

Campfire Cooking

Basic Equipment

Cooking on a campfire is one of the most primitive forms of cooking, yet it can provide excellent meals if you have the right tools and a little knowledge. You will need fire gear including safety buckets of water, a shovel or stick for moving around hot coals, tongs for manipulating food and possibly some heavy gloves to insulate your hands from the heat.

Making a Cooking Fire

Fires used for cooking are specialized. What you are trying to achieve is a consistent amount of heat that you can use to heat the meal, and a bed of coals is the best way to achieve consistent heat. Keep in mind that a fire takes some time to build up and burn down into coals, so start the fire as much as an hour before you want to start cooking to ensure that you have a good cooking fire.

Use a fire lay such as a tee-pee that is quick burning to get larger hardwood logs reduced to coals. Use a stick or shovel to scrape fresh coals out to one side and continue to feed the other side with hardwood fuel to produce a supply of coals. Use the coals for direct heating, Dutch Ovens or to grill over on a grate.

Basic Methods

Direct Roasting on flames is the easiest form of cooking on fire. Cub Scouts can put a hot dog on a stick and get it hot on a basic fire. Basic breads, S'Mores and kebobs can be cooked in this way. An advanced version of this is to suspend meat on a spit over the flames and rotate it, such as roasted chicken or pig.

Suspended Dutch Ovens are good for stews and soups. A sturdy tripod built over the fire can hold up a Dutch Oven by the handle. You can use the pot lifter to hook the handle and tie into the loop at the top of the lifter to attach to a suspension point. Sometimes at historical reenactments you will see elaborate iron work tripods with s-hooks of various sizes to allow the cook to adjust the pot up and down to get an optimal heat.

Foil Packs in Coals is a great way to cook on a campfire and is taught in Cub Scout leader training. Usually ground beef is put into a foil packet with root vegetables and seasoning. The foil pack is placed in a bed of coals to cook for a while, turned one or more times and comes out very moist and delicious. There are many other varieties of vegetables and proteins that you can cook in a foil pack—just make sure there is some moisture source in the pack to prevent the food from burning.

Dutch Oven in Coals produces some very tasty meals but there are some challenges in cooking over campfire coals instead of charcoal. Use a stick or shovel to pull off an amount of coals that forms a 1 foot diameter circle. Place the Dutch Oven on top of those coals with enough room for air to circulate between the oven and the coals. Use rocks or a lid trivet to elevate the oven if you don't have legs on the oven. Scoop some more coals and place them on top of the Dutch Oven. Cover the top rim of the oven completely and then fill in the middle of the lid with a thin layer of coals.

Another use for the Dutch Oven is to flip over the lid and place the top side into a bed of coals to allow the inside to be used as a griddle cooking surface for pancakes, eggs or bacon. Keep in mind that bacon grease is very flammable but is a good substitute for cooking oil.

Grate for Grilling

Every guy should know how to cook meat on a grill. Start with a bed of coals and suspend a cooking grate above the coals about a foot. Cook hamburger, steak, chicken, fish or vegetables on this grate once the heat is right for cooking.

To check for heat levels hold your hand about five inches above the cooking surface (about the height of a Coke can). Count the number of seconds that you feel comfortable holding your hand in that area to determine the relative heat. 2-4 seconds is very hot, 5-7 seconds is medium and a good range for cooking, 8-10 seconds is low heat and good for slow cooking.

Show off Methods

Cowboy style is cooking a steak directly on a hot, flat rock. Clean the rock before lighting the fire with a little water, but make sure it is dry once the rock gets hot. It is said that Cowboys put a steak on the rock to sear it and used their knife to turn it once for a medium-rare steak. I personally prefer a well done steak on a grate, but this method has a lot of flare...and sometimes you just forget the grate...and tongs...so it's good to know you have a backup plan.

Cooking in Orange Peels is an interesting concept. Cut the top off of an orange about ¼ of the way from one end. Scoop the fruit flesh out of the peel, leaving a nice bowl. Use this bowl to cook brownies or eggs directly on coals. The moisture of the fruit peel prevents burning and imparts a nice sweetness to the food.

Bread in double cans yields fresh bread or muffins on the trail! There are two schools of thought here, dry and steam baking. Dry baking involves burying a large outer can (like a coffee can) 2-3 inches in coals. Place pebbles or sand in the bottom of the outer can and then place a smaller can inside the first can supported by the pebbles so that it doesn't touch the hot bottom of the outer can. The inner can contains the bread dough and should be about ½ or ¾ full when starting to allow for the bread to expand during cooking. Loosely cover the outer can with tin foil and check on the bread after 30-45 minutes. It's done when you see a nice golden brown crust forming and your buddies will likely smell the goodness when it's getting close.

An alternate version is to add some water to the bottom of the inner can and to let the steam bake the bread. It won't form a brown crust, but it won't burn either. The bread/muffins are done when you can poke a small stick or toothpick into the top of the bread and it comes out dry. Add enough water to keep the supporting pebbles wet, but not the inner can.

Example Meals

Kebabs on a stick

Each person can assemble their own meal or one chef can cook for everyone. Put out 1-2 inch chunks of meat such as steak tips or sliced pork sausage, sliced vegetables like onions and peppers and maybe zucchini and mushrooms. Poke a stick through alternating layers of food so that the meat is spaced out and can cook. Place the sticks over the fire and rotate often until the meat is cooked all the way through. A little bit of black around the edges of the peppers is usually a good sign that the kebob is done if cooked over medium heat.

You can supplement this meal with stick bread by wrapping Pillsbury Dough around a stick and roasting it in the flames while the kebobs are cooking.

Red Beans and Rice mix with Andouille Sausage

Cut the Sausage into bite sized chunks, either ¼ inch coins or cut into small chunks. Brown the sausage in a small skillet or the Dutch Oven lid using some coals. Place Red Beans and Rice into the Dutch Oven bottom or other pot with appropriate amounts of water according to the box. Suspend the Dutch Oven over the fire using a tripod, some large rocks or a cooking grate so that the pot is in a "low heat" or zone (simmer, not bake). Add in the sausage after it's brown and continue cooking as directed by the recipe until done.

Silver Turtles (a.k.a. Hobo Meals)

Allow each person to assemble their own meal. Use heavy Aluminum Foil in the wide size and create squares of foil for each person—double foil layers if you are using cheap foil. Put a wet root vegetable like sliced potatoes or onions in the center of the foil. Put a handful of ground beef on top of the first layer and then add one or more vegetables on the top of the beef. Season using salt & pepper or other grill spices such as Montreal Steak seasoning. Create a steam pouch by pulling up two opposite sides of the foil and fold or roll them down to near the top of the food. Fold in the other two sides to create a loose pouch that can contain some steam in addition to the food. Use cheap mustard to write your initials or other symbol on the pouch and place the pouch in a bed of coals with the mustard facing up. Turn the pouch over when the mustard is blackened and cook for another 5 minutes.

The quality of food can greatly improve the taste of a foil pack. Experiment with better cuts of meat. Add other sources of moisture such as citrus fruit and peppers and experiment with seasonings. A fish steamed with lemon and dill or a steak cooked with lime and cilantro are very good meals.

Dutch Oven Lasagna

Using any good lasagna recipe, there are typically three layers to be placed in the pan: Sauce, Cheese and Noodles. In a Dutch Oven, put in the sauce layer first, completely covering the bottom of the oven. Cover the sauce with dry lasagna noodles, breaking them up as needed to fit the pan, and finally add the wet cheese layer.

Repeat this stack until you run out of ingredients by ending on a cheese layer. Save a little hard cheese to sprinkle on the top of the lasagna about 10 minutes before it's done.

For the sauce I like to use canned spaghetti sauce with browned hamburger or sausage chunks. Crumbled Spicy County Boy sausage is amazing. Diced Onions or sliced Mushrooms are good additions.

For the cheese layer, I like to use ricotta cheese, one or two eggs and grated Romano cheese add in some Mozzarella cheese if you want more flavor.

Cook per the recipe as if it were a 350F oven, usually around 45 minutes to an hour.

Chicken on the BBQ

Place whole chicken breasts on the grill at medium heat. Cook each side about 5 minutes, and then brush on BBQ sauce. Cook for another 7-8 minutes per side until there is no pink inside the center of the chicken.

Cook a side of asparagus lightly coated in oil, rotating frequently for about 10 minutes.

Or grill foil packs with a shucked ear of corn with butter and salt & pepper for 20-25 minutes.