

Period Cooking: It's Not as Hard as You Think

I'll be the first to say I am no expert when it comes to cooking. But, I'd like to pass along some of the things I've learned over the last couple events.

Here's the list of rations that I lived off:

¾ lb Slab bacon (cured)
1-2 yellow onions
1 russet baking potato
2-3 apples
Hardtack or other hard bread
Soft bread or biscuits
Coffee
Sugar

Using this as a start, I've also added some whole carrots, dried apples and peanuts in the shell. Add or take away what you like, but what is listed above lasted me the weekend, with extra of some items on Sunday afternoon. The more fresh (in season) fruits and veggies, the better. As much as I love bacon, it gets redundant by Sunday morning.

I'm still trying to diversify what I can do with the above ingredients. I suppose you can combine them in any way you like. I like to fry the bacon together with apple, onion and potato slices. Or, wait til you are done with the bacon, and then fry onion slices and strips of potato in the leftover grease. This is quite good – like French fries. Some folks like to cook all their bacon at once, and keep the cooked bacon in their haversack. Others cook a fresh batch at each meal.

Another way to enjoy everything is as a soup. Take your tin cup, and fill it a third to a half full. Slice in some potato, onion, apple (you get the idea) and add some pieces of precooked bacon. If you brought carrots or other fresh veggies, add these too. Cook until the potato is

soft, and you've got a darn good soup. Get creative and bring a fistful of fresh herbs (parsley, anyone?). At Gettysburg, I tried adding navy beans to this. It requires some forethought, as the beans need to soak for at least 24 hours to soften. Then they need to be cooked for a time, before adding other ingredients.

Something else that is good is boiling some dried apple slices in enough water to cover them (I usually just do a few). This reconstitutes them. When they are nice and soft, and easily cut with a spoon, drain the water out, then mix in some brown sugar to taste. This is good on bread or by itself. Tastes like pie filling and makes a good dessert.

Coffee is a fun one. I like to buy whole beans, and crush them myself (just ask George). It's easy, and doesn't take long. I just put them in a poke bag, set the bag on a board and beat the snot out of it with a log. I put some sugar in the bag with the coffee, so that it is presweetened. I put two teaspoons of it into my tin cup full of water, stir it up, and let it boil for a few minutes. After you remove it from the fire, add cool water to bring the level back up. Give it a stir and let the grounds sink to the bottom. As long as you do not swirl your coffee cup, you won't be drinking any of the grounds. Others express concern when they see this, but Aldona will attest that she thinks my coffee is pretty tasty, and she can be particular about her morning java.

Well, there's a couple ways to cook with period ingredients. None of which need refrigeration, and should last a weekend in your haversack. Give one a try at the next event.

Other helpful tips:

- Buy CURED slab bacon. Not just salt or smoke *flavored*. Check with the butcher counter if you are unsure. Properly cured bacon (I am told) will keep a weekend in the haversack without doing you any harm.

“Slab” just means it is not sold sliced. You slice it yourself. Bring your bacon or other meat wrapped in brown paper, tied with string, and stuffed in a poke bag. It’ll get good and greasy, so you may want to line your brown paper with waxed paper first.

- Poke bags are excellent for just about everything else. These are easy to make, so make a bunch of them in all sizes to keep your food covered and clean. After my brilliant folded paper envelope filled with brown sugar got wet and attracted ants last weekend, I’m thinking that some kind of small food-safe tin would be better for sugars and the like.
- Use two cups, or a boiler and a cup. When cooking with one cup at High Tide, I had to finish my coffee before I could begin making dinner, and then I had nothing to drink with my dinner. If you plan on soaking beans, you’ll definitely want a boiler or a second cup, as you will be without it for at least 24 hours if you try to get by with just one.
- Cook over the coals, not the flame. The grate is excellent for steaks, but for boiling or frying, I prefer a nice even bed of coals. Rake out a small amount of coals from the center of the fire. Place a stick on either side of the coals and rest your pan, cup, etc on the sticks just above the coals. If you notice a cool spot, get new coals. By the way, that blackening on the outside of your tin ware helps prevent rust.
- Lastly, wash your hands! Dysentery is very period, and very preventable. Keep critters and bugs off your food, and keep your hands clean. The porto’s sometimes have hand sanitizer. Or, better yet, buy a hunk of

lye soap and wash 'em with canteen water the old fashioned way.

Well, it ain’t Martha Stewart, but so far these recipes have worked for me. I make no claims or promises as to the consequences of following my example – don’t come to me if your intestines begin to revolt. Good luck, and let me know what works for you.

Respectfully submitted by Sgt Jones

Some good reading on the topic:

Hardtack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life by *John D. Billings*

Rebel Cornbread and Yankee Coffee: Authentic Civil War Campfire Cooking and Camaraderie by *Garry D. Fisher*

A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray by *William C. Davis*