

Hit The Sauce

By themselves, noodles are just plain bland. Add the proper topping, though, and dinner takes on a whole new flavor.

By [Buck Tilton](#), *BACKPACKER* Contributing Editor, April 2000

"Good lovin' don't last, but good cookin' do." Haunted by these words, I stared at yet another trailside bowl of bland, squiggly noodles. As I scraped the leftovers into my trash bag, I vowed that henceforth, I'd heed the adage that hung above the stove in the Georgia kitchen where I grew up. I would make sure that good cookin' was first and foremost in my menu plan. Since I'm a big fan of lightweight grains, pasta, and potatoes (flakes, that is), that meant one thing: time to put a little sauce in my camp life.

A good sauce does several things for you at mealtime. Besides making otherwise bland foodstuffs more palatable, a hearty sauce makes your tastebuds happy and therefore improves your outlook on life (never knew sauce was good for mental health, did you?). It also gives your body a nutritional boost, thanks to the protein in the milk, cheese, or peanut butter used as a base, and the essential vitamins found in the tomatoes, onions, and garlic you add for flavor.

Sauce is simple to prepare, too. All it takes is a little forethought, a stove that simmers, and about 5 extra minutes of cooking time.

First, a few general, time-tested suggestions regarding which sauces work best with which "vehicles":

- White cream sauce: good on pastas, grains, and rehydrated or fresh vegetables.
- Red tomato sauce or green pesto: makes a great pasta topper.
- Brown sauce: also known as gravy, best suited for topping off potatoes and vegetables.
- Specialty sauces: those flavored with curry or peanut butter, for instance, go well on rice, couscous, and bulgur.

Premixed Packets

Not much of a chef? Don't worry, because your local grocery store has premixed, powdered sauces worth licking off the spoon. Knorr and Schilling, for instance, make great brown gravy mixes. Add a cup of water to the powder, bring the slurry to a boil, simmer for a couple of minutes, and before you know it, a pile of boring potato flakes becomes a flavorful feast fit for a king.

To make white sauce from a powdered mix, you'll need to pack some powdered milk. Figure out how much powder is needed to make the amount of milk called for in the directions and pack it in its own zipper-lock bag. Resist the urge to dump the sauce packet in the same bag. To get that homemade taste without clumps, it's best to reconstitute the milk in a dish before adding it to the mix. Be sure to add the powdered milk to the cold water, not vice versa, and stir until it's smooth.

You can also get Alfredo sauce in a pouch. Just remember to pack some butter or margarine in a screwtop container to make it rich and creamy. Packet pesto sauce requires a splash of oil (pack the oil in a small, leakproof bottle). Just remember the basic rule of pretrip meal

planning: Read the back of the package to make sure you take along all the necessary ingredients.

From Scratch

To prepare sauce from scratch, all you need are a few extra ingredients in the foodbag and a well-stocked spice kit. A huge hunk of the fun is varying the nonessential ingredients to create your own personal sauce successes. Read on and you'll discover some of the tasty surprises I concocted simply by adding a variety of ingredients to 1 cup of hot water (below) or 1 cup of basic white sauce. Note: All of these "from scratch" recipes make approximately 1 to 1 1/2 cups of sauce, enough for two hungry hikers.

Recipes

Alfredo Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour
- 1/2 Cup grated parmesan cheese
- 1/2 Teaspoon dried basil or dill
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 Dash salt
- 1 Dash pepper

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and stir until well mixed. Remove from heat and add salt and pepper to taste.

Asian Tomato Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 1 Cup cold water
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour

- 2 Tablespoons tomato base
- 1/4 Teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 Tablespoon onion flakes
- 1 Dash soy sauce or tamari

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and stir until well mixed. Remove from heat and add salt and pepper to taste.

Cheese Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 1 Cup cold water
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour
- 3/4 Cup cheese, cubed or grated

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Add your favorite cheese just before removing the pot from the heat. Stir until the cheese is melted, but be careful: Cheese burns easily. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Curry Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 1 Tablespoon flour
- 2 Teaspoons onion flakes
- 2 Teaspoons curry powder
- 1/2 Teaspoon salt

- 1 Cup water
- 1/4 Cup dried apples, chopped
- 1/4 Cup raisins
- 1 Teaspoon brown sugar

Serves: 2

Heat the oil and flour over low heat, stirring constantly until the mixture is smooth. Add spices, water, fruit and sugar. Bring to a boil and simmer until apples are tender. Rice, couscous, or bulgur will never be the same.

Gravy

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 1 Cup cold water
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour
- 1 Teaspoon onion flakes
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 1/2 Tablespoons soy sauce or tamari, or 1 beef or chicken bouillon cube

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and stir until well mixed. Remove from heat and add salt and pepper to taste.

Hot Sesame-Peanut Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Cup water
- 1/2 Cup peanut butter (crunchy is best)
- 3 Teaspoons spicy sesame oil
- 1 1/2 Teaspoons soy sauce or tamari
- 1 Teaspoon onion flakes

- 1/2 Teaspoon crushed hot red pepper
- 2 Tablespoons vinegar (optional)

Serves: 2

Heat water, remove from burner, and add the remaining ingredients, stirring until well blended. Excellent served hot or cold over noodles.

Italian Tomato Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 1/2 Cups water (more for thinner sauce)
- 1/4 Cup dried tomatoes, mushrooms, peppers, or other vegetables (optional)
- 1/2 Cup tomato powder
- 1 Tablespoon onion flakes
- 1/2 Tablespoon dried parsley
- 1/2 Teaspoon dried basil or oregano
- 1/2 Tablespoon cooking oil
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder

Serves: 2

Bring water to a boil in a pot with any dehydrated vegetables you're using. Add the remaining ingredients and simmer over low heat, stirring frequently until you're satisfied with the consistency. This is a superior backcountry pizza topping.

Mexican Tomato Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 2 Tablespoons dried red and green peppers
- 2 Tablespoons dried tomatoes
- 1 Cup hot water (more for thinner sauce)
- 1 Tablespoon oil
- 2 1/2 Tablespoons tomato powder
- 1 Tablespoon onion flakes
- 3/4 Teaspoon chili powder
- 1/2 Teaspoon cumin

- 1/2 Teaspoon basil or oregano
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 Pinch black pepper
- 1 Tablespoon cornmeal or flour

Serves: 2

Rehydrate the peppers and tomatoes in the hot water. Heat the oil, seasonings, and cornmeal in a pot. Add in the veggies and water, stirring frequently for 5 to 10 minutes. Another good pizza topping, and great on vegetables.

Mustard Cheese Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 1 Cup cold water
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour
- 1/2 Cup cheese, cubed or grated
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/4 Teaspoon mustard powder (or 1 tablespoon prepared mustard)
- 1 Dash cayenne or Tabasco

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Combine remaining ingredients and stir until well mixed and cheese is melted. Remove from heat and add salt and pepper to taste.

Peanut Butter Gravy

Recipe Ingredients

- 1 Cup water
- 1/2 Cup peanut butter (crunchy is best)
- 1/4 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 1/2 Tablespoons soy sauce

- 1 Pinch cayenne
- 2 Tablespoons vinegar (optional)
- 3 Tablespoons dry milk (optional)

Serves: 2

Heat water, remove from burner, and add the remaining ingredients. Reheat carefully if the need arises; peanut butter loves to scorch your pan. Excellent on noodles of any shape or size.

Tomato Cream Sauce

Recipe Ingredients

- 4 Tablespoons powdered milk
- 1 Cup cold water
- 2 Tablespoons margarine
- 2 Tablespoons flour
- 2 Tablespoons tomato base, a form of powdered tomato available from many outdoors food suppliers
- 1/2 Teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 Teaspoon dried basil

Serves: 2

Add the powdered milk to the water and mix well (read the directions on the package because reconstitution can vary slightly from product to product). Set aside. In a pot, melt margarine over low heat. Add the flour and stir until the mixture is smooth. Add the reconstituted milk and stir constantly to prevent burning. Cook over low heat until the sauce is thick enough, usually about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and stir until well mixed. Remove from heat and add salt and pepper to taste. The easy option: Use 2 cups of reconstituted instant tomato soup instead of base and spices.

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