroma to greet you. Let stand 15 minutes before serving.



Dutch oven chocolate overdose cake in the making. Add chocolate frosting if you dare.

DUTCH OVEN CHOCOLATE OVERDOSE

Calling all chocolate fanatics! When your chocolate fix needs attention, this recipe will do the trick. Top off your favorite camp meal with this truly decadent dessert. Wash it down with a glass of red wine for further self-indulgence.

» ingredients

- 1 box chocolate cake mix
- 1 box instant chocolate pudding mix
- 5 ounces of your favorite chocolate chips (about a half a bag)
- 1 can chocolate frosting mix (or vanilla frosting as an alternative)

» in camp

In separate bowls or Ziploc freezer bags, prepare both the chocolate cake mix and the instant pudding mix according to the directions on the box. Most instant cake mixes call for butter and eggs so be sure to pack the dehydrated equivalent to add in camp. A good source for whole powdered eggs and dehydrated butter is www.honeyvillegrain.com. Line a 10-inch Dutch oven with parchment paper. Pour in the chocolate cake mix and the pudding mix. Stir together. Add the chocolate chips. Place seven glowing briquettes under your oven and 13 briquettes on top. Bake for 40 minutes and check doneness by inserting a toothpick or knife. Let the cake cool when finished, and frost away. Enjoy.

» RESOURCES

A Fork in the Trail:

Mouthwatering meals and tempting treats for the backcountry
by Laurie Ann March
www.wildernesspress.com

Although not specific to Dutch oven cooking, *A Fork in the Trail* is chock-full of delicious recipes that will cook up beautifully in a Dutch oven. Many of these meals are dehydrated, with detailed instructions. Laurie Ann March shares over 200 of her trail-tested recipes that will turn an ordinary outing into a gourmet adventure. Rounding out the book is advice on recipe creation, menu and meal planning, dehydrating and rehydrating basics, packing and much more.

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.

The Outdoor Dutch Oven Cookbook by Sheila Mills

Paddlers, campers and other outdoorsy folk will find this book an excellent resource with more than 225 river-tested recipes. If items such as gingerbread corn cakes, sage and

olive focaccia bread and Dutch oven enchiladas grab your attention, then you will want a copy of this book. This isn't your usual cowboy kettle fare of meat, beans and biscuits. These are healthy, innovative recipes that will delight your taste buds and wow your camping companions.

www.seabear.com

Online ordering for high-quality smoked salmon and other products. SeaBear patented the innovative Gold Seal pouch, which preserves their salmon naturally, so no refrigeration is required. They will ship anywhere in the continental U.S. and stand behind everything they do with their "Fisherman's Oath guarantee."

www.honeyvillegrain.com

Discount, bulk items with many hard-to-find foods, such as organic powdered eggs, dehydrated butter and organic whole milk powder.

www.gsioutdoors.com

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