

Cooking for One

Where I Run Into Trouble

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At some point, I crossed a line.

It was probably around my 10th mile on the C&O Canal, when my running coach suggested I try some energy gel to power me through the next few miles. It comes in one- to two-ounce packets, consists of "long-chain maltodextrin" and looks like something I should be using to protect against chafing rather than eating. That first one made me sick. But I will say this: The single-size portion was all I could handle.

When I finish a hard run, the last thing I want is another gel. I want flavor, aroma, love: in other words, food rather than fuel. I come home to an empty apartment, which means I'm cooking for myself.

Or should be. I'm often too spent and starving to prepare anything more involved than chocolate milk. The wait while scrambling an egg might do me in; I

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think I'd start gnawing on the spatula. The microwave is speedy, but the remnants of dinner are so yesterday. And the day before that, and sometimes the day before that. Besides, after running 18 miles, don't I deserve something fresh?

When I started running long distances three years ago, I was surprised it made me so hungry. I'm lean and have a tiny frame, and I generally don't eat big portions of anything except dessert. But when I was training for my first marathon, my stomach turned into an insatiable beast. Food consumed my thoughts in the final miles of long runs. When I finally made it home, I was unprepared. I'd throw anything that was ready-made down the hatch.

Ready-made, as in peanut butter out of the jar. As in yet another particle-board energy bar.

Frustrating as such hunger can be, it's also deeply personal. This is truly a time I should be tailoring food to my palate and nutritional needs and to the finicky demands of my post-workout digestive system.

Every runner (and her stomach) has a unique relationship with food. My running buddy and I prepare the

same pasta dish before all of our big races: our ritual carbo-loading party. The recipe is tried and true, something that doesn't irritate our stomachs.

On the other hand, my running-veteran boyfriend has never needed to alter his diet before 100-mile trail races. And when he's done racing, sometimes more than 24 hours on his feet later, he takes singular joy in stopping for chicken strips at a Sheetz gas station on Interstate 66. If I were to run 100 miles, I'd need a little more than that to motivate me. I once saw a woman racing in a shirt that said, "Will run for chocolate cake." That's my kind of runner.

One of the major challenges I faced in adopting this sport was understanding how my body responds to food. Other athletes I talked to followed different diets, and the magazines certainly weren't conclusive. The one thing everyone agreed on was that I would just have to experiment.

But I did learn one universal truth: Whether I think of my post-run meal as a reward or refueling, I know I have to watch the clock. It's crucial to get something into my body soon after I finish; it helps replace glycogen stores, aiding in muscle recovery. Many nutritionists and exercise physiologists say that after stopping, a runner has a 15- to 20-minute window during which it is essential to eat.

In an effort to kick bad habits, I tried a few quick recipes from various runners' Web sites. What could I whip up in 15 minutes when my heart rate is still elevated, my stomach's doing somersaults and all I want to do is lie down? Not much, actually. But I found that I can throw a couple of tasty ingredients in a blender and be devouring, and enjoying, a smoothie within five minutes. It's a great solution to the time-crunch problem. Smoothies also help me cool down and are easy to digest. Lately I'm into a version with peanut butter, banana and dark chocolate. The peanut butter gives me a jump start in replacing protein, and the potassium in the banana can help ease leg cramps. The dark chocolate? That's for taste.

With my hunger abated, I can focus on two other pressing post-run



needs: a shower and a nap. When I wake up, I'm usually ready to eat. I crave logger food, meat and potatoes; my body knows it needs protein and carbohydrates. Oh, and my taste buds are craving attention, too.

But once again, I'm too exhausted to spend 45 minutes making that happen. I've discovered I can fulfill all those demands as long as I am organized. If I know I'm doing a long training run Sunday morning, I spend part of Saturday night cooking something that will motivate me to finish, get home and savor lunch.

This time of year, comforting stews are one answer: Easy to do in advance, they can be reheated in minutes. They can even be made in a slow cooker programmed to finish simmering at the end of a run.

As much as I like stew, however, I don't want to eat it eight nights in a row. I searched for a recipe that could be scaled down to feed one person instead of six. I found a light chicken stew that looked promising, halved the ingredient amounts and crossed my fingers.

Sure enough, my version made three hungry-runner portions. The dish, with herbes de Provence and red potatoes, was soothing, flavorful and filling but did not weigh me down. Freezing the other two portions ensures I won't bonk after the next long training run.

And in an ultimate snub to those energy bars, I got help in scaling down an old family recipe for apple-sauce-chocolate chip bars. They're more like moist cookies, but why run that far if you can't have dessert?

Tracy Dahl is a copy editor for the Business section and a Food section recipe tester. She will run the 33rd annual Marine Corps Marathon on Oct. 26.