

Drying Out

Dehydrating your own food can be a cheap and tasty alternative to prepackaged backpacking meals

by Allison Woods

Drying your own food can be easy and rewarding. It's most easily accomplished in a commercial dehydrator, widely available, and not expensive. A cheap alternative to buying a new dryer is to find one at a thrift shop, and even cheaper than that is to use one that belongs to a friend. Food dryers are pretty bulky, so this is the best option for the space-impaired.

It takes some trial-and-error to get it right. Some foods aren't amenable to having all of their liquid removed or won't properly rehydrate. In order to avoid making big mistakes, start with just a bit of food to see how it holds up to drying before embarking on any major dehydrating endeavor. Dry a small amount, then if it's a food that requires dehydrating, try soaking in water for a few hours to see how well it reconstitutes. I haven't found any rhyme or reason to what dries and reconstitutes the best with one exception: in order for a food to dry well, it must be low in fat. Fatty foods turn into a disgusting, greasy mess.

Here are some things I've personally had good luck with:

Ground beef

Get the leanest ground beef you can find. Cook as usual, adding herbs and spices, like taco seasoning for example. Add flour while cooking if you want the GB to be in any sort of gravy. Dehydrate until pieces are hard like little pebbles. GB takes some time to

rehydrate, soak for a couple of hours for best results. Use as you would at home. Backcountry burritos with dried refried beans taste just like mom was out there with you!

Jerky

I don't make jerky, but WTA Assistant Crew Leader and WT contributor Kim Brown does a fine job with it, so I asked her how she likes to make it. Kim says, "Grab a turkey loaf, or some real turkey, A can of chili peppers, your choice of hotness, cumin, and red pepper flakes. Mash the chili peppers to make a paste. Add cumin to taste. Douse turkey pieces in

the chili mix, then throw on the dryer. Sprinkle red pepper flakes on 'em & fire up the dehydrator." Sounds vague, but I've eaten the stuff, and it's sheer heaven, formed or sliced, and dried into the shape of a stick.

Salsa

Homemade or store-bought, salsa dries well and adds punch to bland food. Spread on a piece of plastic wrap in the dehydrator, dry until you have "salsa leather." Reconstitute.

Vegetables

I've had brilliant successes and spectacular failures with vegetables. **Carrots** are one of my favorites. Peel,



Fruits, veggies, salsa, and even ground beef can all be preserved for the trail in a home dehydrator. All you need is a dehydrating machine and some patience.

Gear We've Tried

and slice or shred, then dry. Sliced carrots rehydrate into a lovely side dish all by themselves. Shredded carrots can be added to any dish to increase nutritional value, or reconstituted into a salad when paired with cumin, shallots, salt, parsley, sugar, and lemon juice. Carrots take a while to rehydrate.

Jalapeno peppers

These take well to dehydration, and add punch to dried pho noodles, eggs, and burritos. Ditto for shallots and onions, and any citrus zest. Easy as pie to dry, and all provide big flavor boosts.

Fruit

I don't dry a lot of fruit, mainly due to easy availability, but there is one fruit that you've just got to try drying. The lowly **watermelon** can't be left behind when talking about drying your own food. Get a seedless watermelon (you'll hate yourself if you don't), remove rind, and slice thin, about 1/4 inch. Don't be tempted to slice it any thinner, or it will be fragile when dry. Dry until it looks leathery, at least 12 hours. Store with layers of wax paper or plastic wrap to avoid making a sugary mass of dried fruit. An entire watermelon will fit in a zipper-lock bag. Its intense and unique flavor will keep you smiling in the backcountry.

Not so good...

Potatoes dry well, but I tend to avoid doing them due to availability of cheap sources of various forms of dried potato. Dried **peas** are easy to come by, as are different kinds of dried **tomatoes**. **Mushrooms** are a piece of cake to dry, but good-quality dried mushrooms are readily available at a reasonable price. **Green beans** and **celery** haven't reconstituted well for me. **Tofu** was recommended by one book on the subject, for me, a complete disaster. **Chicken** and **fish** were just plain gross. Freeze-dried chicken is expensive, but it's available and palatable, and smoked salmon

keeps for several days. The grossest of the gross was when I tried to make dried **gazpacho**. Blech.

I can't emphasize enough that dehydrated foods are different from freeze-dried, and all that will be eaten reconstituted will require rehydration. Some can sit for an hour or so, but

others benefit greatly from an all-day soak. If you are traveling, simply put some water in the zipper-lock bag with the food, tuck it in your pack, and off you go. The flexibility and reduced cost make home-dried foods a worthy addition to any backpacker's chow bag.

Neat Stuff!

Funny Looking But Comfy

New hiking sandals from BITE offer an alternative to boots



By Allison Woods

"I can see by your outfit that you are a spaceman."

Funny looking? Heck yes! Comfy enough to pound out a few miles? Definitely. Local footwear company BITE has a line of technical sandals made just for hikers. We tried the Trail Hi, a kind of high-top gladiator sandal. Outfitted with supremely cushy soles, these puppies are made for going the distance. The

buckle and hook-and-loop tape system was positive and easy to adjust, and the toe guard saved us from innumerable bruises and stray rocks. The buckle system lies over the top of a sort of stretchy fabric, protecting the feet from painful pinching from the plastic buckles. Caveat: sandals are a real treat for your feet, but debris is an inevitable side effect of open-architecture footwear. Proceed with caution near gravel.