

Fast Food: A Backpacker's Guide To Grocery

A soup-to-nuts guide that'll get you through the supermarket and on the trail faster than you can say "express lane."

by: Susan Newquist

Assembling food for a "get outta town fast" backpacking trip can be about as much fun as a three-wheeled shopping cart. Unless you pack nothing but energy bars or have a stockpile of freeze-dried food in a closet at home, you find yourself speeding through the grocery store, grabbing bags of this and boxes of that, and ultimately forgetting key ingredients for tomorrow's dinner.

So what's a hiker to do when he or she can spare only 20 minutes for shopping?

Relax-here's an aisle-by-aisle guide to nutritious, quick-cooking foods that taste great in the woods and stand up to bumps and bruises along the trail. We've also prepared a tasty menu and shopping list, so you'll have time to ponder the most important trail food decision of them all: plain or peanut M&M's?

Know Your Store

Most grocery stores are laid out with produce at one end, milk and bread at the other, and everything else in between. Here's where to find the best foods for backpacking.

- Produce aisle. Apples, oranges, and crunchy baby carrots make mouths happy at lunch and snack times. Cucumbers and bell peppers travel well and combine with hummus to make a great pita sandwich. Bags of ready-made salad complete with dressing are good for the first night's dinner. Garlic, shallots, and small onions give any dish a welcome kick. Hit bulk bins for trail mix, candy (chocolate-covered espresso beans or gummy bears), and dried fruit (mangos, blueberries, and pineapples).
- Cereal aisle. Instant oatmeal makes for easy packing, but if you want more variety, look for the individual cups of hot cereals from Fantastic Foods (Banana Nut Barley or Cranberry Orange Oatmeal) and Health Valley (Terrific 10-Grain!). Pick up zipper-lock bags in the paper and plastics aisle for repackaging. Granola, fruit, and grain bars come eight to a box, which is enough for two breakfasts and two snacks for two people. Choose something that tastes good but can stand up to the rigors of pack life, such as Nature Valley or Quaker Chewy granola bars. Fruit leathers are usually on the same shelf.
- Snack, candy, cookie, cracker aisle. Most major cookie and snack-mix makers have jumped on the resealable packaging bandwagon. I like the taste of Pepperidge Farm cookies best, but have found that Nabisco Fig Newtons suffer the least damage while packed. Cheese-on-wheat and similar sandwich crackers serve as snacks or lunch supplements. Grab gum, hard candies, and a bag of M&M's (repackage in zipper-lock bags). Hershey and Nestle both make delicious little candy balls in resealable bags.
- Beverage aisle. Powdered sports drinks are usually located in the juice aisle, but you may have to settle for flavored drink mixes. Avoid the unsweetened mixes so you don't have

to lug extra sugar. Flow-through coffee and tea bags, instant coffee (Maxwell House Sanka sells a box of 20 individual packets), and hot chocolate will give you a morning caffeine boost. Cocoa lovers can choose from tubs (repackage in zipper-lock bags), cartons of 8 to 12 packets, or single-serving envelopes of gourmet cocoa. Instant spiced cider usually resides next to the cocoa. Packaged dried fruits are often in this aisle. Ocean Spray Craisins, Dole CinnaRaisins, and all Sun-Maid dried-fruit bags reseal between snacks.

- Baking aisle. Instant dinners often require butter or oil. Hain is the only brand of olive oil that I've found in a plastic 12-ounce bottle. Replace butter in instant dinners with Crisco shortening for 50 percent less fat and less risk of melting in your pack. Look for foil-wrapped Crisco sticks in plastic containers. Powdered milk for granola, coffee, or instant dinners is found in this aisle. The larger box (without a spout) contains trail-handly 1-quart packets.
- Rice and pasta aisle. If you're willing to pack along butter and powdered milk, just about any instant rice, noodle, or grain dinner is fair game. Otherwise, choose instant dinners that come with sauce in squeeze packets. Rag? Express! is a prime candidate for spaghetti lovers. Mac and cheese fans should seek out "deluxe" versions (Kraft makes a tasty one), which usually feature the squeeze-packet sauce (look for the picture on the front of the box). Lipton pastas and rices call for milk and butter, but are edible without either. Near East's boxed selections (just add olive oil and water) can help you break out of the same old carbs. My favorites are Creative Grains Roasted Pecan and Garlic, Tomato Lentil Couscous, and Couscous with Toasted Pine Nuts. Look for instant hummus and dried refried beans in this or the soup aisle.
- Soup aisle. Cream soups need milk, but broth soups from Lipton, Knorr, and Wyler's cook up quickly with just water. Individual cups from Fantastic, The Spice Hunter, Nile Spice, and Health Valley go beyond the norm with flavors like Creole Vegetable Couscous, Creamy Asparagus Soup, Kasba Curry, and Corn Chowder with Tomatoes. Potato fanatics should snag the individual cups of instant potatoes, which, unlike the large boxes, already have milk and butter added. Canned meats and fish usually sit near the end of this aisle. Look for StarKist tuna in 3- and 7-ounce foil pouches. The packets cost more, but weigh less than a can. Meat lovers should consider Libby's processed meats and Spam, which don't require a can opener.
- Dairy and bread aisle. You'll find tortillas and pitas near the cheese. Kraft and Helluva Good brand cheeses come in resealable packaging, and Laughing Cow makes small, individually waxed cheese pieces. Individually wrapped string cheeses travel well. Peanut butter, jelly, and honey in plastic containers, plus Honey Sweet powdered honey, bread, and bagels are often opposite the dairy section.
- Deli case. Near the deli, a stand-alone cooler houses imported cheeses, plus hummus and other meatless lunch spreads in plastic containers. Dry sausage, hard salami, jerky, and pepperoni are usually close by.

Grocery List

Here's what you'll need to feed two people on a weekend hike. See "2-Person, Weekend Meal Plan"

- **Produce aisle**
- 1 bulb garlic; 10 to 16 ounces trail mix; 2 to 3 ounces dried apples; 7-ounce resealable bag Dole CinnaRaisins
- **Cereal aisle**
- 2 or 3 packets or cups oatmeal; 1 box of 8 granola bars (you'll need 6)
- **Cracker & cookie aisle**
- 7-ounce resealable bag Ritz Snack Mix; 7-ounce resealable bag Mini Oreo cookies
- **Beverage aisle**
- 1 canister Crystal Light (contains 6 tubs of drink mix; you'll need 2 to 4); 1 box flow-through coffee bags, hot chocolate packets, tea bags, and/or cider mix
- **Baking aisle**
- 1 small bottle cooking oil
- **Rice & pasta aisle**
- 1 package Rag? Express! Sweet Tomato and Garlic; 1 box Near East Creative Grains Roasted Pecan and Garlic
- **Soup aisle**
- 6-ounce can chicken chunks
- **Paper & plastics aisle**
- Gallon-size zipper-lock bags
- **Dairy & bread aisle**
- 12 medium tortillas; two 8-ounce packages cheese; 2 bagels
- **Deli case**
- 6-ounce stick pepperoni

2-Person, Weekend Meal Plan

	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Breakfast	At home	Oatmeal with dried apples and half of Dole CinnaRaisins; 2 servings beverage	2 granola or energy bars; 2 servings beverage
Lunch	At work or home	2 bagels with pepperoni and cheese	Half a 7-ounce bag Ritz Snack Mix; 4 tortillas filled with cheese and pepperoni
Dinner	Ragu Express! Sweet Tomato and Garlic dinner; 4 tortillas topped with garlic and melted cheese; half a 7-ounce bag Mini Oreos; 2 servings beverage	Near East Roasted Pecan and Garlic dinner with canned chicken; 4 garlic-cheese tortillas; half a 7-ounce bag Mini Oreos; 2 servings beverage	At home
Snacks	2 granola bars	Half of trail mix; half a 7-ounce bag Ritz Snack Mix; 2 small tubs Crystal Light lemonade; 2 granola or energy bars	Half of trail mix; half of Dole CinnaRaisins