

Adult Meal Planning 101

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Several of the Troop's adults asked that I share some of my insight into meal planning for a basic camp, such as Powhatan WMA, Davis Farm, Hatcher Island or most recently, Pedlar River. I'm happy to do so.

In this paper, I'll provide some guidance about the basics of meal planning, provide a sample plan and shopping list and finish with some tips from experience.

First of all, don't be intimidated! It doesn't have to be hard and you don't need to have a lot of experience since we all do this once the first time. It does involve some work well ahead of time to gather ideas, find out what folks would like and then plan, plan, plan... And don't ever feel you're being measured against others. We can all succeed or we can all fail. Just keep your head, work your plan and ask for help when you need it -- it will be there, ready and waiting.

We generally eat better, eat more and eat healthier than the Scouts. That means we bring more food and cook more than the average Patrol. But we don't work any harder at it than we have to -- involving other adults throughout the weekend lightens the load on the Grub Master. It also maintains our esprit de corps and opens opportunities for real help or a backup plan when it is needed.

Get Your Plan Together

Create a meal plan and let everything else follow from that. Plan for 4 main meals -- Saturday breakfast, lunch and dinner plus Sunday breakfast. Generally, Friday and Saturday evenings include cracker barrels (snacks). Find out who will handle those. If no one, line up a volunteer or add it to your meal plan.

Find out what's planned for the weekend with the Scouts and arrival and departure times. Our basic weekend camping trips are normally centered on activities for the younger Scouts. We usually break camp on Sunday morning early enough to arrive between or after services at the Church. The adults are busy on Saturday in activities with the Scouts, so lunch may need to be flexible with little clean up; Sunday morning's departure might not allow enough time for another big cooked meal and clean up afterward. Find out and plan accordingly.

About Menus

Consider the basic needs of the adults and their meal preferences. I've yet to hit a serious dietary need, but that's not out of the question. Ask about their meal preferences if you aren't sure -- do they expect a cooked breakfast each day, for example? It's a sure bet dinner will involve some prep and cooking, but lunch might depend on the day's activities or the weather (hints: for winter or cold weather camping, a hot lunch is a welcome meal; in warmer weather sandwiches are a better choice). What about desserts? This is good opportunity to involve others -- many Troop adults have brought or made great desserts in the past. Ask around, line up some more volunteers to help out. Give them some idea of what you are planning then let them offer up their ideas. Decide on the best and sign them up to help.

What's My Meal Plan?

Experience and imagination are the keys to creating a meal plan. It's easier to set up a meal plan around one or two ideas, whether we've done them in the past or they are totally new. Think about food at previous camping trips. What did you like? What didn't work (not that it means it would never work, it just wasn't well received)? Do you have a theme in mind for, say, dinner? I have done several evening meals with that in mind -- a Tex-Mex BBQ and an Leaders' Chili Cook-Off, for example. Maybe you like stir fry. What else would make a stir fry-centric meal complete? How about "comfort food" in the colder months -- hot, familiar and filling? The possibilities are only limited by a sense of what YOU like and imagination.

Here's a simple meal plan for one of the Troop's basic camp weekends:

Saturday breakfast: pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon or breakfast sausage, toast, coffee, milk and juice.

Saturday lunch: sandwiches or hot dogs, chips, lemonade or iced tea (also left over juice or milk from breakfast).

Saturday dinner: grilled chicken, potato salad or slaw, corn on the cob, a bread or rolls, lemonade, coffee or iced tea. Dessert can be pudding, a dutch oven recipe pie or cobbler.

Sunday breakfast: hot or cold cereal, fruit, toast, juice, milk and coffee.

These meals includes a number of staples: bread, milk, juice, cheese, coffee, condiments (catsup, mustard) and the basic spices -- salt & pepper. You'll add other condiments, like BBQ sauce, mayonnaise, hot sauce, pickles or relish, depending on your actual meal plan.

Get the Plan Up to Size

How many adults (and younger brothers) are going? That is probably the biggest single cause of angst for any meal planner. How much do I need to feed this small army?

Many meals come down to how many servings or pounds per person. A good place to start is a good cook book, like *The Joy of Cooking*. The editors do a thorough job providing rules of thumb about servings per person and how to buy ingredients accordingly. Recipes on the backs of staples, like Bisquick or a package of dry chili mix, are also very handy guides to servings and other ingredients you'll need. A word of warning: never take the servings per person at face value. I've found them off by a factor of at least 2 for our folks...we eat a lot, remember?

So, it's back to the meal plan...

Saturday breakfast:

Pancakes: I'll assume 4 to 6 medium sized pancakes should be enough for each person. How much Bisquick do I need? Don't forget any eggs and milk needed for the mix, plus pancake syrup.

Scrambled eggs: 2 to 3 eggs for each person.

Bacon or breakfast sausage: probably 1/3 to 1/2 pound each, before cooking.

Toast: maybe one or two slices for each person

Milk: can't really tell, but 1 gallon ought to be enough and we can finish it off later...

Juice: maybe 1 gallon and we can finish it off on Sunday...

Coffee: better figure on 2 or 3 pots, 8 to 10 cups each

Then comes the shopping list:

This is for 15 people, so for Saturday breakfast I'll need...

A box of Bisquick

4 dozen eggs

3 pounds of bacon and 2 pounds of pork sausage (maybe more?)

1 large loaf of bread

1 gallon of milk

1 gallon of orange juice

1 pound of coffee, plus sweetener and creamer (or we can use milk)

1 small bottle of pancake syrup

Then you work through lunch, dinner and Sunday breakfast the same way to develop your food shopping list. Be sure to shop the specials and look for low fat alternatives where possible. Adults will eat fresh vegetables and fruit, so add them where they make sense. Keeping the overall cost down and being sensitive to the adult concerns over diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure are always good ideas.

What else would you need? This should include several rolls of paper towels, Ziplock bags big enough to store any ingredients you'll prepare at home or to package items before they go in a cooler, aluminum foil,

cooking oil and large trash bags. Even though many of us have our own cups, plates and flatware, be sure to add enough picnic plates, bowls, plastic flatware and cups to provide one full set per person for just about every meal. Anything left over can go into the adult's cook box.

Logistics

Learn about where the Troop is going. What can you expect there? Does the camp site have running water, a fire pit or permanent grill? Most of our basic camp locations don't, but it doesn't hurt to find out. Is this going to be car camping or do you need to pack everything in? Powhatan and Pedlar River have a pretty long walk from the parking area. Hatcher or Davis Farm are also primitive but it's easier to bring in some bigger equipment, like a grill or a smoker.

The logistics of the trip will have an effect on your meal plan. If your idea for dinner included some grilling (open fire or charcoal) but no open fires will be permitted, then you need an alternate plan for dinner and a Coleman stove.

Know Your Equipment

You have a choice -- use the Troop's adult cook box, your own gear or a mix of both. If you're going to depend on the adult cook box, take it home ahead of time. If you have a meal plan in mind, think about anything you'd need not in the adult cook box. Can you bring what you need from home or do you need to change your meal plan? How many stoves or dutch ovens will your need? Don't feel that you need to buy anything if you can borrow it or use Troop gear. Ask around.

You'll need some basics, regardless of whether you use Troop gear or your own. These will include kitchen items to prepare and cook food, such as sharp knives, mixing spoons, a cutting board, a can opener, meat fork, serving spoons or a ladle -- all depending on your meal plan. You can count on needing several coffee pots -- the adult box has at least two, many of us bring additional coffee pots. Beside brewing coffee, they come in handy for boiling water for hot chocolate or tea.

I've been camping with my own equipment for at least a 15 years, so I've always planned my meals largely around my gear, using Troop equipment to supplement what I don't have (or don't have enough of). It's your choice, but you must know your equipment.

If you plan to bring your own equipment (all or some), pack it in a plastic storage box large enough to hold everything and secure it -- if it doesn't lock, use a bungee cord to keep the lid on and critters out.

Food Prep, Storage and Handling

I try to balance out the meal plan within the limits of what can safely be brought to a camp. What works at home may not travel well, so I'll find substitutes for some fresh items that might not stay fresh in a cooler. You can also use substitutes to simplify food prep (example: I make jambalaya from scratch at home but I've found a good box mix as a starting point for camping). Less to pack, less time to prepare and the results are consistent.

Fresh foods (unfrozen) and all dairy products must be cold when you leave for camp and iced until used. This is easier said than done if you can't resupply your ice, but there is a trick. Hard freeze any fresh meat products 2 days in advance, and use them in your cooler to help keep the fresh foods cold. Your 10 pounds of frozen chicken will do the work of 10 pounds of ice for at least a day. This will make your real ice last that much longer.

Depending on the weather, you may be able to keep fresh fruit or vegetables out of the cooler (but bagged to keep critters out). During hot weather, it makes sense to keep them chilled in a cooler. If you put your fruit and vegetables on ice, keep the bag of ice intact and drain the cooler every day; that will minimize water build up. No one really likes a soggy banana!

Bread should be kept in a storage box, if possible.

Dry ingredients and prepackaged dry food should be stored in an air tight, moisture and critter-proof box (like Sterlite or similar storage box). Humidity and the morning dew will render them soggy in a day if left out.

Tip: Keep all your spices together in Ziplock storage bags. That makes them easier to find and keeps out the weather. Nothing is more irritating than finding out your garlic powder has turned into a solid brick.

Tip: It's better to keep food locked up in your vehicle (if possible) until you need to set it out for prep or meals. Animals can and do find it, mainly overnight. Even if you can't smell it, they can. You'd be surprised how much damage a raccoon or squirrel can do trying to get into even the toughest plastic storage box!

Mike's Tips and Picks

Some rules of thumb I use:

Chili -- a full batch for 5-6 adults, use 1-1/2 times the meat in the recipe, slow cooked stew meat is better than ground beef; cut the beans to 2/3's what the recipe requires.

Corn on the cob -- a full ear per person

BBQ Chicken -- 2 to 3 pieces per person for thighs and drumsticks; 1 full quarter per person

A recipe like stew, beans and ham or jambalaya -- a full dutch oven for 5 to 6 adults

Soup - 1 gallon for 8-10 people

Spaghetti -- a full batch of sauce for 5-6 people

Sandwiches -- allow 1-1/2 sandwiches per person using 1/4 pound of sliced meat, each (it will even out over the whole group)

Hamburgers, Hot Dogs -- allow 2 or more per person

Chips -- a large bag will serve 8-10 people

Pork chops -- 2 per person

Smoked Sausage or Kielbasa -- 6 servings per pound

If you plan a "mixed grill" where everyone gets a little of each, limit what you buy to about 1 pound per person, before cooking or a total of 4 pieces per person (such as chicken plus smoked sausage).

Seasoning secrets:

For chili, jambalaya or other "hot" recipes, I prefer to add mild peppers and juice, sparingly, rather than load up the mix with chili powder or hot sauce. Peppers add flavor plus some heat; every adult can add more seasonings to taste; the most flavorful hot sauce I've found is Crystal, but it's hard to find in most stores.

Basic grilling seasoning is 1/2 part salt plus 1 part pepper and 1 part garlic powder. Use less salt if desired.

All purpose seasonings that really kick up a grilled or stewed recipe:

Old Bay (really useful in stews)

Zatarain's creole seasoning (good on anything including corn on the cob, I garontee!)

Montreal Steak seasoning (indispensable for grilled beef and pork, also for ground beef, ground turkey and stew meat.)

General purpose Italian seasoning blends for vegetables and prepared spaghetti sauce