

# River Trip Meal Tips for Slackers Like Me

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## THERE ARE THOSE WHO RELISH THE MEAL PLANNING

and execution involved in raft trips. They pore over cookbooks, prepare and freeze sauces, and calculate the exact number of charcoal briquettes necessary to grill 19 ribeye steaks and bake a pineapple upside-down cake on the same evening. When it's their turn in the meal rotation, they impale cherry tomatoes on bamboo skewers and grill them lightly before layering them with fresh basil leaves and mozzarella balls, drizzling each stick with beads of balsamic glaze. They whip cream and mix it with strawberries, pooling the concoction on shortcake medallions prepared over the coals in a Dutch oven.

I am not one of those people.

I'm a capable cook. Everything I make is satisfactory; occasionally certain meals are great. But when I'm on a river trip, I have little interest in spending time in camp dishing up gourmet cuisine when I could be reading on the river's edge, running in the cool of the morning, or burying my niece in sand.

If you're someone who delights in the satisfaction of a well-stocked camp kitchen, producing miracles from dry boxes and coolers, and reducing fellow trip members to groaning puddles of speechless pleasure, read no further. You do you. But if you, like me, are perfectly fine with the trip meals being perfectly fine—if not memorable—then follow these five easy principles of meal planning.

## 1. Organize by meal type, not by day

I know! Your mind is blown.

River trip meals are almost always assigned by each meal team taking a certain number of each type of meal. But one of the most valuable knowledge nuggets I mined from somewhere deep within the recesses of my logistical brain was the understanding that concentrating one's focus on certain types of meals allows for greater creativity, more efficient use of condiments, and less waste.

Let's say you happen to have a river trip with, conveniently, four different parties represented. One party takes breakfasts, another lunches, a third snacks and appetizers, and the fourth signs on for dinners. The beautiful simplicity of this scheme is that, with only one meal type to concentrate on, you can dedicate yourself with Labrador-like loyalty to that cause. Breakfast people specialize in breakfast. Lunch people focus on lunch. And so on.

"Oh, but dinner is so much more complicated," the naysayers wail. "It doesn't have to be," I counter.

True, dinners often involve more ingredients and, typically, more expense. But there's usually a larger party on the trip—like a family—that deserves to bear more of the burden of providing more of the calories and meal-preparation effort than, say, a lone boater or a couple.



If your group can surmount the philosophical hurdle of assigning meals by type and not by day, I promise, you may never go back.

## 2. No one cares if you make the same awesome thing twice

My brother, who often attends raft trips solo due to his family's performing arts schedule, has become the breakfast master. The first year he was assigned this duty he brought us to our knees with a breakfast we had heretofore not experienced, despite our collective decades of experience packing food and leading expeditions for Outward Bound.

All hail the Greek breakfast. Oh. My. Goodness. Olives. Hard-boiled eggs. Feta chunks. Salami. Hummus. Fresh figs. Voila—breakfast, easy-peasy, magnificent.

Although my brother rotates Greek breakfast with the standard crowd-pleasers—yogurt and granola, muffins and fruit, and bagels with toppings—there's not a person among us who would protest if we woke up each morning to my brother laying out the artichoke hearts and red peppers with prosciutto.

Lunch follows the same script, with a variety of proteins, sauces, vegetables, fruits, and—OK c'mon, we're on vacation—chips. Proteins: ham, turkey, prosciutto, cheese, tuna or chicken salad (both of which are premixed in a ziplock bag with mayo to be added at each lunch). Sauces: hummus, Bitchin' Sauce, tzatziki, baba ganoush. Fruits and vegetables: carrot and celery sticks, cabbage, pickles, apples. Breads for those who want them: bagels, sourdough, pita, crackers, or chips.

Appetizers are often as simple as a couple of bowls of pretzels and nuts or chips and salsa, or as relatively fancy as a basic charcuterie board, depending on how much time will elapse between appetizers and dinner.

Because I've been in charge of dinners for the past few years, I've developed a standard rotation: brats and potato salad, pulled pork, Buddha bowls with chicken, pasta night, chili, and burritos/fajitas/tacos. I cook the meat in advance and freeze it. If grilled onions and peppers are involved, like in fajitas, I grill those in advance and freeze them.

## 3. Wing it for the final meals

Remember all those trips when you got to the takeout, opened the boxes and coolers, and said "We could launch again tomorrow and the only things we'd need to buy would be ice and beer"? Try to hang onto that memory when you're planning meals. We always count on a leftovers smorgasbord for at least the final breakfast and lunch. It always works out.

## 4. Make dinner leftovers into lunches or snacks

If you bring extra tortillas, you can create a surprisingly popular snack or lunch item for the following day by rolling up dinner leftovers into a wrap. The trick is to do it right after dinner, while the rice, pasta, meat, and whatever else is warm. Heat each tortilla so it bends easily, spoon in a portion of dinner leftovers, roll it up, and wrap in foil. The next day, bring out the wraps and I guarantee you'll have some takers.

This, of course, results in having extra lunch foods. This, of course, is why you don't plan the final lunch or two into the meal count.

## 5. Condiments are key

Never underestimate the power of a good sauce to transform a meal from fine to fabulous. Salsa, hot sauce, garlic sauce, pesto, chipotle mayonnaise, cilantro-lime cream sauce, sesame-ginger sauce—figure out a way to fit them into the food box.

Just as a single sparkly individual can spice up a river trip, the right sauce can make a simple meal sassy. ■