

Creative food ideas to weather the storm

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Getting through the hurricane might be the hard part, but the days and weeks that follow the storm can be nearly as challenging.

Here are ideas and tips to get you through the crisis.

Stock up early, buying one thing you need with every trip to the grocery store.

Save cooking water: When you have a pot of water to heat boil-in-bags, you don't have to discard it. Save it to heat boil-in-bags at another meal. Just bring to a boil again, let boil a few moments, then add more bags. Don't use for another purpose, however.

Bread ideas: If bread becomes a bit stale, don't throw it out. When you make soup, break up the bread and put a few of these croutons in the bottom of the bowl before you ladle the soup into it. The bread will soak up the soup and make a heartier broth.

Spice it up: Use a variety of dried spices and spice mixes to add flavor to such simple things as rice, couscous, instant mashed potatoes, pasta tossed with olive oil and other simple but filling starches.

An easy salad: If you have any canned vegetables or beans, drain and mix them with a good olive oil and vinegar such as red wine or balsamic. Toss to combine. Any fresh additions such as onion, carrot, celery or olives are welcome.

Grilled Spam: If Spam is in your hurricane survival pantry, remember it's not mystery meat but ground pork. If you've got a charcoal or gas grill, don't hesitate to slice and grill it either plain or slathered with sauce.

Cleanup: Use disposable plastic gloves to mix things by hand so you don't dirty utensils unnecessarily. This saves water used for cleanup. And use self-seal plastic bags instead of mixing bowls to mix salads and marinate meats. Just put the ingredients into one, seal and toss to mix. No need to wash a container. Food stored in plastic bags in an ice chest take up less space than plastic containers.

Bottled dressing: Remember that salad dressings make simple marinades for grilled foods. If you're grilling foods, burgers should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees; chicken needs to be 170 degrees.

KEEP YOUR FOOD SAFE

Before you cook, assess the safety of your food. Toss out any food that may have come in contact with floodwaters. When in doubt, throw it out.

Frozen meat: If the food is still partially frozen, you can refreeze. If thawed and held at room temperature for less than two hours, cook and serve, or cook and refreeze. Otherwise, discard.

Frozen vegetables, fruits and juices: If ice crystals are still intact, refreeze, but there may be some loss in flavor and texture.

If thawed and held at room temperature for less than two hours, cook and serve. Juices can be refrozen.

Refrigerated foods: Food kept in an unopened refrigerator for 24 hours is still cold and remains safe.

Milk: Discard if unrefrigerated for more than two hours.

Fresh eggs: Safe unrefrigerated for five to seven days. Discard if shells are cracked or odor or discoloration is present.

Hard-boiled eggs: Discard if held at room temperature for more than two hours.

Other tips might be found at the Web site www.foodsafety.gov/~fsg/fsgdisas.html.

WATER TIPS

Pay attention to local authorities about the status of your water supply. Use only bottled or disinfected water for drinking and cooking until the public water supplies have been declared safe.

Boil-water orders are often issued after a hurricane. That's usually because the public water utility has lost pressure in its water-moving systems, making it possible for contaminants to enter water lines. The danger with tainted public supplies is from bacterial contamination that can cause severe diarrhea. Untreated diarrhea can be life-threatening.

Water that you saved in bottles before the storm should be good for up to six months, if properly stored. To prevent the spread of disease, wash your hands frequently with disinfected water and soap.