

Reflector Oven Baking

by Culver Modisette

"It's a throwback to the days of Horace Kephart, when camping meant a leisurely excursion in the woods rather than a hectic race against the clock to see how many miles you can accumulate in the course of two weeks of freedom from the city."

A good reflector oven is a joy forever—or for at least as long as your canoe trip lasts. It can be the source of tangy sourdough bread, sweet loaves of yeast bread, biscuits, shortcakes, cornbread or gingerbread and is a nifty place to dry your socks. Most reflector ovens are either too small or too flimsy, or both. Be sure your oven has the capacity to bake at least three loaves at a time, and that it is of sufficient strength to withstand the cuffing that a wilderness trip necessarily entails. The part on which the baking pans rest should be sheet aluminum. The wire grills often used permit localized hot spots. Additionally, it should fold flat for easy storage. Reflectors are better suited to canoeing than to backpacking, as they are bulky and difficult to pack in a small space. However, a small party can make good use of one by delegating one person the chore of carrying the reflector while an equivalent load is shared by the rest.

Most campers experience difficulty with their first fling at baking because they do not have a sufficiently hot baking fire. The best time to bake is after supper, when the fire has been burning for some time, and a

good bed of coals has been laid. I prefer to use only **dry** hardwood, as this will generate the most even heat. (In the North Country, though, hardwoods aren't easy to come by, so you use what's available as long as it's dry.) Soft, green or wet wood will smoke, causing the heat to fluctuate, which constitutes the kiss of indigestion to your baking efforts. Wet wood is also smoky wood, and your bread will assume a definite smoky taste. If you are baking, and your fire starts to smoke, add dry wood immediately or rearrange the fire so the smoking wood is back in the flames.

There are as many ways to prepare a fire for reflector oven baking as there are campsite bakers. All agree that the fire must be **hot, uniform, and as high as the top of the oven**. The easiest way to achieve this is to lay a fire against a large rock that will serve as a reflector in its own right. Stack the wood horizontally, long side to the oven, and if necessary, crib the ends with two green sticks driven into the ground to keep the fire from collapsing. In unremittingly flat terrain, the wood may have to be cribbed on both sides. Small sticks placed across the firewood will provide sufficient air for a hot,

smoke-free fire.

If you're starting with a bed of coals from the supper fire, the process is easy. If not, it's best you consider how to start a fire. Anybody can start a fire with enough dry material and enough matches; the prevalence of forest fires proves that amply. But the universe is notably indifferent to the needs of a camp cook, and the rainy, chilly days are those when fresh-baked biscuits go down best. How, then, to get some steam up on a wet day?

The simplest way is commercial firestarter, in either a tube or in cube form, with suitably dry (or merely damp) tinder above it, and kindling above that. **Dry** tinder on a wet day? Sure. It's easy. A dead branch, preferably one still attached to a tree, will most likely be dry under the bark. Gather a few of these, shave off the wet bark (and outer layer of wood if you have to), and make a fuzz stick by shaving a lot of tiny little curls of wood. Don't shave them off; leave 'em attached at one end. With a little patience and a sharp knife, you can produce three fuzz sticks in no time at all. Light them with the fuzzy end **down**, or arrange them under the kindling with the fuzzy end down.

Little strips of cedar bark work well, too. The cedar generally grows at a slant, and a vertical strip from the underside can be shaved to smaller strips easily with a pocket knife.

Kindling itself is an easy matter. Again, dead branches still attached to trees is the route to follow. Strip the wet bark, and split if necessary. While you can build an acceptable fire for reflector baking from kindling wood alone by laying in at least twice as much as you think you'll need and tending the fire meticulously, there is no substitute for split dry wood. For splitting you need an axe, a much-abused and too often neglected tool. If you haven't used an axe a lot, though, best fall back on unsplit wood cut to length with a collapsible saw. Peel the wet bark off and it'll light nicely if you're patient.

Part of being patient, by the way, consists of not using gasoline as a firestarter. The odor is offensive and the hazard level is immensely high.

Be sure to keep your reflector oven clean, as a sooty surface will not reflect heat as efficiently as a shiny, clean surface will. The bottoms of the pans, though, are best left sooty for better heat absorption.

Both steel and aluminum bake pans are available. Use the steel ones. They're heavier, but they conduct the heat most efficiently, and your bread will bake more quickly and more evenly. Rub the inside of your bake pans with oil prior to flopping the prepared dough into them. The following recipe will bake three loaves of trail bread. It is a reasonably sweet loaf. If you wish, reduce the sugar to one cup for a less sweet loaf.

TRAIL BREAD

- 7 cups flour
- 1½ cups sugar
- 2 tsps. oil
- 4 packets yeast
- ½ cup milk
- 1 palm salt (2 tsps.)
- 3-4 cups warm water

Mix the dough until it is reasonably stiff, and put it in a pot, cover it, and place in a warm spot to rise to twice its height. In cool

weather, a sleeping bag or a jacket is an excellent blanket for the dough. Be sure to put a polypad **under** the pan, too. Don't place it too near the fire during its rise, or it will start to bake. After it has risen, punch it down (after flouring your hands, which hopefully you have washed). Turn the dough out onto a clean board, aluminum foil, canoe hull or whatever, and knead vigorously, adding flour as you knead until the dough is no longer sticky. Place in the oiled pans, and pop into the reflector oven, making sure that the oven is sufficiently far from the fire so the bread will rise again, but not bake. When it has again risen to twice its height, move the oven closer to the fire and start baking. Place the back of your hand low between the oven and the fire. If you can count three before withdrawing it, the fire is ready to bake bread. A count of two is right for cornbread and gingerbread. Biscuits may be baked at a two or three count. One caution is worth noting. While the bread is rising the second time, do not touch it or the oven, as a slight jar will cause the dough to fall.

Ordinarily, it takes an hour for your loaves to bake. As a nice brown crust starts to form near the front of the loaves, turn the bread pans around so the loaves will bake uniformly. As the bread is baking, you may brush the top with milk, which gives it a crispy crust. To test the loaves, insert a knife blade into the bread. If it comes out dry, it's done. If the blade is a little sticky, it means the center of the loaf is not quite done and needs another few minutes. Once you have taken the loaves from the oven, remove them from the pans and allow them to cool before storing. Wrap in aluminum foil and place in a cool, dry spot, and you're in business. If you're in crittercountry (bear, racoon, squirrel), that cool, dry spot had best be up a tree.

Baking powder biscuits are quick and easy on a reflector, and the best results are usually obtained by following the directions on the Bisquick box. (Cut the panel off the box and put it in the polybag with the Bisquick.) But be sure to grease the biscuit pans. Same thing applies to cornbread and gingerbread. I have better results baking cornbread and



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gingerbread in regular bread pans rather than the shallow biscuit pans.

If you're lucky enough to be out during the blueberry season, try this recipe on your friends!

Bake one large baking powder biscuit per person, adding a little sugar to sweeten them slightly. Take a quart or two of fresh-picked blueberries, (preferably Alaskan, but take what you can get), place in a pot, add one inch of water and bring to a simmer. When the blueberries become sauce-like, remove from the fire. Add a dollop of marshmallow fluff to the biscuit, pour a generous serving of blueberries over the entire mess, and you're really living. A guaranteed gold-plated winner with your coffee at the end of a long, hard day on a raw, windy river!

I have used reflector ovens on canoe trips throughout the East and Alaska, and they can spell the difference between a memorable dinner and an ordinary meal. Usually I bake enough bread at night to provide lunch the next day. That way, you always have fresh bread, and if there is any extra, it tastes remarkably well for breakfast, or with a cup of cocoa around the fire, before you climb into your sleeping bag.

Reflector oven baking sounds like a hassle. In a sense, it is. It's a throw-back to the days of Horace Kephart, when camping meant a leisurely excursion in the woods rather than a hectic race against the clock to see how many miles you can accumulate in the course of two weeks of freedom from the city. Repackaging all these dry ingredients so they don't run around loose is a chore. Selection of suitable wood is a bother. Breaking down a firesite so that the next traveler never knows a fire was built there is time-consuming. But after five days in the bush, the taste of fresh biscuits slathered with honey and washed down by fresh coffee is worth all the effort. Besides, who enjoys watching prepackaged food cook over a gasoline stove? Whatever virtues contemporary camp cooking gear has (and it has many), the virtue of contemplation is absent. Gather your wood. Tend your fire. Smell the aroma of fresh bread on the crisp riverbank air. Relax. You've earned it.