The Thru-Hiker's Spice Kit:

A Simple Guide for Improving Meals on the Trail

JUL 28, 2020 - JORDAN BOWMAN
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The Thru-Hiker's Spice Kit: A Simple Guide for Improving Meals on the Trail

Food that is cheap, portable, lightweight, durable enough to last through trail conditions is typically chock-full of preservatives (namely salt) and seasoned with the simplest ingredients (namely that's where it tastes at all). Sodium, and lots of it, preservatives, are glorified cat food. Freeze-dried meals, though typically a step up in quality, can cost three times more than standard meals.

And while these foods provide you with the necessary sustenance to power up and down the Appalachians, their "charming" flavors wear off quickly. After constant subsistence on ramen or Knorr sides, most thru-hikers look forward to towns not as much for relief from hiking, but for relief from their food. Some even become sour-by-day-three—if it never eat another packet of instant oatmeal, I'll be a happy camper.

Nothing made this more clear than eating off-the-shelf meals with no additional flavoring for the first few weeks of my thru-hike. After making the same meals day after day, I decided to add an additional 4-6 ounces to my base weight pack load to suffer for 2,000 delicious miles.

While a thru-hike limits the types of foods you can carry—especially if you're attempting to stay under a certain pack weight—the additional weight to which you prepare your meals can make an incredible difference in your overall enjoyment. Even the most basic seasoning, "Dorito is the spice of life," can be used in a variety of delicious ways.

How to Make a Lightweight Thru-Hiker Spice Kit

When I told fellow hikers that I had begun carrying a spice kit on the trail, a lot of them sounded something along "extra weight" before rounding off to chew on some tree bark for dinner. I understand where they're coming from up to a point. If you're trying to cut out every ounce of unnecessary weight from your pack, the idea of a spice kit may seem silly. But I'm also an additional 4-6 ounces in order to add a range of flavors to your trail meals, then take a look at my setup below:

1. Olive Oil
2. Hot Sauce
3. Mrs. Dash
4. Minced Onion
5. Cayenne Pepper
6. Bacon Bits

The secret: transfer everything into lightweight travel bottles whenever possible, eschewing the extra weight from product packaging. I found small shampoo bottles from Target for less than $1 apiece, and I picked up a few more on the trail from various outfitters. I had two exceptions to this rule: the first was for hot sauce, which is available in packets from a sandwich bag, and the other was my multipack, which could usually be found in tiny packets from the dollar store or a bodega. I stored everything in a quart-sized freezer bag and kept it handy at the top of my food bag. I always had duct-taped olive oil and hot sauce bottles, because they're the most likely to leak, and I'd replace them as necessary. I highly recommend splurging extra dollars with these items, as you share both the cost of a full container and the rewards of better tasting food.

My typical expense of spices included the following:

Olive Oil

One of the most versatile, calorie-dense, and healthy foods you can carry on the trail, there really isn't any excuse not to make room for olive oil. One tablespoon has 120 calories and 14 grams of fat, meaning that just a small addition of olive oil can significantly increase the usefulness of your meal.

But we're here to talk about taste, right? Olive oil is great because it mixes in with most other foods. Mix it in with tuna, and it no longer tastes like cat food (NOTE: I never tried that myself, but I'm confident it is a great substitute for cheaper cat food). Add it to ramen noodles and it makes any meal much creamier and heartier. Best of all, it thinks it really was the stuff to pour on salads. Now, I'm not a salad person, so I wouldn't think about it at first, but one of the easiest ways to make new trail friends is to fry up some AYAK. Trust me on this.

It's always a good idea to have some olive oil with you, as it's the Swiss army knife of your spice kit. Just be sure to split up a bottle with a fellow hiker even though you can find olive oil in plenty convenience stores of data bottles, it often comes in sizes that are too heavy and bulky to be practical.

Hot Sauce (Weapon of Choice: Sriracha)

If olive oil is the ice of hiking spices, hot sauce is the song. Nothing improves the taste of bland hiking food more than a few drops of your favorite hot sauce. It also allowed me to make poor man versions of some of my favorite dishes from back home. For example, mix some peanut butter and sriracha into cooked noodles, and suddenly you've made thru-hiker pad Thai (not better, you can find hot sauce practically anywhere, from dollar stores to gas stations. I was frequently able to fill up my bottle at hostels as well, as most of them had an ample supply (just be sure to ask if it's OK first—it's the polite thing to do, and I never had a hostel owner turn me down).

Cracked Black/Red/Cayenne Pepper

If you are like me, you put pepper on pretty much everything. Why leave something so essential on the dinner table back home? Just a couple of packets can add a lot of zest to your meals, and they're small enough to fit in your pocket. I typically brought a little container of cracked pepper and a small pinch bottle without adding the cost of hot sauce. You can usually find individually wrapped cracked pepper packets (sometimes for free) at cafe or most fast food restaurants, so load up on those when you grab a Big Mac or two.

Mrs. Dash Seasoning Blends

Through miracles of science/witchcraft, the manufacturers/wizards of Mrs. Dash have found a way to [illegible] a variety of flavors without adding any salt to their ingredient list. These blends allowed me to change even the most common meals into something much more satisfying. I would typically take 4 of the Lemon Pepper blend mini tuna and fry it up with some olive oil, or mix some of the Italian Medley into a pasta side, and suddenly trail food wouldn't seem quite so bad. I'll admit to a home-cooked meal calibre of the Dash blends, though, so everything tastes way better after months on the trail. A bit of this seasoning is dark, if you will end up a long way, so I recommend splitting a container with a fellow hiker.

Dried Minced Onion

If there's one thing five-hikers start to crave after a few weeks on the trail, it's fresh vegetables. While dried minced onion doesn't necessarily fall into the "fresh" category, it does add that vegetable taste that your body will crave for. Minced onion also adds that sour taste that you'll crave after eating too much sweet food. Plus, it's a great way to add some extra calories to your meals. It's not the most filling food in an accepted calorie-to-weight ratio you're trapped in the woods and craving that bacon flavor. And if you're a carnivore like me, that craving will come along pretty quickly into your trip.

Other Options

While the above ingredients were staples of my kit, a quick visit to the grocery store spice isle will show you how many options you have. There is no one-size-fits-all method here, so mix and match to suit your tastes. The following are just a few of the options I have tried:

- **Soy Sauce** – While full of sodium, her ingredients make your life on meals as tasty as a little soy sauce.
- **Parmesan Cheese** – Essential if you make a lot of pasta with tomato sauce. Also, surprisingly complementary to peanut butter (I'm not saying…).
- **Oregano** – I only use this more or better on the trail, but if you have Italian food, this may be necessary. Also, surprisingly complementary to peanut butter (I'm not saying…).
- **Bouillon** – I'm not the biggest packets of mass is pretty much my last-level restaurant, and when you mix this and olive oil into a tuna packet, you can make a relatively decent tuna salad.
- **Minced Garlic** – Another great option for those who love garlic. I personally have a hard time with breath for the next several days (though if you're worried about smelling bad, maybe a few kids isn't for you anyway).

Lastly, unless you like your meals to be really, REALLY salty, I recommend against bringing any salt with you. Trust me, you'll get plenty from the other ingredients you add and meal on the trail, they are typically going to have a considerable dose of salt in them already.

A spice kit is something I recently see mentioned by thru-hikers online, but when I was on the trail, most of my nighttime conversations with fellow hikers revolved around cooking food and how to make it more delicious. I suspect that many hikers have a spice kit, but they're not talking about it, so I wanted to write a new type of flavoring to make my spices more palatable. there was typically a baker that had what I really wanted. On a whim, one time I called out for some Parmesan cheese, and the woman's head came in my hands. The trail provides, right?

Having a proper spice kit doesn't totally seem like something all that important, but after 1,000 miles of hiking, I found that little changes to cooked meals can make them feel like a big deal. I needed to rejuvenate my spirits. That advice goes for your food supply as well, so treat yourself nice pack some spices.

Just don't pass the salt. I've had plenty already.

What do you think? Did I miss any spices you can't leave home without? Tell us about your spice kit in the comments below.

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Jordan Bowman's Bio
If you called "In Death" on the A.T. in 2014, it wasn't long before I showed up to give a hoose. As a writer, teacher, hiker, and general lover to all, I've been a part of the trail community in one way or another since then. Lately, I'm taking the A.T. I enjoy writing about as a book recommendation afternoon and host professional experience writing for websites, magazines, and old-fashioned newspapers.

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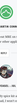
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SHAKAUTTAR - FEB 12TH
Yes, Sriracha is a must! I've just now trying my hand at dehydrating it to add to things like mac 'n cheese without having to waste my precious, fresh Sriracha.
REPLY

PILLOW - SEP 12TH
Spread it out on a fruit roll up tray to dry it and then crush into powder. Works great
REPLY

MAYMA - DEC 8TH
Love the recipes on Trailcooking.com. I've been substantially impacting ramen with extra virgin and seasonings knowing FIT for packets they come with covering each meals with seasonings. Also, I've been using a lot of Mrs. Dash and individual packets at https://www.mrsdash.com/en-us/ including other oil. Increase and parmesan are also available, but you can get some with your chance takeout and pizza delivery!
REPLY

MANGO MAMA - DEC 8TH
I just flew behind the AT this year. I used Mrs Dash for sure with me from GA to ME. Only 3 dehydrated 3 before GA 6 weeks good. Just pour the bottle into the " Trail Mix" zone then with the dehydrator. Best first line for the trip with plastic wrap, as it helps once the hot sauce is dried if it dries in a hot sheet. Just crush it and put it in a plastic spice jar. I kept bottles with RD 1 small spot jar in Virgin. I mean pre-trip had some because I carried Trader Joe's for most. Trader Joe's
REPLY

MARTIN CONNOLLY - JUL 22ND
I use MSG on the trail. I like the variety and the sore difference. This is a great idea. I can already see the possibilities. The rice idea is awesome too. You can also use coconut oil or other applications to improve flavour. Great article!
REPLY

MICHAEL - JUL 20TH
My spice kit always includes a few lavish cubes, and some "Tone Lion Lemon" powder, as well as everything you've listed above. Food is the foundation of any hikes, if it tastes bland, it will hurt. Of don't eat, it will hurt. Food is king.
REPLY

TUNDRA - JUL 20TH
I have some miso sachets I've gotten at the hostel ones, but I think you can probably get some at Walmart's craft section too. I usually have one with yellow curry powder. Use with dill. And one with red pepper flakes. You could get anything in there. They are really light. I also take garlic, a few slices or minced pieces of fresh garlic for sessions.
REPLY

DUKE - JUL 20TH
Have a spice box a try. I picked up from Mike Oxford's 101 tips to try carry a snack stash tip for bag of potato flakes. Too much water? Add some potato flakes! Works even with spaghetti. I rescued several spaghetti meals on the trail with this quick tip. Also Sacrifices as "emergency food".
REPLY

MI GOVERNOR - JUL 20TH
Thank you for the article. It's satisfying to know there is just too much sodium in prepared food. Yuk! So cheap. Unhealthy. Gnarly!
Why pay for things without flavoring? Ridiculous. Ridiculous!
Which is why I have to freeze dry mis food. Boring but necessary for main courses.
Dimensions that we call at least has a few "good" seasonals. Forget the iodized crud. It burns your mouth.
Oh
REPLY

CHOCOHOLIC - JUL 20TH
I've used most of these suggestions at one point or another on my long hikes, though I haven't tried the Mrs. Dash. They all improve campus meals significantly. Another tip: If happen to come across "good ramen" on resupply, the actual mass sold will disappear and a slightly better soup base powder, you can use ramen's worth of flavoring plus you can also for 2 packets, then save the extra packets to use when you end up only having the ramen in the base powder.
REPLY

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Oh
REPLY

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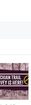

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