



BANOFFEE PIE: AN ENGLISH BANANA-BASED DESSERT.

PHOTOGRAPHY: AMANDA LESLIE

Backwoods gourmet

Halifax-based chef teaches national park visitors how to prepare delicious meals over a campfire. It's a skill that applies to all seasons.

BY AMANDA LESLIE

TAKE a trip to any of Canada's 46 national parks and you'll find plenty of visitors enjoying the rustic appeal of the great outdoors. Our extensive park system, which dates back to 1885, is synonymous with activities such as hiking, canoeing and cross-country skiing. But there is something Canadians probably don't associate with the national parks: Gourmet food. That's why Fundy National Park decided to team up with a Halifax-based chef to prove that outdoor cooking is far from difficult. In fact, it can be a real treat.

At an old picnic shelter in Herring Cove, Dennis Johnston stands by a woodstove with a table full of brightly coloured ingredients sitting nearby. It's the second year in a row that he's visited Fundy National Park to host Rustic Gourmet, a cooking class geared specifically to campers who are looking to expand their culi-

nary skills. There are no hamburgers or hotdogs on the menu today. Instead, Johnston is preparing a traditional Thai curry called Kao Soi.

Rustic Gourmet is one of several new programming initiatives that Fundy has introduced in recent years. Others include snorkeling with salmon for conservation pur-

poses and Fundy's first-ever concert on the ocean floor, which was so popular the CBC dedicated an entire TV special to the event. "With Rustic Gourmet, we wanted to create an activity to complement Taste of Fundy," says events coordinator Mike Vautour, referring to the late summer festival that encourages visitors to sample local food and wine along the coast of New Brunswick.

Johnston, the former owner of Fid Resto and a big supporter of the local food movement, is a qualified host. He's spent years perfecting his craft as a chef and it certainly shows. After leaving Fid Resto to pursue other ventures, he has continued to cater at the request of many loyal customers. Johnston and his wife Monica also offer guided culinary tours of France, Italy and the Yorkshire countryside, where they take guests to different markets to explore the local culture and prepare elaborate dishes at a nearby villa.

For today's meal, Johnston wanted to choose something flavourful, but also relatively easy to prepare. Kao Soi used to be one of the most popular lunchtime specials at Fid Resto. Seeing as the whole thing can be made in a single pot, it seemed like a perfect fit. Once the oil heating on the woodstove begins to hiss, Johnston reaches for a container of diced chicken from the cooler and pours it into the mix.



backwoods gourmet

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It took me a year, a really good year, but I did lose 130lbs and there's no way that I could see myself going back.”



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KAO SOI: THAI CURRY.

PHOTOGRAPHY: AMANDA LESLIE

This is our first piece of advice: Prepare in advance. In addition to cubing the chicken, he's also cooked the noodles at home and fried a handful of them for a crunchy garnish. Johnston keeps these ingredients in a re-sealable bag until they're ready for use. As for the two most important tools for cooking in the woods? Johnston says it's salt and a good knife.

He adds an assortment of spices and frequently checks the amount of oil in the dish by moving the ingredients around with a wooden spoon. "One of the mistakes people often make with Thai curries is not adding enough oil," Johnston says. "You have to make sure it doesn't get too dry." He pours some more into the pot and adds the coconut milk. Johnston prefers to use a brand called Mae Ploy, which is available at most grocery stores.

While the curry simmers, Johnston slides two thin pieces of bark under the pot to elevate it off the woodstove. "It's hard to control the heat when working over a fire," he explains, before sitting down to dice long strands of green onion. Johnston also begins to assemble a dessert called Banoffee Pie. He's made the graham cracker crust in advance and it doesn't take long to add a layer of caramel and sliced banana, before topping the dish with a mixture of espresso and whipped cream. His earlier class prepared an equally appetizing meal: Breakfast burritos with Pico de Gallo and chocolate-covered churros.

We talk as he works and it's surprising



CHEF DENNIS JOHNSTON.

PHOTOGRAPHY: KRISTINE RICHER

how easy the whole thing appears to come together. In just over an hour, the curry has finished cooking and Johnston ladles the aromatic mixture into our bowls. He adds the noodles, along with green onion and a splash of fresh lime juice.

The final result is delicious and easily the best meal I've ever had while camping. As for Johnston? He's already anticipating a return to Fundy for Rustic Gourmet next year. "Cooking is a form of play," he says. "And like all play, it should be fun. Campfire food is no different." 🍴

MORE INFO

For more on Dennis Johnston and his culinary classes, follow him on Twitter at [@fidkitchen](https://twitter.com/fidkitchen) or at his website fidkitchen.com.