

Cruising Cuisine

Provisioning and Cooking on a Sailboat: Tips for First Timers

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Perhaps you are a gourmet chef at home, invited for the first time to sail on an overnight trip to Catalina. Or perhaps (like me) your hobbies include sailing, but not cooking, yet you want to take friends out for a dinner cruise that includes more than chips-and-dip. Here's a quick overview of the basics you need to know, regardless of the level of your culinary aspirations!

Is cooking on a sailboat really that different from home? Of course, the basics are the same. We try to keep perishable food cold to keep it from spoiling until we cook it over some heat source and serve it to an appreciative audience, then address the dirty dishes. But here are some differences, and implications for cooking on a sailboat:

STOVES/OVENS:

- Some boats have a 3 or 4 burner stove and oven. Others have a 2 burner stove but no oven. Race boats may have a little camping-type stove, or none.
- Stoves may be "gimbaled" which lets them stay fairly level even when the boat heels underneath them.
- While some boats may have microwaves, they are generally used only with shore-power at the dock, not underway.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- If you are a guest cook on an unfamiliar boat, be sure you know what is available to cook on before you start menu planning and provisioning.
- A gimbaled stove should be in the gimbaled position when cooking while underway, locked in position when in a smooth anchorage or at the dock.
- If the boat has no oven, you can bake in a Dutch oven or "Backpacker's Oven" (REI)

REFRIGERATORS/ICE BOXES:

- Some boats have refrigerators that run off of AC shore power at the dock, and DC battery underway. But practically speaking, many skippers don't like draining the batteries this way, and the associated need to run the engine for an hour or two to recharge them.
- Some boats may only have what is literally an "ice box" cooled with ice, or portable cooler.
- Some boats have "dry boxes," which have no drains at the bottom for melted ice.
- Obviously, if you open the ice box door a lot, it will warm up faster.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Know what refrigeration the boat has ahead of time, and the skipper's plans.
- Don't count on ice to keep food frozen: your ice cream will melt and make a mess! (The exception is "dry ice" which has its own issues).
- Melted ice turns un-waxed cardboard containers and paper labels into soggy messes; don't put them in the ice box.
- The good news: if you make sure the ice box/fridge and everything you are going to put it in is very cold/frozen before you put them in, they stay cold for days.
- Try to remove everything you need for a meal at one time to use the door less. A small cooler in the cock-pit for drinks helps, and minimizes need to "go below."
- Don't put loose ice in a dry box, or you will be sponging it out back at the dock.

COOKING FUEL:

- Propane gas is the most common fuel on boats, because it is cheap and efficient. But it must be used with care because it is heavier than air and very combustible.
- CNG fuel is also hazardous, but since it is lighter than air, tends to dissipate quickly rather than settle into the bilge.
- Alcohol is also a common fuel. It produces a fairly cool flame. Keep a pot of water available to douse an accident alcohol fire.

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- Propane tanks are stored in special lockers, usually near the stern of the cockpit. Additionally, there is an electric “solenoid” switch which controls the flow of propane from the tank to the stove. This switch should be near the stove, often on the electrical panel.
- Some propane stoves have a built-in pilot light or starters, but many need to be light with a BBQ type lighter or matches.
- Many propane stoves seem to “go out” often when you are using them.
- They may have a thermocouple in them which turns off the propane when the flame goes out and the burner cools off.
- Propane ovens often must be lit from underneath.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Again, know what you are working with, and make sure you have a way to light it.
- If propane, turn the solenoid “on” only when you are using the stove. You may need to press and hold in the knob on a propane stove for a while as you light it, until the thermocouple warms up enough to not turn the gas off when you release it.
- Ignite match or lighter before turning on a burner.
- If something seems to be taking a long time to cook, double-check that the burner/oven flame hasn’t gone out.
- As a precaution, when you are done cooking, turn the solenoid off before you turn the burner off, to eliminate any propane in the line that might leak into the boat and create a fire/explosion hazard.
- Remember to avoid loose sleeves or clothing around flames stoves, especially if you are used to electric range-tops.
- If you can’t light a stove, double-check that the tank is open and solenoid on.
- The propane tank should be turned off when you are done cooking for the day, or whenever you leave the boat.
- Lighting a propane oven from underneath can make you feel like you are trying to stand on your head; best if you are flexible and not prone to sea-sickness!

FIRE/BURN DANGER:

- Fire on a boat is even more dangerous than at home; escape is limited, propane tanks can explode, and fire can cause the boat to sink.
- A boat’s movements underway can send hot pots and their contents flying, risking burns.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Make sure that you know where the fire extinguishers are on board, and how to use them. Understand and follow safety requirements for whatever fuel you use.
- If you have a fire in a propane stove, turn off the solenoid first.
- If you cook while the boat is moving, consider wearing shoes/boots and foul-weather bibs to protect you from scalding.
- Some stoves have adjustable wire frame “pot holders” that help hold pots in place.
- Keep children away from a hot stove. A gimballed stove is even easier for a child to pull down towards themselves and spill something hot, or set something on fire.

BBQs:

Using a BBQ on a boat is similar to at home, with a couple of exceptions:

- Wind; sailboats are often in windy spots. It can be harder to keep a BBQ lit.
- Attachment: BBQs on sailboats are usually attached to the round railing on the stern.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- If for some reason you can’t light or keep your BBQ going (too much wind for example), best to have a ‘plan B’, such as pan-frying in on the stove, or oven broiling.
- Ensure the BBQ is solidly attached to the railing, so it doesn’t tip and drop your steak and lobster dinner to the fish.
- BBQ downwind of the cockpit, or anything sparks may damage. This is usually fairly easy if you are alone in an anchorage, swinging on a single anchor, but be careful otherwise.

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STORAGE:

- Storage space on a sailboat is limited, and it can tilt or move... sometimes violently. Stoves may be “gimbaled” which lets them stay fairly level even when the boat heels underneath them.
- There is usually limited room to store trash in the galley (another good reason to leave extra packaging behind). On multiple day trips, when trash is consolidated into larger trash bags for stowage in an anchor or cockpit locker, the bags often snag/rip and create a stinky mess.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Minimize storage space requirements by bringing only what you need, rather than “the whole box” and any un-necessary packaging. Cut out any directions/cooking times before you throw package away!
- Repackage food in containers that can break, or can’t be resealed, into something non-breakable and re-sealable. Many prefer cartons of Egg Beaters to real eggs.
- For anything that even MIGHT break or come open, put it in a zip-lock for safety.
- Stow heavy items such as canned goods and pots as low as possible. Remember the warning on planes to use care opening doors as “contents may have shifted?”
- Heavier, stronger “compactor” type bags work much better than regular trash bags. If the boat has no oven, you can bake in a Dutch oven or “Backpacker’s Oven” (REI)

CONSERVATION:

- Fresh water underway is limited to what is in the storage tanks.
- While usually safe to drink, water from the boat’s water tanks may pick up an odd taste. Plan on minimum of two quarts per person per day for drinking and cooking.
- To make the fresh water go further, some boats use salt water for tasks such as rinsing dishes before washing in fresh water. There make be a separate faucet with a foot pump at the sink for this.
- Water from the galley and head sinks, including soap, drains directly to the ocean
- MARPOL regulations define how far you must be from shore to throw food, paper, and other waste overboard.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Check to make sure the fresh water and cooking fuel tanks are full enough before you leave the dock.
- Check to see if the water from the tanks/faucet tastes funny, if so bring enough bottled water for drinking and perhaps cooking, or powdered drink mix.
- Check to see if the boat has a salt water faucet for rinsing dishes, don’t confuse it with the fresh water faucet!
- If fresh water is limited, consider rinsing dishes in salt water in a bucket.
- Consider using an environmentally friendly, biodegradable soap (try REI)
- Follow the MARPOL regulations, which legally must be posted on board.

BEING A GOOD HOST(ESS):

At home: You may enjoy spending lots of time in the kitchen. Your audience doesn’t mind waiting for a meal since it is easy for them to snack, and they appreciate all the time and effort you spend to make a complicated meal from scratch. Most everyone enjoys smells such as bacon frying, and exotic, spicy flavors. You have everything you need to cook, including lots of electrical gadgets that plug into the wall, and you know right where each is in your kitchen.

On a sailboat: There is often going to be at least one person battling some amount of seasickness. It may be you, and every second you must spend in the galley seems like an hour. It may be someone else; they can’t bear to eat anything spicy, and the smell from your fry pan literally “sends them over the edge.”

- After a long day on the water everyone is hungry, especially those that may have been too seasick to eat on the way. Weather, mechanical, or other issues may have delayed arrival to the anchorage to well after the planned anchor and meal time. As blood-sugar drops among the crew, so does their sense of humor.
- Underway, crew needs “one hand for the boat.”
- Cooks also may find that two hands don’t seem enough on a sailboat. Simple tasks like draining a pot of pasta or rice with the lid often end up with a mess in the sink.

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- Not only are food spills easier to happen on a boat, greasy decks are dangerous.
- Sailboats often have 110 AC “wall plug-in” type power only while plugged into shore-power at the dock. Small inverters which convert DC battery power to 110 AC power are available (West Marine). But again, the skipper needs to decide how to manage the ship’s battery reserves.

Implications for cooking on a sailboat

- Until you have cooked underway enough to be sure you aren’t prone to seasickness, plan menus that require a minimal amount of time in the galley while you are underway, or even at a rolling anchorage.
- Consider avoiding foods with strong odors, or even pan-frying smells, if anyone might be prone to seasickness.
- Consider preparing blander food such as pasta or pancakes, and bring separate sauces and condiments for those who want to more flavor. (Nuttela!)
- Provision lots of convenient snack foods for underway, or between meals. Make sure the crew knows what items are reserved for your special menus!
- Underway, look for foods that crew can eat with one hand. Serve soup in mugs, rather than with bowls and spoons. Partially wrapped sandwiches are easier safely to put down as crew tends the boat.
- Consider bringing a strainer (collapsible is nice) to make draining pots easier.
- Meals served on a reasonably predictable basis may be more important to your crew than whether you made everything from scratch and fresh ingredients. Consider provisioning prepared or “instant” versions of favorite foods, “just in case.”
- Have simple “back-up” menus, in case someone with less culinary skill than you has to prepare what you provisioned because you are sick, dealing with some other issue on the boat, or tired of cooking.
- Do as much food prep at home as possible. “Boil-in” bags are great because they are easy to heat and clean up. You can prepare you culinary masterpiece at home, put it in a boil-in bags (or two), freeze it, and delight your crew. Lots of great prepared options at Trader Joes.
- Double check for basic items in the galley before departure. Can opener? Lighter? Paper towels? Trash bags? Zip-lock bags?