

The Chameleon Grain

Rice takes on the flavor of whatever you add to it, so no wonder it's such a tasty, versatile trail food.

By [Liz Rusch](#), August 2000

Munch on this mindbender: What backpacking food is red and spicy, creamy and cheesy, and even sweet, crunchy, and fruity? Give up? Rice, of course, that amazing chameleonlike grain that adopts the flavor and consistency of whatever tumbles with it in the pot. Simply add some grated tomato powder and red pepper one day, cheese the next day, and brown sugar and dried berries on day three and you have enough variety to keep your taste buds blissfully happy.

"Rice is versatile enough to be a staple food for Asians, Hispanics, and Africans all around the world—a full two-thirds of the world's people," says Amy Maxwell, of the USA Rice Federation, an industry association located in Houston. Plus, it's lightweight, durable, and nutritious—all qualities enticing to any backcountry traveler.

Small Grain, Big Nutrition

The tiny grains have all the good nutritional stuff you need out on the trail: complex carbohydrates, essential amino acids, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, phosphorus, iron, potassium...the list goes on. But there's none of the bad stuff; rice is not only cholesterol-free and sodium-free, but it has only trace amounts of fat. It's also nonallergenic and gluten-free. Most important is that it's easy on the digestive system—so you can keep your dinner down at high altitude—and wallet, costing only about \$.05 per serving.

Botanists have identified more than 40,000 varieties of this healthy grain. Backpackers need concern themselves only with one easy-to-find, fast-cooking type of rice: instant, which is actually precooked rice that has been dehydrated (see "The Instant Rice Taste Test" on page 41). The dried granules revive in boiling water within 10 minutes. To save fuel, you can rehydrate instant rice by soaking it in tepid water for about 30 minutes.

"Instant rice is almost as nutritious as raw rice," says the Rice Federation's Maxwell. "Brown rice provides slightly more fiber, vitamin E, phosphorus, and calcium, but enriched white rice packs more thiamin and iron."

If you'd rather go fresh-off-the-stalk, reach for varieties that cook in 25 minutes or less: long-, medium-, and short-grain white rice, jasmine, or basmati. Long- and medium-grain rice cook up light and fluffy, while short-grain rice comes out stickier and clumps together. Jasmine and basmati are considered aromatic rices, so named for their roasted nutty or popcorn smell and taste.

Other varieties, such as brown, sweet, black japonica, Arborio, and Wehani or red rice, are tasty but take 40 minutes or more to cook, so leave them for the dinner table at home. Wild rice, which is technically not a rice but an aquatic grass, also takes ages to cook.

Your local grocer probably stocks several brands of flavored rice, or what I call "rices with spices." Offerings vary from herb-and-butter to mushroom-and-chicken to Spanish rice and fried rice. The taste varies widely, from downright bland to subtle and creamy, to harshly salty. Most have reasonable cooking times of 15 to 25 minutes, but check the directions on the packages before tucking any into your pack. Some require milk, butter, or oil, so be prepared with your backpacker-ready substitutes. Also read the nutrition information. The sodium content of many flavored varieties is 30 to 40 percent of the recommended daily allowance. Plus some creamy versions have considerable saturated fat.

To better tailor the dish to your taste and to control the nutrition, add a pinch of this or that to plain instant rice. For example:

- Your favorite instant soup cooked with rice makes a tasty side dish.
- For an easy, cheesy rice, add Butter Buds and grated parmesan cheese to hot, cooked rice.
- Try rehydrated peas and chopped mint for a green rice.
- The juice or zest of a lemon or orange, along with a dash of olive oil, makes for a tangy, fruity rice.
- Cinnamon, sugar, and coconut flakes turn leftover rice into a satisfying dessert or next day's breakfast, if kept cool overnight.

Recipes

Breakfast Side Dish

Fruity Breakfast Porridge

Recipe Ingredients

- 1/2 Cup powdered milk
- 1/4 Teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 Teaspoon nutmeg
- 1/2 Cup chopped walnuts
- 2 Cups cooked brown rice
- 1/4 Cup brown sugar
- 1/4 Cup raisins
- 1/4 Cup dried berries
- 1 Cup water

Serves: 4

Make a meal with brown rice the night before and save 2 cups for this super oatmeal substitute.

At Home: Combine the milk, nuts, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a zipper-lock plastic bag.

In Camp: Combine all dry ingredients in a pot with ½ cup water and rice and cook over low heat for 8 to 12 minutes, stirring frequently. As the porridge simmers, add water until it reaches your desired consistency.

Dinner Side Dish

Greek Spinach Pilaf

Recipe Ingredients

- 2 Cups uncooked long-grain instant rice
- 2 Tablespoons dried mint
- 2 Tablespoons dried oregano
- 1 Tablespoon dried thyme
- 1 Pinch salt
- 1 Pinch pepper
- 6 Ounces fresh baby spinach
- 2 Tablespoons dried onion
- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 2 Tablespoons tomato powder
- 2 Cups water
- 4 Ounces feta cheese, crumbled

Serves: 2

Make this on day one or two of your trip.

At Home: Combine the rice with mint, oregano, thyme, salt, and pepper in a zipper-lock plastic bag. If the spinach is not prewashed, wash and dry it thoroughly and repack in a large zipper-lock plastic bag. Leave air inside.

In Camp: Sauté onion in olive oil for 2 minutes. Mix tomato powder with ½ cup water and add to pot. Stir in spinach and simmer, covered, for 2 to 3 minutes, until wilted. Stir in the rice bag and remaining water, and bring to a boil. Cover and cook for 5 minutes. Let stand for 5 minutes. Sprinkle feta cheese over the rice before serving.

Dinner Side Dish

Nutty Rice

Recipe Ingredients

- 5 Cups uncooked instant brown rice
- 1 1/2 Cups sunflower seeds
- 1 1/2 Cups slivered almonds

- 1/4 Cup parsley flakes
- 1/4 Cup chicken bouillon granules
- 6 Cups water

Serves: 8

This is also a bulk recipe that can be divided into four equal parts for meals that serve two campers (add to 1 1/2 cups water).

At Home: Combine all dry ingredients in a zipper-lock bag.

In Camp: Pour the bagged ingredients and water into a pot. Bring to a boil. Stir once or twice. Lower heat to simmer; cover, and cook 5 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes. Fluff with a fork.

Dinner Side Dish

Pesto Walnut Risotto

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 small onion
- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 1 1/2 Cups uncooked short-grain white rice, not instant
- 4 Cups water
- 4 chicken bouillon cubes
- 1/2 Ounce-package dried pesto mix
- 1 Cup grated parmesan cheese
- 1/2 Cup chopped walnuts

Serves: 3

How can it be practical to make rich, creamy risotto in the backcountry when it takes tons of soup broth and restaurants can't make it in less than 40 minutes? With my tried-and-true tricks, you can have risotto with just 25 to 30 minutes of simmering.

In Camp: Chop the onion and sauté it in hot oil over a low flame until it's soft, about 3 minutes. Add the rice and cook another 3 minutes while stirring. Add 1 cup of water and 1 bouillon cube, and simmer about 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Add another cup of water and another bouillon cube, and simmer, stirring constantly for another 5 minutes. Add the last 2 cups of water and two bouillon cubes and simmer another 10 to 15 minutes, or until the liquid is almost completely absorbed. Add the pesto packet, Parmesan cheese, walnuts, and pepper, and stir until smooth and creamy. Serve immediately.

Dinner Side Dish

Red Hot Rice

Recipe Ingredients

- 5 Cups uncooked instant long-grain white rice
- 2 1/2 Ounce-packages tomato soup mix
- 3 Ounce-packages dried vegetables or vegetable flakes
- 1 1/2 Teaspoons ground red pepper
- 1 1/2 Teaspoons ground black pepper
- 6 Cups water

Serves: 8

This spicy rice is ideal for big groups or long trips. If you're looking to serve only a few, divide the mixed dry ingredients into four equal parts and pack them in zipper-lock bags. Each bag serves two and requires only 1 1/2 cups water.

At Home: Combine all dry ingredients in a zipper-lock bag.

In Camp: Pour the bagged ingredients and water into a pot. Bring to a boil. Stir once or twice. Lower heat to simmer; cover, and cook 5 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes. Fluff with a fork.

Dinner Side Dish

Sue's Shiitake and Bean Rice

Recipe Ingredients

- 8 dried shiitake mushrooms

- 4 1/2 Ounce-packages instant mushroom rice
- 1/2 Cup dehydrated black beans
- 1/4 Cup grated cheddar cheese

Serves: 2

In Camp: Place the mushrooms and rice in a pot and fill the pot with enough water to cover the ingredients. When the water comes to a boil, reduce heat and boil for 5 minutes. Add the beans to the pot, reduce heat slightly, and simmer 5 minutes. Drain off excess water and stir in rice seasoning packet (if there is one) and cheese.