

Jacob Monash

## Philmont Dining

When I was 15, my Boy Scout troop, my dad, and I took it upon ourselves to begin one of the most physically demanding trips offered to scouts. Philmont is a scout ranch where scouts from around the country go backpacking through its more than 140,000 acres of land in the mountainous backcountry just outside of Cimarron, New Mexico. During most normal camping trips we ate pretty well, cooking up whatever we could fit into our coolers – steak, potatoes, veggies, pancakes, you name it – all whipped up on our skillets and Dutch ovens. Trekking through Philmont, though, was different. We were forced to think of food differently.

On the trail, we lost all our gastronomical senses. Food became weight and energy, nothing more. It needed to be light, as we could only prioritize so much space in the backpacks we wore during our nearly 10 mile daily hikes. We carried several days' worth of food on our backs at a time, restocking every so often at camps we passed through. We saw food for its calories, not its taste. We gladly scarfed it all down just so we could put one foot in front of the other the next day.

All the food we ate could be classified as rehydrated mush or drier-than-the-state-we-were-in cardboard. Breakfasts and lunches were packaged and didn't take much preparation. Dinners were mush brought to "life" by water we heated up over a small gas stove. The mush tasted like what it claimed to be in the same way that Crystal Light tastes like fresh squeezed lemonade. Raisin bread pudding, fettucine primavera, jambalaya, beef stroganoff – mush. All of it. Though we likely weren't the best trail-side chefs, each one of our mush meals has since been filed away in my brain into a cabinet labeled "Don't you dare."

Our dry lunches were nothing special. We'd eat nuts, granola, crackers, squeeze cheese (dare I say, my favorite), and sometimes packaged meat. Though they weren't spectacular, these meals helped us to survive the morning hours, for which I was grateful. I am still, however, scarred by the horrors that are Larabars and Clif Bars. No promises of healthy energy could trick me into enjoying the act of chocking down bite-after-bite of those rocks masquerading as energy bars. Even sight of their packaging holds a place of disdain in me today.

Meals continued like clockwork for the 12 day trek. We ate breakfast, then we broke down camp. Hours of hiking later, we'd stop for lunch, sometimes for no longer than 10 minutes. We'd hike some more before we'd set up camp where we stood and convened around our mush dinners. Then, right before bed, we sealed our food away into sacks that we'd hang high up in the trees so that we wouldn't attract bears while we slept.

By day 12, this edible monotony had gotten to us. We were done tricking ourselves into thinking our food had any gastronomical merit. Upon finishing our trek, we cleaned up at base camp and headed into Cimarron for our first real food in over a week. We ordered pizza and relished in its real grease, its real baked cheese, its real crust. The pizza didn't last long, and we boarded our charter bus back home, our legs shaking from the hike and our stomachs aching in alien joy.