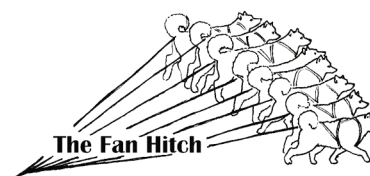


Selected reading from....

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Done to perfection! Yields two very generous 5 ounce (142 gm) servings photo: Hamilton

Bannock Revisited

by Sue Hamilton

Bannock, a.k.a. trail bread, survival food – the accompaniment that goes with just about anything, from being paved over with peanut butter to dunked into caribou stew, and everything in between. Its homeland seems to be Scotland, then emigrated to northern Canada where it was embraced and adapted by that country's aboriginal people once they had access to flour.

Most people mix the ingredients in a glass or metal bowl. But I've sat in a tent and watched in awe as "Uncle" Joe Goudie of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Nunatsiavut, kneeled in front of a twenty pound sack of flour and mix up a small batch of dough, right in a depression he made in the top of entire sack, leaving the balance of the four dry and ready for the next recipe! For bush travelers, bannock was – and is – the "it" in "Don't leave home without it." long before the admonition became identified with American Express credit card commercials. It is found in just about every tack box strapped down to a qamutiq on journeys of just about any length. There are several ways to cook it: baked, pan fried, deep fried, wrapped around a stick and roasted over an open fire. And there are the countless recipes.

Almost ten years ago, in *The Fan Hitch* V1, N3 (March 1999), I published three bannock recipes. Each had merit, although the measurements weren't always precise and

some seemed heavy on the lard. Maybe you're one of those lucky cooks who easily adapts to imprecision. But I am somewhat obsessive compulsive when it comes to recipes I am trying out for the first time and I never did get the hang of approximations, so I gave up in failure.

Last November on an annual pilgrimage to the Snow Walkers' Rendezvous, I jumped at the chance to attend one of the break-out sessions entitled "The Art of Bannock Making". The class was led by renown Maine guide and outfitter, Alexandra Conover. An expert in everything related to bush travel in all seasons, she was also expert enough to teach even me how to make bannock! In fact, mostly everyone in the class was successful and our creations (we cooked in teams of two) were served up to the entire assemblage before and with dinner and no one broke a filling, choked or died of indigestion. I was inspired, determined to make bannock, confident that I could do it without Alexandra holding my hand.

However, I was absolutely convinced that, if I could not cook it on a camp stove as was the case at Snow Walkers', at least I had to use a cast iron skillet. This turned out to be the most difficult part of the recipe, for the size best suited (where the dough touches the sides of the skillet in order to have the benefit of direct contact heat) to bannock for two without leftovers is a very small pan, what is known to be a size "number three", about 6 inches (15 cm) across the top and 1 3/8 inches (3.5 cm) deep. These skillets, especially with a cover, which is another essential for making bannock (to my way of thinking, anyway), are extremely difficult to get hold of and if found on eBay, they usually end up the clutches of zealous collectors who think nothing of bidding to well over \$600 USD to claim ownership! For that price I'll settle on a bagel or an English muffin. Big cast iron skillets, new or old, with covers are pretty easy to come by and at a fraction of the cost of the little ones. But I was convinced that because the recipe was so quick and easy, there was no reason not to make it fresh for just the two of us. Besides old bannock, even a few hours old, is, well, a little 'heavy' and not nearly as enjoyable as the crispy-surfaced stuff hot out of the pan. Don't get me wrong, while a delight to the stomach after you've been on the trail for eight or more hours at minus forty degrees and you have to thaw it out in hot tea or caribou-infused stew water, or first thing in the morning before the ice on the inside walls of the tent melts with the heat of the Coleman stove and you're already hungry enough to eat your socks, and you know the bannock has got to be really good because your guide's wife is a great cook, fresh is still best.

Nearly a year after Alexandra's class, my hunt ended successfully. I found a cheap, unbranded #3 cast iron skillet with a lid that fit. And after researching the web on how to clean and season disgusting old and ignored cast iron (actually not too difficult or complicated), I was ready to make my bannock! The only problem was now I forgot the recipe! Alexandra made it seem so simple – and it really was – that at the time of the class I said to myself, "I'll never forget it." Yeah, right!

Fortunately, thanks to the miracle of the world wide web, I found her recipe. It was designed for eight people so I ran the math and cut it down for two servings. Despite being my "maiden voyage" with this recipe, dividing it to size (which sometimes doesn't work) and my very first time using cast iron cookery, the initial batch was a total success. Given my attempts (prior to the shared experience at Snow Walkers') were such dismal failures, this was a really HUGE success for me. Subsequent batches were consistent. It appears Alexandra's bannock recipe and the use of a cast iron skillet produces no-fail results.

Then I took really bold action. Feeling a tad guilty about using all white flour, I decided to experiment by substituting 1/3 portion of white whole wheat for the plain white unbleached flour. And I also added a small amount of sugar and a "pinch" of cinnamon. Good grief, the results were even better! Bannock is not one of your light and fluffy biscuits. They're rather dense. Okay, they can be downright heavy although not nearly like the sinkers of my previous failures. This is why day-old bannock can sometimes revert to the quality of slingshot ammo capable of taking down small mammals. For reasons beyond my understanding of baking chemistry, the addition of the white whole wheat flour resulted in a much lighter texture that didn't feel like a lead weight after eating. The inclusion of the cinnamon and a little bit of sugar nicely hid my perception of a somewhat bitter or flat aftertaste associated with whole wheat flour.

So...here we go; a great bannock recipe. Freshly made, it's wonderful with a cup of cocoa or tea or chicken stew (if you can't get your hands on some caribou). If you're out on the trail with your dogs, even if it isn't right out of the pan, it's still a very edible snack during a long run*.

Alexandra Conover's Original Bannock Recipe (eight servings)

4 cups flour
4 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
dash sugar
16 teaspoons (1/3 cup) oil
enough water to make a stiff dough

- Mix the dry ingredients first, then add the wet ones.
- Mix well and shape into a large pancake.
- Put onto a HOT, greased eight-inch frying pan.
- Cover the pan and cook the bannock over medium heat for ten minutes, then flip over and cook uncovered for another five minutes or until a wood sliver inserted comes out clean.
- Break apart to eat. Tradition has it that cutting slices brings bad luck.



The mixed dough in the bowl is shaped to the size of the skillet
photo: Hamilton

Sue Hamilton's Modification #1 of Alexandra's Conover's Bannock Recipe (two servings)

1 cup white flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/8 teaspoon salt
3/8 cup raisins
4 teaspoons oil (I use extra light olive oil)
3/8 cup water

- Mix the dry ingredients and raisins first, then add the oil and water.
- Mix well and shape into a pancake the size of the bottom of the cast iron skillet. The dough should be slightly moist but not sticky.
- Put into a lightly oiled, well-seasoned six-inch (as measured across the top of the pan) cast iron frying pan that has been pre-heated (with the cover on) on medium. When the handle is very warm to the touch, the pan is ready to receive the dough.
- Cover the pan and cook the bannock over medium heat for ten minutes. The bottom should be nicely browned.
- Flip over and cook uncovered for five minutes or until a wood toothpick inserted comes out clean. When properly done, the bannock should issue a nice "thunk" sound when tapped.
- Break apart to eat. Tradition has it that cutting slices brings bad luck. I compromise and divide in half using the tines of a fork.



See how this serving for two fits snugly, touching the sides of the pan?
photo: Hamilton

**Sue Hamilton's Modification #2 of
Alexandra Conover's Bannock Recipe**
(two servings)

1/3 cup white whole wheat flour
2/3 cup white flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/8 teaspoon salt
3/8 cup raisins
1 teaspoon or so of sugar to your taste preference
cinnamon to your taste preference
4 teaspoons oil (I use extra light olive oil)
3/8 cup water

- Mix the dry ingredients and raisins first, then add the oil and water.
- Mix well and shape into a pancake the size of the bottom of the cast iron skillet. The dough should be slightly moist but not sticky.
- Put into a lightly oiled, well-seasoned six-inch (as measured across the top of the pan) cast iron frying pan that has been pre-heated (with the cover on) on medium. When the handle is very warm to the touch, the pan is ready to receive the dough.
- Cover the pan and cook the bannock over medium heat for ten minutes. The bottom should be nicely browned.
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- Break apart to eat. Tradition has it that cutting slices brings bad luck. I compromise and divide in half using the tines of a fork.

****WARNING! Do not feed raisin bannock to your dogs or let them have access to your supply of raisin bannock. Raisins are nephrotoxic to dogs (and possibly cats) and will cause kidney failure!***