

- Backpacking Food Suitable for Philmont Shakedown –

Preparing Philmont-Style Meal Packets

[2021 Edition]

Philmont Food Packets - Every fall, Philmont offers for sale unused food packets from the just concluded summer, including breakfasts, lunches, and dinners (that is, complete meals). Each meal packet serves two trekkers. Prices are reasonable; supplies are limited. Obviously, these packets are the best possible “practice” foods for Philmont shakedowns - in many cases, they’re identical to the meals being served the next year. In order to secure enough meal packets for all your shakedowns, it’s important to order early - meaning in September and October for treks occurring the following summer. Trail menus for previous years are posted at: http://philmontdocs.watchu.org/other_documents.htm (go to the bottom of the page). Call Philmont for ordering information (505/376-2281).

Camping Outlets - Dehydrated Backpacking Food - If Philmont meal packets are unavailable (or do not appeal), Crews can put together impressive meals from various dehydrated backpacking food vendors, notably Mountain House, Backpacker’s Pantry, and Alpineaire. Main entrees, side dishes, and desserts are available. After 40 years of trial and error, many of the main entrees are simply amazing. Most large camping outfitters carry a pretty decent selection of such meals; however, they may not have adequate numbers of individual items unless you order in advance. These items can also be ordered on line (for example, from the Campmor or REI catalogs). The quality is excellent (esp Mountain House); however, the prices are rather high. Costs can be reduced somewhat by purchasing only main entrees and maybe unusual desserts, and getting everything else from local grocery stores. There is usually a price break if you order in bulk - meaning you would be better off price-wise if you order all your shakedowns’ meals in a single purchase as opposed to one shakedown at a time.

Military Rations – “MREs” (Meals Ready to Eat) are widely available on ebay and may also be purchased by anyone with Military Exchange (i.e., PX) privileges. Types of meals and prices vary widely. These are not recommended for Philmont shakedowns because they don’t resemble anything provided by the Ranch.

Backpacking-Suitable Food Available at Supermarkets - With the exception of most of the main dinner entrees and some of the desserts, most of the items in most Philmont meal packets or their equivalents are available for purchase at any large supermarket. This is the least expensive option for creating backpacking meal packets; however, it also requires the most effort. That said, there is now a very impressive array of backpacking-suitable food items on the shelves of most grocery stores - far more than 30 years ago, and significantly more than just 15 years ago. The following list represents what is typically available - some stores will have even more.

As a general piece of advice when preparing backpacking meals that do not duplicate or closely imitate Philmont meals, it has been my observation that Scouts are much happier and “fuller” if they eat small amounts of five or six different items versus large amounts of two items - even if the total amount of food and calories are identical. And this is better from an overall nutritional viewpoint as well.

The following list is subdivided into typical breakfast, lunch, and dinner items. Obviously the designations are somewhat arbitrary, and many items can be used at any meal.

Breakfast Items:

Oatmeal - available in bulk or in individual packets - at least a dozen different flavors available.
Cream of Wheat - Note: Not a popular item with most Scouts, but can be a “change of pace” for long-term treks. Different flavors available. Better if dehydrated fruit bits are added.

Grits - Note: Another item that isn’t popular with most Scouts, but (again) can be a “change of pace” for long-term treks. Different flavors available. Also better if dehydrated fruit bits are added.

Add-water only Pancakes, with Dehydrated Syrup (Notes: Pancakes are very slow to prepare, and we rarely bring fry-pans on backpacking trips; dehydrated syrup is available at some camping stores (however, it’s rather pricey)).

Pop-Tarts (or Equivalent) - multiple flavors available; “frosted” are far more popular.

Granola Bars, many variants on these - avoid “soft and chewy” type - they are significantly heavier, melt too easily in hot conditions, and turn into jaw-breakers in very cold conditions. “Nature Valley” granola bars are the driest and lightest. Many different flavors available.

Nutra-Grain or similar “Breakfast” Bars - multiple flavors available.

Rice Crispie “Treats” (or equivalent); several flavors available.

Cereal - multiple flavors; available in individual boxes or in bulk cartons. Note that cereal can be eaten dry, with cold water, or with dehydrated milk; most Crews eat dry or with water, because dehydrated milk is not a popular item with most Scouts.

Granola mix (equivalent to cereal, but a far more substantial choice); again, can be eaten dry, with cold water, or with dehydrated milk.

Raisins, craisins (dried cranberries), dried cherries, or other dehydrated or semi-dried fruits – good alone or for adding to oatmeal, Cream of Wheat, grits, or cereals.

“Fruit Rolls” (or equivalent); several flavors available.

“Pemmican Bars” - Available at Camping Outlets - Expensive!

“Bacon Bars” - Available at Camping Outlets - Expensive!

“Fully Cooked” Bacon - Expensive! - A good complement to pancakes.

Tang, or equivalent.

Hot Chocolate.

Hot Cider.

Hot Tea (needs sugar); can also be made cold.

Coffee (needs sugar and non-dairy coffee creamer). VIA packets are very popular!

Lunch Items:

Crackers - many different sizes and types! Triscuits are probably the most durable cracker.

Cracker packs (individually wrapped packages containing 6 “filled” crackers (peanut butter or cheese)); available in bulk, single flavor or varieties. There are also small bags of “filled” mini-crackers; for example, mini-Ritz crackers with cheese or peanut butter.

Tortillas, pitas, or bagels (good for weekend and multiday trips, not for very long-term treks).

Rice cakes - not a substantial meal item, and also bulky (but light). Several flavors available.

Peanut Butter (beware of peanut allergies!); available in one cup plastic containers and also in squeeze packets (however, the latter are not commonly stocked at grocery stores).
Jelly; available in squeezable plastic containers (much less messy than jars) and also in squeeze packets (again, the latter are not commonly stocked at grocery stores). Multiple flavors.
Squeeze-Cheese (not commonly available at stores) or canned cheese spreads (pressurized; the latter is more convenient and less messy, and can be used over multiple days).
Cheese sticks - individually wrapped, multiple flavors available (cheddar, colby, mozzarella, pepper jack, mixed, etc.). Sharp cheddar has the longest life and doesn't get overly soft or separate out oils as easily as the other types.
Sealed block cheese is also usable for single meal use; again, sharp cheddar is best.

Slim Jims (or equivalent beef sticks; many different types and flavors are available – avoid “hot” or overly spicy versions).

Beef Jerky - many different flavors available. A few are sold in individual packets; most come in larger packages suitable for 4 - 6 people. Again, avoid “hot” or spicy.

Preserved Pepperoni or similar preserved (hard) beef “sticks.”

Deviled Ham or chicken (or equivalent “spreadables”) - several flavors available; good with crackers or (for short-term trips) on small tortillas or hard mini-bagels.

Fish in foil packets or easy-open tins (“cups”) - Tuna, salmon, crab, shrimp; tuna is the least expensive. These are best if mixed with small plastic or foil packets of salad dressing or similar dressings. Avoid cans that require can-openers - heavy, and heavy trash too.

Fish “salads” in foil packets or easy-open tins (“cups”) - Tuna Creations, Salmon Creations.

Gorp (or Equivalent - “Trail Mix”, “Swiss Mix,” etc.) - available in individual to large packages; much less expensive in taken from bulk bins; beware of nut allergies.

Nuts (cashews, peanuts, etc.) - available in individual to large packages; much less expensive in taken from bulk bins; peanuts are the least expensive (by far). Beware of nut allergies.

Cookies, Oatmeal Raisin, Fig Bars, or other dry/fruit cookies, many available. Many cookies are now available in individual packets (4 - 8 cookies); these small packets can be purchased in bulk. Dry cookies are significantly lighter, and therefore are preferred for backpacking. Graham crackers can be used with peanut butter and/or jelly spreads.

Pringles or “thick chips.” Multiple flavors; available in individual cans or in larger tubes. Note that bagged potato chips or Dorito's are bulky and easily crushed! - “Sun Chips” seem to be the most durable of the various chip products.

Pretzel Sticks (the thick ones); again, avoid bagged, bulk pretzels - too bulky, easily crushed!

Bread Sticks (hard) - not a durable item, but can be backpacked if protected from crushing.

Granola Bars (see comments under Breakfast).

“Power-Bars” (or Equivalent, several flavors available); however, adults with weak teeth and Scouts with braces should avoid these products.

“Camping,” “Nutritional,” or “Protein” Bars (Clif bars, Larabars, Hoo-ah bars, many others).
Be cautious about weight (many are heavy); avoid chocolate coated bars (they melt).

Brownies (heavy, but a popular item and loaded with calories); better than chocolate candy bars.

Mini-doughnuts (6-packs); multiple flavors.

Candy Bars - M&M's (plain or peanut) are best to resist melting. For maximum calories, Snickers, Baby Ruths, and Butterfingers are best; however, all are chocolate coated and suffer from heat. Most candy bars are available in a variety of sizes.

Hard Candies (available in bulk) - Excellent for hiking snacks. Cinnamon and mint flavors tend

to be the most popular.

Dried Fruits - Apples, Apricots, Cherries, “Craisins” (cranberries), Dates, Figs (prunes), Mangos, Pineapples, Plums, Raisins, and various “Tropical Mixes.”

Dehydrated Fruits - these are much lighter than dried fruits, but are limited to Apples and Bananas. Dehydrated apples tend to be easily crushed.

Drink Mixes - Lemonade, Ice Tea, Gatorade, etc., many variants available - avoid diet-type drink mixes!

Dinner Items:

Ramen Noodles, Cup-o-Noodles (or Equivalent), Nissin meals, etc. - many flavors available. Many of these are available both in individual sizes and larger plastic trays, or in foil packets (look for Bear Creek and Lipton for the latter). Note that Ramen-type noodles are a popular item, but long-trail hikers avoid them as being “empty calories.”

Stove-Top Stuffing, several flavors available; addition of bacon bits or chopped up beef jerky makes these into much better meal items.

Knorr or Zatarains Rice Dinners - many flavors available - note that (contrary to the instructions) margarine or milk are not needed. Caution – easy to burn on pot bottoms – better to let sit for 10-15 minutes without continued heating to absorb the last liquid (as opposed to boiling it off).

Knorr Pasta Dinners - many flavors available - again, margarine or milk are not needed, and again, easy to burn on pot bottoms.

Idahoan Potato Sides, Hungry Jack Potatoes, or equivalent items; several flavors available.

Macaroni and Cheese - need a small can of evaporated milk, or a package of squeeze or real cheese, in order to make reasonable cheese mix. Available in various flavors. Again, addition of bacon bits or dehydrated meat makes these into much better meal items.

Spaghetti or “rotini”-type pastas (requires sauce); rotini-type pastas are easier to deal with in a backpacking setting. In my experience, there are still no good “dehydrated” spaghetti sauces available; the dehydrated sauces at the grocery stores require cans of tomato paste, while those at the camping stores are rather expensive and not very substantial. It may be preferable, despite the weight, to buy a plastic jar of sauce at the grocery store. This would be reasonable for a short term trip with easy, short hikes.

Casserole-type meals in a box (requires tuna, salmon, chicken, or some other fish or meat).

Sealed meats (in heat-sealed plastic) - good for one meal only - salami, pepperoni, dried beef, summer sausage, etc.

Sealed meats (in foil packets) - also good for one meal only - chicken, spam.

Canned meats (in easy open cans or tins) - these are rather heavy - good to add to various rice or pasta meals, such as macaroni and cheese, or to Stove-Top Stuffing mixes - spam, Vienna sausages, (real) bacon bits, tuna, salmon, chicken, etc.

Dehydrated Meals (usually diced) from Camping Outlets - beef, chicken, and turkey are available; very expensive!

[Note that there are also a large variety of “dehydrated” sauces that (along with meats) can be added to various rice, noodle, or pasta meals to improve their taste. Salsa can be similarly used, but it’s rather heavy (Note: Mountain House makes dehydrated salsa).]

Dehydrated vegetables from Camping Outlets - green beans and corn are best, several others are

available. In general, not too expensive.

Instant pudding (add-water type, or you'll need to also bring powdered milk). Jello "No Bake" products are widely available, and come in multiple flavors.
Other Dehydrated Desserts from Camping Outlets - many available, rather expensive!

Miscellaneous Items:

Vitamins.

Spice kits.

Hot sauces, Hot Mustards, BBQ sauces, Soy sauces, etc., may be desirable for flavoring.

Preparing Philmont Style Meal Packets – Each packet should serve two people. It may be necessary to make packets that serve four because certain items don't come small enough, but try to stick with two if possible. Use zip-lock plastic bags to mimic the Philmont sealed plastic packets. Each meal packet should be labelled with its meal and number designation, again to mimic the Philmont meal packets; for example, Breakfast 9, Lunch 5, Dinner 8. Again, doing this for multiple shakedown is a fair amount of work, but it will familiarize the Crews with what they can expect to see at Philmont, and also how they should equitably divvy up and mark meal packets for carrying in their backpacks.

- Dr. Bob