

*Presented by Michael Gray of Uncommon Adventures ([www.uncommonadv.com](http://www.uncommonadv.com)), This excerpted from the book "[Hey, I'd Eat This at Home!](#)", copyright 2010, by Michael Gray. Book available in softcover at [uncommonadv.com](http://uncommonadv.com) or in ebook format via Amazon.*

## CHAPTER 6

### BACKWOODS BAKING

THE ALLURE OF HOT baked goods fresh out of the oven is universal, but when translated to the outdoors it can be downright transcendent. In the last few years much attention has been given to new gadgets to help people bake biscuits, brownies, and even apple pie in the backcountry—where something chocolaty and steaming can mean the difference between a miserable storm and an easily shrugged off shower.

#### Baking Tips

The learning curve associated with baking in the wilderness is worth every effort and will make you a hero on good days and a deity on tough ones. Following are some general tips to help make your baking success come sooner rather than later:

- Insulate the top of the pan with a dry camp towel (a damp towel will burn you).
- Level the stove using wood or stone chips (put a drop of water into a pan to test).
- Use silicone mitts or dry towels to manipulate a hot oven.
- Never use a damp towel or mitt as a hot pad . . . the resulting steam will burn you.
- For even baking be vigilant and rotate the oven every six to eight minutes.
- Use very low heat. It is better to wait longer than to burn the goods.
- Let smell be your guide. It will smell dryer and sweet when done.
- Sweeter items burn more easily. Remember to use low heat.
- Use a rigid foil windscreen to retain heat around the pan.
- Use a heat diffuser plate to avoid burning.

#### Choosing a Camp Oven

Over the last two decades I have used a variety of baking devices on sea kayak, canoe, and backpacking trips in different environments. I have also participated in some field tests for magazines. What follows is an evaluation of the relative merits of the products that have stood the test of time. For those of you who prefer a Fred Flintstone approach to technology, I do look at a few low-cost retro-oven ideas that work quite well.

The Outback Oven, the BakePacker and Woody's aluminum Dutch oven were subjected to rigorous trials by several guides in Abel Tasman National Park on the south

island of New Zealand as part of a field test for *Sea Kayaker Magazine*. We used baking mixes from bake ware manufacturers, supermarket box mixes, and our own homemade creations. In all cases we judged the baking device's performance by using stoves that supplied heat from one burner underneath the pan.

As in most wilderness areas today, fires were not allowed in Abel Tasman, so we couldn't use hot coals. We didn't need them. There were no failures, and some of the guides may have ascended to guru status after turning out such goodies as crispy baked Camembert cheese and chocolate cakes piped with fresh-whipped cream and strawberries. Our guests never complained about the results of our field trials and were happy to volunteer for further research.

### **The Outback Oven**

Although this is one of the more expensive stovetop camp ovens available, The Outback Oven is one of the best engineered. We tested the model with all the bells and whistles. This compact, little mesh-bagged package consists of a nonstick frying pan without a handle, a heat diffuser, a pot grab, a lid with a heat gauge, a bamboo do-it-all tool, an insulated silver tutu, a heat reflector, and a handy plastic cutting board. Sorry, no Ginsu knives included. It makes quite a light and neat package.

Yes, it is a lot of pieces and gadgets, but when put together the Outback Oven does a great job on cakes, pies, brownies, and pizza. The bottom pan doubles as a good frying pan and the whole unit is fuel-efficient. To use it, the silver tutu rests on the lid and works by convection, collecting heat and funneling it downward providing consistent baking conditions. Your scones won't exactly get golden brown, but they do bake evenly. Plan on a baking time that is five to ten minutes shorter than the average box mix. In fact, if you turn your stove up much past simmer, your brownies will be bricks. So, if your stove only has two speeds—off and blowtorch—you can start that brick fireplace you've always wanted.

On the down side, you do have to take special care of the non-stick coating. Even if you use bamboo or plastic utensils, the coating will scratch simply due to nesting everything together. Try putting the coated half in a plastic bag before packaging it up for travel.

(Source: The Backpackers Pantry at <http://www.backpackerspantry.com>)

### **The BakePacker**

We tested the larger model that is designed to fit into the bottom of an 8-inch pot with a bit of skepticism. It was not easy to visualize the end result while looking at a round aluminum waffle. Follow the directions. It works. The ring-shaped aluminum grid suspends whatever you are baking over an inch of boiling water. You simply pour the batter or dough into a durable plastic bag, seal it loosely, nestle it onto the ring, and let the high temperature of steam do the baking. With a tight-fitting lid, you will have

enough hot water when you are done to make a cup of coffee to go with your cake. The BakePacker grid doubles as a cake cooling rack or a good place to rest your cooking pot if you don't want to set it in the sand.

If presentation is important to you, be warned: this baby bakes ugly. Once your creation cools enough to extract from the pot, it takes a bit of care to peel off the plastic bag with a minimum amount of destruction. We found wide-diameter bags worked best because we could roll back the edges and invert it to get the dessert to come free. But it still looked like clothes we had slept in. Don't panic, you can work wonders with powdered sugar, whipped cream, or sliced fresh fruit.

The BakePacker works best with sweets due to the very moist goodies it produces, however it does come with a useful no-frills cookbook of its own. This baking device also baked more rapidly than recommended cook times.

(Source: <http://www.bakepacker.com>)

### **The Woody**

Although the nine-pound aluminum Woody is too heavy to easily carry in a backpack, it bakes amazingly well on a single burner. Its nine-inch-square shape might seem to be an odd package, but it lends itself well to packing and food portioning. The two halves nest into one another and it is well seasoned from the get-go. For best results, make sure the stove is level and place a flexible foil windscreen around the pan and stove.

To bake effectively with the Woody, preheat the unit with its lid on. While preheating the pan for six to eight minutes on medium heat, you can be mixing up whatever you plan to bake—perhaps Jalapeno-Cheddar Cornbread is on the menu to accompany tonight's chili. Simply mix the batter in the zip-seal plastic bag containing the dry mix and squeeze the batter into the waiting hot oven. Turn the heat down to a low simmer, make sure the lid is on tight, and insulate the lid with a couple of small camp towels. You will want to rotate the pan with a pair of mitts and follow your nose. When the bread starts to smell good and "dry", shut off the heat and let it sit a bit to finish. Remove the lid to reveal a golden square of delicious hot bread that will cut beautifully into nine pieces.

You can get similar results with quick breads, brownies, and cakes. If properly insulated and wind-sheltered, you will use very little fuel and your goodies will bake quicker than they would at home. Can be ordered from [uncommonadv.com](http://uncommonadv.com).

### **Banks Fry-Bake Pans**

Developed by former NOLS instructor Pam Banks and her father, the Fry-Bake pan is a versatile and quality piece of equipment. It is a hard-anodized aluminum product, much like the most expensive home cookware. It is fairly nonstick and is easily cleaned. The Fry-Bake Pan comes in two sizes; both work well as a frying pan and an oven. Their lids are designed to hold a few coals for a small twig fire. If you are in an area where you can't have a fire, you can cover the lid with a small hand towel to retain the heat

and use a heat diffuser plate underneath the pan to keep things from burning. As long as you have a stove that you can adjust to simmer, you should be able to bake cakes, brownies, and quick breads on a single burner.

### **Retro-Ovens**

There are many simple baking methods for the outdoors, ranging from hot coals and palm leaves to ovens fashioned from riverbank clay. There are as many options as there are cultures in the world; here are a couple that I have tried with success.

**The Coffee Can Oven**—described in the book *One Pan Gourmet*, this is a very simple oven you can make from a three-pound coffee can or a #10 tin salvaged from a local restaurant. To use the can, your small baking pan is suspended above the heat on a rack made of tent pegs skewered through the can. With the right configuration of vent holes and rack heights, the coffee can makes a neat convection oven that doubles as a container for your stove and cook pot. It has a couple of drawbacks, though: it is unstable on a stove due to its top-heavy nature and it can only bake enough for a couple people. You may be able to bake two things at once on two levels. It certainly is an idea worthy of further experimentation.

**The Aluminum Ring Mold Oven**—is simply a Bundt cake pan or a Jell-O mold with a domed cover. Secondhand shops are usually loaded with them. A small stainless steel bowl makes a good lid and encourages even baking. The greased and battered ring mold is centered over the stove burner so that the heat rises through the hole like a chimney, hits the lid, and rolls down the sides by convection. It is a weird item to pack, but it bakes nice shortcake, biscuits, brownies, and terrific cornbread—as long as you keep the heat very low.

### **A Final Note**

No matter what device you choose, experiment in the backyard to ensure against embarrassing failures in front of ravenous clients and friends. Again, low heat is usually the key to tasty desserts and fresh breads that will evoke Pavlovian responses in the most stoic of campers. Be prepared to handle fame. Being a baking magician during your outdoor exploits can get your presence requested on many adventures. You may have to quit your day job.

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