



Best green camping food choices

BY EARTHA STEWARD
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY,

Dear Eartha,

Do you have any tips for the best green choices for backpacking food and such? There are so many choices for packaging these days, and I'm never sure what is best.

— Steve, Silverthorne

Great question, Steve! There's nothing like packing up your supplies for a few nights in the wilderness, carefully balancing weight and comfort. And there's really nothing like a good long backpacking trip to remind you about the difference between wants and needs.

I remember packing for the longest trek (eight days, seven nights) that I've ever taken with a pack. As I carefully portioned dried foods of all sorts, I wondered how the dehydrated beans would taste day after day. But after wandering deep into the woods and settling into the weight of the pack and the amazing efficiency with which your body operates, they tasted heavenly each and every night.

These days, there are complete gourmet meals in flashy packaging with images of sturdy backpackers on mountain peaks. You can have your linguine with clam sauce, and eat your chocolate cake for dessert, too. But what about the packaging?

Most of the prepackaged dehydrated gourmet meals come in pouches designed to be lightweight, sturdy and heat resistant. This typically means that they are a "hybrid" package, made with aluminum or paper and plastic lining.

As most of you know, these hybrid packaging solutions are truly great when it comes to lightweight food storage, but are generally not recyclable or biodegradable. This rule doesn't just apply to gourmet backpacking goods; the same goes for chip bags and juice pouches.

I haven't yet found a solution that is truly recyclable or biodegradable, but am still willing to sacrifice those small packages for some wilderness time. Of course, there are always varying shades of green.

One great company testing some new models in backpacking food is Mary Jane's Farm. You can check them out at www.maryjanesfarm.com — click through the Food Pantry section to find the numerous options. Wilderness-ranger-turned-organic farmer, Mary Jane offers delightfully nutritious gourmet backpacking meals in non-aluminum paper packages and — even better — bulk options to pack up in your own reusable bags or containers over and over again.

From the organic spinach and cheese mashed potatoes to the amazing breakfast options, these prepacked, dehydrated and healthy meals provided me with a whole new level of bliss in the woods. Next, I'm going to invest in some bulk options to pack up for the season of outdoor adventures (or maybe even those rushed dinners that come up so often).

Another great tool for enjoying meals in the backcountry came across my lap recently. Headed in for a two-night stay not far away from home, Mr. Steward and I left some room in our packs and stopped at the liquor store to purchase an evening reward for the climb in. Reaching for our newest favorite beer, Dale's Pale Ale in a can, my eye caught a wine packaged in a slim "aseptic" container (the kind used for soy milk or shelf-stable juices).

Occasionally a sucker for sleek new packaging choices, the French Rabbit pinot looked too cute to pass up. I convinced Mr. Steward that the one container of wine was the weight winner compared to that six-pack of cans and that the pinot would go nicely with the Indian cuisine the first night, so off we went.

I admit that peeling off the plastic cap and sipping wine from an aseptic container took a little getting used to. But, when we finished dinner and cleaned up for the second day trek, the cap screwed back on the bottle tightly, making this new-found backpacking treat even more worthy, though still not recyclable.

Someday we'll find a way to make a completely biodegradable package to ease our eco-conscious as we enjoy our gourmet meals in the wilds of nature. Until then, I say: trek on and enjoy your meals in the woods! As long as you're packing out what you've packed in, spending some time in contemplation of the beauty of our home planet, you're doing something really, really good.

Ask Eartha Steward is written by Carly Wier and Jen Santry at the High Country Conservation Center. To submit questions or column suggestions, contact them at eartha@highcountryconservation.org

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