

## Camp Gourmet—Sharing the Message about Healthy Eating

Success in camp food all boils down to: Choices, Variety, and Keep it all separate!

Parents are the hands-down experts in feeding children—creatively disguising those unwanted ingredients, tempting kids to experiment, or gently pleading with “just try one bite.” We begin our love-hate relationship with food early.

But what happens when you serve as personal chef to three hundred finicky eaters?

*CAMP* asks an expert who meets the challenge every day of summer.

Camp Gourmet--A Talk with Viki Kappel Spain

### **What do you consider the biggest trend in camp meal preparation and nutrition in recent years?**

Choice is the biggest news for camp. Family or buffet-style serving has replaced the cafeteria trays of yesteryear, though line serving still takes place. The “lunch lady,” line-served food is basically out the door. Food served in a family setting, with a bowl of salad, a pan of lasagna, and loaf of garlic bread for each table, offers the opportunity for children to sit, relax, enjoy each other’s company, learn table manners (“please pass the butter”), and to think of others (taking one or two pieces and passing the bowl around instead of taking half the bowl and thinking of no one else). In this fast food era and age of both parents working, many children do not experience the family table as often as parents would like. If camps offer this serving style, it affords a great opportunity to support family values.

### **What are the top concerns expressed by parents about children and eating at camp?**

Parents know their children best, and most are concerned about their children getting the healthy foods they need, and they want to make sure they will get their favorite foods, as well. The major topic of concern from most parents is about meat and the assurance that the meat will be cooked well enough. Parents worry about their children who have special dietary concerns (dairy-sensitive, vegetarian, food allergies), and contact the food service director regarding the menu and ask how the camp can support this need. Many parents also express concern about sugar and caffeine, and some even ask about the availability of a low-carb program. Since the nature of most camps is activity-oriented, low-carb-conscious parents are usually told that carbs are necessary for energy at camp.

### **Practically speaking, how do health & nutrition translate into menu planning?**

I have five principles for delivering the highest nutrition to campers:

### Serve food items separately

To accommodate most dietary requests, it's best to serve food items separately, for example, pasta and two sauces, one with meat and one without. The second sauce should be a cream or pesto sauce such as Alfredo to please those who don't want the traditional tomato-based spaghetti sauce. The meat (such as meatballs) can be served separately from the marinara sauce, as well. Those who don't want sauce at all can always just eat the noodles with Parmesan cheese. Offering several options separately allows campers to make healthy choices on their own.

### Choice and more choice

If every camp could and would adopt the “bar” mentality at camp, great strides could be taken in the healthy choice effort. The concept of having many items to choose from (such as a salad bar, taco bar, baked potato bar, dessert bar, sandwich bar, etc.) offers a key element of teaching children to make good choices from a selection of good choices. Every time a child has the ability and opportunity to make good choices, healthy eating patterns are reinforced. Children remember and have fond memories of being able to pick and choose all on their own, and it only enhances the opportunity camps have of helping children gain independence.

### Serve a wide variety

A major health and nutrition challenge is to offer balanced nutrition in an appealing format, and the best way to offer healthy choices is in a salad bar array. With the availability of proteins, nuts, grains, and low-fat dressing choices, campers can eat healthy without feeling hungry.

### Substitute or eliminate non-dairy items in cooked foods

One of the ways to address healthy eating and still maintain food quality is to substitute high-fat, high-cholesterol items like butter or cheddar cheese with margarine or a cheddar/mozzarella blend cheese. When cooking rice, substitute margarine for the butter, or leave it out altogether. Use flavor substitutes like seasonings or other flavor enhancers and campers can enjoy a great taste that satisfies most children.

### On the side

The most important feature to offer at all meals is salad dressings, sauces, and gravies on the side to allow each individual to select the amount they desire.

## **How are camps addressing special diets and food allergies?**

The days of serving everyone in the dining hall exactly the same food is definitely a thing of the past. Each and every camper may have slightly different dietary needs that camps consider when planning a menu. Allergies and sensitivities have taken a center stage for food service directors and their focus on foods served at camp. With peanut allergies so rampant and extremely dangerous, even having peanut butter on the shelves can cause

problems, let alone serving peanut butter and jelly or peanut butter cookies to the whole room.

For those who are dairy sensitive or lactose intolerant, having dairy-free options are a must, from soy milk to cheese-less pizza, and even butter-free desserts. Cooks are encouraged to make Rice Krispy treats with margarine, not butter, to ensure a safe environment for all.

Some parents make a great effort to contact the food service director when their child has serious food issues (wheat allergies, preservative allergies, etc.), and every effort needs to be made from the camp kitchen to support any food plans or arrangements the parents are willing to make. Some parents can look at the tentative menu planned for the week and send a supply of acceptable food items that match the menu (corn tortillas for the burrito lunch, wheat-free waffles for breakfast, sugar-free maple syrup for the diabetic child, etc.) so the child can still have a positive camp experience without being ostracized for their food differences.

It is important for the camp food service operation to understand its role in supporting special diets, stocking as many unusual food items for special requests or emergencies as the budget and reality can accommodate.

### **Anything families can or should do to prepare children for meals away from home?**

One of the best things parents can teach their children is to “just try a little.” Some families serve favorite, home-made foods and family recipes, and others eat a small variety of fast or prepared foods. In either case, the children will be exposed to many new items and need to take the opportunity to learn new tastes and experience the entire food array at camp. No parent wants to think of their child as finicky, but most children actually are finicky and reluctant to try new things. The age of potlucks is almost gone, and with that the opportunities for children to try new things is fading, as well. As hard as camp cooks try to duplicate home-made food items, children can tell that camp macaroni and cheese looks and tastes different from home food, whether it be different from the “Easy Mac” they are used to making or the scratch cheese sauce mom or grandma makes.

If parents can prepare their child for the camp experience, not only with packing and building anticipation for the fun, activities and new friendships, but also with food, the camper may feel more settled and secure with the changes about to take place. Parents can present it as a new food adventure, with the challenge to experiment and try one new thing each day and then “report” their analysis and opinion in a letter home. If a child is extremely finicky and may need more than the average incentive program to give camp food a try, a reward may need to be implemented. Parents know their children best and what will work, and almost any approach can be successful if there is communication and attention given to the child prior to the camp visit.

### **What are children’s favorite foods at camp?**

Traditionally, children's favorite foods vary from region to region, but there are several menu items that can guarantee success: pizza, hamburgers, barbecue hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, ravioli, spaghetti, submarine sandwiches, tacos and burritos, chicken dinner, pancakes, scrambled eggs, and cereal. When the camp kitchen takes the food preparation level up a notch, children are delighted with fresh-baked breads, hot dog rollups (dough wrapped around the hot dog in a spiral and baked), and other fun foods. Children also love and appreciate fresh-cut French fries, real turkey dinners, real pizza dough (instead of cardboard crusts), special meals like cookouts, barbecues, breakfast-in-cabins, and even hike lunches.

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Harvest Chili served in Bread Bowls

*Serves Multitudes*

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Ingredients:

Ground beef	10 lbs, cooked and drained, patted dry
Diced onion	1 lb
Diced green peppers	1 lb
Red kidney beans	2-#10 cans (drain off liquid)
Pinto beans	1-#10 can (keep liquid)
Canned diced tomato	2-#10 cans
Tomato sauce	1-#10 can
Worcestershire	1 cup
Chili powder	1/2 cup
Cumin	1/4 cup
Garlic powder	1/4 cup
Salt	1/3 cup
Pepper	1/4 cup
Red flaked pepper	1/8 cup (optional for children)
Unsweetened baker's chocolate	5 ounces (secret ingredient!)

Preparation:

Cook the ground beef, drain off all the fat, and dry beef in paper towels. Set aside in refrigerator for up to 24 hours or even freeze until needed. Put all ingredients into a

stainless-steel pot for cooking on top of the stove, or 6" deep steam table pans for oven baking (do not use aluminum).

**Tip:** Put all the ingredients into 6" deep steam table pans, cover with foil, and bake in the oven for four (4) hours at 350 degrees. This saves constant stirring on the stove, and eliminates sticking and burning (I usually stir once or twice during the four hours).

Bread boules/bowls: Buy par-baked bread bowls, usually 8-ounces in size. An alternative is to take three, 1.5 ounce frozen (thawed) dough balls (a French dough is the best and is more nutritious than traditional white dough) and roll them together into a tight, smooth ball. Place on sprayed sheet pan (no more than 15 per pan), let rise until double in size, and bake until golden brown. Let cool, slice a flap lid across the top of the ball, and serve with instructions to press the dough inside to form a bowl, or pull dough out and use for dipping.

Bon Appetit!

[bio]

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