

## Outdoor Cooking at High Altitude

Faye and I grew up in Eastern Idaho in an area and at a time when camping was the primary recreational activity. Money was scarce just after the depression and that simply was the thing that the people in our area could afford to do. Camping was in tents and cooking was outdoors either with gasoline stoves or over the coals with cast iron pots. We learned to make do with what we had. Recipes were simple and made from “scratch.” Sourdough bread recipes were common. We refer to that as “roughing it” now. We both have a pioneering heritage and spirit. So camping and outdoor cooking has, and continues to be, our primary recreation for over 52 years. In short we consider ourselves as the “outdoorsy” types. Wildwood provides an excellent environment to continue that tradition.

Our early experience in the Upper Snake River Valley of Idaho was primarily between 5000 and 7000 feet elevation. The exception was a three year stint in New Jersey where we camped along the entire eastern seaboard including eastern Canada. That area was primarily from sea level to about 3000 feet which most recipes are made for. Our elevation at Wildwood is at 9200 feet elevation. We have learned from experience over the years that cooking at high elevation requires adjustments to recipe ingredients, mixing, cooking times and temperature.

I researched and accumulated some literature on “high altitude” cooking over the years. I have found that some of the best high altitude cooking research has been done at Colorado State University. Some of my literature, recipes and advice are over 20 years old but my current research finds that much of it is still in print. A more recent CSU High Altitude Food Preparation Guide states, “Colorado State University has a long tradition of high-altitude baking research. Over the years, researchers with the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition have developed altitude tested recipes for use at high altitude areas, supported by CSU’s Cooperative Extension and Agricultural Experiment Station. As a result, CSU is able to offer the publications to consumers.” You can call (970) 491-6198 for information or go on-line to [www.ext.colostate.edu](http://www.ext.colostate.edu). Click on Colorado State University Extension, click on the gold Storefront button; click on Nutrition, Health and Food Safety; then click on High Altitude Food Preparation. Most of the pamphlets are now about \$2.75 each. I believe they contain excellent advice.

The high altitude guide mentioned above outlines in good detail the reasons behind the need for adjustments. It explains why, for example, water boils at 198 degrees F at 7500 feet and 194 degrees F at 10,000 feet. So things cook at lower temperatures at Wildwood and

consequently cooking times are longer. It also spells out why and how much specific ingredient adjustments are required at given elevations. For example, baking powder, shortening and sugar should be decreased. Liquids, eggs and temperature need to be increased. A lot of this has to do with strengthening the cell structures so that baked food doesn't fall. This is all good information. Of course there is no substitute for experimenting and the above advice is a good starting point.

The tradition that Faye and I carry on with at Wildwood is with sourdough and Dutch oven cooking. Sourdough is a tradition that we associate with the West and Alaska. In the "olden days" it was common for a mother to pass along her sourdough yeast strain called "starter" to a daughter. My aunt was given a start of the Bills family sourdough when she got married in 1928. She gave me a start of her sourdough in 1978 along with the family (grandfather Bills) banjo. So in keeping with tradition I have conscientiously maintained the integrity of the sourdough yeast strain and learned to play the banjo as well. But that is another story. My sourdough strain is well over 100 years old and I have split it and passed it onto our son Jeff who is also continuing the tradition of Dutch oven cooking and banjo playing.

I have a number of Dutch oven reference and recipe books, some of them quite old. However bulletin 496A from CSU specifically addresses the use of sourdough at high altitudes. It also has been revised to reflect changes in Coloradan life styles. Shortcuts, yeast boosters, and convenient methods that make some traditionalists cringe have been used. Recipes have been altered to reduce fat, salt and sugar. Some CSU recipes are designed for use with food processor, dough hook, automatic bread maker, and microwave ovens. Nutrition values are now in vogue so CSU also developed a chart listing the nutritional values of their high altitude recipes for old timers turned modern. You can also get bulletin 41, "High Altitude Food Preparation," and bulletin 513A, "Making Yeast Breads at High Altitudes."

Sourdough has a unique flavor and also differs somewhat from strain to strain. Traditionalists are very proud of their strains. We have sampled sourdough all over including making it when we camped throughout Alaska. We knew a neighbor when we wintered in Mesa, Arizona that won blue ribbons year after year at the Arizona State Fair. Some of the best tasting sourdough bread that we ever tasted was on Fisherman's Warf in San Francisco. Of Course sourdough is not limited to bread. Sourdough can be used to give a unique flavor to all kinds of baked goods such as: biscuits, cakes, cookies, muffins, bagels, zucchini-nut bread, pizza crusts and more. Just imagine the taste of golden brown sourdough pancakes with blueberries topped with maple syrup, or golden brown baking powder biscuits dripping with honey out of a Dutch oven.

Store-boughten breads don't take kindly to back packing. Squashing reduces them to a doughy mess. You can take some sourdough starter along in a zip-lock with a sack of flour. Flour, baking powder, salt, margarine, powdered milk and water are all that is needed to make a variety

of trail breads. "Bannock" was bread that we made in the canoe country at my scout camps in the Adirondacks in upstate New York. You just make a 1" thick layer in the bottom of a fry pan with no grease, bake on wood coals for about 10 minutes, and it is ready to eat. When you are tired and hungry, it is fast and "ok." My mother used to fry dough that was left over from her bread loaves and fry them in grease. We called them scones. With a little honey, they are much better than ok. "Damper or ash bread" can be made from the above ingredients by placing the dough between some leaves or tin foil, pouring some ashes on top and baking for a while. No pan is required. You can roll out some dough like a sausage, twist it around a stick and bake it over coals like a hotdog or marsh mellow. Some of these things can be fun activities for your kids and grandchildren at Wildwood.

Speaking of store-bought bread as we called it. We grew up on home-made bread. Faye makes our bread the old fashioned way today but with one exception. She uses a bread mixer with a hook but pats it down twice and bakes it the way she was taught as a girl. We tried the modern bread maker for awhile but it soon gave way to the traditional method. Once in a while we get caught short and have to buy a loaf but that doesn't happen often. Making our own bread at Wildwood works great as it is a once in a lifetime experience to buy a loaf at Hartsel.

The other tradition that we have carried on is cooking with cast iron cookware that we now call Dutch ovens. In the early days cast iron pots were as common as the front door. They were also used by the mountain men, on cattle roundups, wood cook stoves and recreational camping later on. I helped my mother make our own lye soap by stirring hot grease and lye in a very large cast iron pot over a fire outside. I even remember her boiling clothes in it.

It has always been said that iron cookware enhances the flavor! Even in later years my aunt's cast iron cake pan was known to all at our family reunions as the "dog Pan." I don't recall how it got that name but getting a bite of applesauce cake out of the "dog pan" was like eating Hors d'oeuvres. Cast iron gave way to stainless steel in the '50s. So Faye and I received stainless steel pots for our wedding which are lighter, prettier and more convenient than my Dutch ovens. However, as the old saying goes, "that is in the eyes of the beholder." Good cooks all over are re-discovering the good taste that comes out of cast iron. So don't underestimate the value of the old blackened iron pots that may be hiding in the bottom of the cupboard.

The old iron pot with a new Dutch oven moniker is making a comeback. Several years ago, I was a staff member at a mountain man rendezvous for youth 15 to 17 years old. Along with my black powder range duties, I was in charge of the Dutch oven cooking. One night I had ten Dutch ovens going with two stacks of five ovens each. I had them stacked on top of each other with enough cherry and peach-cobbler to feed 117 young men and staff. Everyone was quite impressed. All of that experience and tradition carries over at Wildwood.

About the only time that our relatives and visitors at wildwood don't get Dutch oven cooking is if the weather is too inclement. I have about ten Dutch ovens of various types and sizes from 8" to 14 ". We like to make baking powder biscuits, potatoes and bacon, fried chicken and baked beans. We've even made some excellent Mexican Food in them. Desserts are usually cobblers, dump cakes, pies or whatever happens to hit our fancy at the time. A Dutch oven is actually an oven and you cook anything in them that you would cook or bake in a range oven. My son and sons in law are now getting into the Dutch oven cooking and are starting to take over. That gives me a chance to brew up and enjoy my "cowboy" coffee. Our son Jeff has become known as a Dutch oven expert in his own right down in Chandler, Arizona.

Jeff passed along a nifty idea that he uses for his scouts and other groups. It works great at our family gatherings at Wildwood. The kids (and everyone else) look forward to the mid afternoon snack of fresh doughnuts. We take a 12" Dutch oven and heat up a couple of inches of vegetable oil in it. **Caution-Hot Oil!** We have previously planned to have several tubes of prepared biscuit dough from the grocery store on hand. Set out one plate with powdered sugar and one with sugar plus cinnamon. Break open a tube of dough and test a small pinch of it in the hot oil. Give the kids each a wafer of dough and let them poke their finger through it to form a doughnut. Pop it into the hot oil. Turn it over, then take it out when golden brown on both sides. It is hot, so be careful. Let them roll it in the sugar plate of their choice. Presto, you have instant hot doughnuts that are delicious and a lot of fun. The kids (and grownups) will go through tubes of them in no time-guaranteed.

Our outdoor cooking doesn't stop with Dutch ovens. Our company always looks forward to breakfast cooked and eaten outside. We have two, double-burner, propane cache cookers and a 24" griddle for each set. Our traditional breakfasts are: hash browns; bacon or sausage; fried or scrambled eggs; and pancakes, blueberry, sourdough or plain or baking powder biscuits. We cook it all on the griddles and put it in hot Dutch ovens to keep warm. Good food, family and our beautiful Wildwood setting-what more could we ask for?

I've covered a lot of information that is short on detail in this article. We would enjoy having you stop in for additional information and tips on sourdough, Dutch oven care and cooking, or just for a visit and some "cowboy" coffee. We're located at 1555 Olympic Circle, Filing 2, Lot 274.

Del Bills is a 28 year Wildwood resident; past Board President; retired electrical engineer; long time Boy Scout leader; a rural farming/ranching boyhood heritage; with an intense interest in nature. You can contact him at [www. delbertbills@msn.com](http://www.delbertbills@msn.com)

## OUTDOOR COOKING at HIGH ALTITUDE



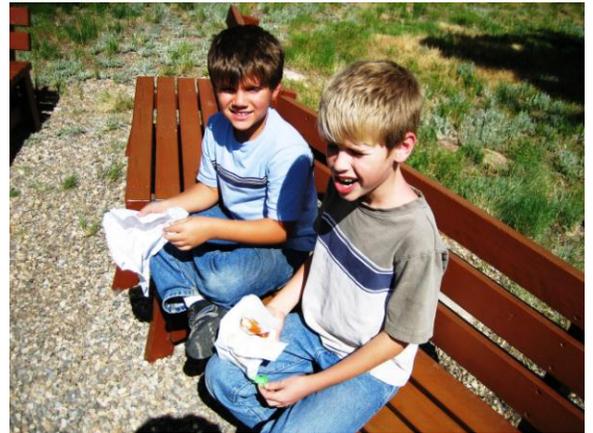
A Dutch Oven Dinner on the Deck



Family Enjoying Dutch Oven Dinner



Jeff Cooking Doughnuts



Daniel and Spencer Enjoying Doughnuts



Fire Pit, smokestack, and Cooking Area



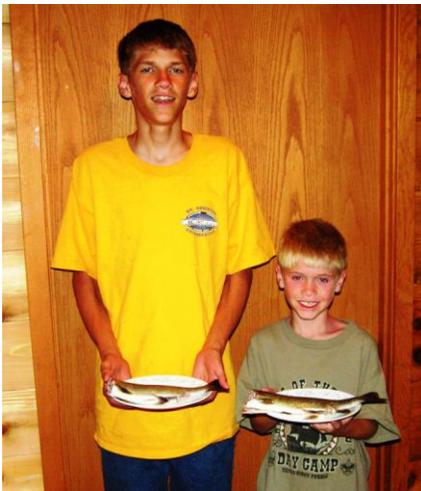
Delicious Food at High Altitude



**Del Cooking with Dutch Ovens**



**Frank Freezing Ice Cream, a Tradition**



**Happy Fishermen, Andy and Daniel**



**Becky and Shish Kabobs**



**Tea Time with Faye**



**Dutch Oven Cherry Pie Birthday, Jeff**



**Outdoor Camping, Early Marriage Way**