

On French Rations

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The importance of food and drink on the morale of soldiers was monumental. A warm meal along with a cup of wine or coffee had the ability to lift up the spirits of men worn down by war. Even the *État-Major* understood this simple fact. Compared to today's standards, the notion of what constituted a nutritious diet, particularly for men actively engaged in hard manual labor and strenuous combat, was somewhat different. Though distribution amounts for certain foods would change during the course of the war, the diet for the average *poilu* remained relatively unchanged throughout.

Daily Meals

In theory, French soldiers received two meals a day: breakfast and dinner. There was no standard time for when the meals were scheduled while in the field. Most accounts indicate that breakfast was normally served around 8-9 am, with coffee or wine sometimes served a little beforehand. Soldiers referred to this liquid refreshment period with the acronym *P.D.D.M.* -- (*Petit Déjeuner Du Matin* or "Morning Breakfast"), pronounced 'Peh Deh Deh Em'. Dinner normally was served sometime in the early evening. It was also common to receive both meals at once in the morning, the men saving half of the ration in their mess-kits to eat later. Often times, conditions at the front prohibited fresh meals from either being prepared or from being transported up to the men. In these cases, they had to rely on their two-days supply of reserve rations, which were to be opened only in circumstances where fresh rations were unavailable. It was not uncommon for a soldier to exhaust his reserve rations as well, in which case he simply went without for as many days as it took to re-establish the supply.

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At the start of the war, when the men were in the rear, they prepared their own meals using the squad cooking implements. Each squad formed its own mess group. When the men were at the front, field kitchens were set up in the rear or support lines and rotating cook positions were assigned within the squad or section. Beginning in February 1915, mobile field kitchens began appearing in the French army and became the dominant way of preparing food by that summer. When a unit was sent to the front, these were stationed in the rear or support lines and manned by a permanent staff of cooks nicknamed *cuistots* ("cookys"). When a unit was in the rear, the men had their meals prepared by either the old cooking-fires or the mobile field kitchens. For more details, see the separate articles on **Daily Rations**, **Reserve Rations**, and **Transportation of Rations**.

Field Kitchens

As mentioned above, at the start of the war the men prepared their own meals using the squad cooking implements when in the rear. Each squad formed its own mess group. When the men were at the front, field kitchens were set up in the support lines (usually about 400-800 meters behind the front line) and rotating cook positions were assigned within the squad or section.

The location of the field kitchen was chosen in a sheltered spot, protected from the elements and near a water source. There were several official ways to set up the cooking-fire according to the various army manuals. Perhaps the simplest and most convenient was to place 2 or 4 large stones close together around the fire-pit. The stew-pots were then rested on top of these and over the flames. In place of stones, a simple trench could be dug into the ground with the stew-pots resting on the edges. This type of set-up was used when the kitchen was only temporary, remaining in this spot for a few hours or perhaps one day. For longer stays, soldiers were constructed a more lasting emplacement. A cross-shaped trench was dug, not too large so as to allow the stew-pots to sit on top as before. A chimney was erected at the center, where the two trenches [fire-pits] met using sod, clumps of earth or stones. If possible, the cooking-pit was completed by placing two or three empty ration cans into the chimney. The stew-pots were set around the four entrenchments.

This style of cooking-fire allows for a proper draft whatever the direction of the wind. Additionally, it's possible to burn green or wet wood and even [earthen] coal by installing an improvised grill. An entire section can establish it's kitchen this way, which requires only one or two men to watch over it (an important advantage on rainy or heavy work days). Often the cooks constructed a light shelter made of wattling or tenet canvases to get them out of the sun and rain. If the ground was wet or if it were a rainy or windy day, the cooks would prepare the fire inside a large pot place the stoking paper or straw inside a large pot and lit, with a pile of dry sticks placed nearby. after having taken care to place in front of the fire-pit the most flammable sticks. The cook-pits, as much as possible, establish at a certain distance from walls in order to not cause any deterioration.

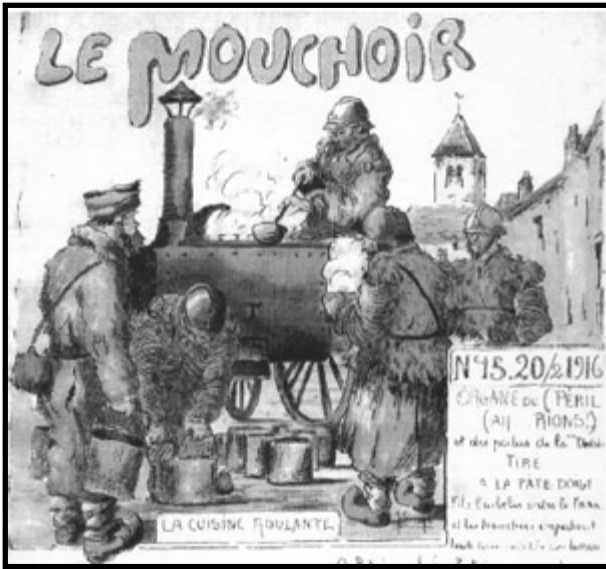
Once the meals were ready, if the men were in the rear or support lines, the food was distributed out into the soldiers' individual mess-kits. If the men were at the front, the meals were transported up to the them either by the cooks themselves or by a ration party sent back for this purpose. After the meals were distributed, the cooking implements were brought back to the kitchens and washed with hot water. If water was not available, the cooking implements could be cleaned using the cinders left-over from the fire. A special paste was made using wood cinders, sod or limestone bits, crushed and padded down in a little bit of water. The implements were then scrubbed clean by means of paper, rags, grass, leaves or straw, etc.

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Once this is done, if the implements were borrowed from the squad, they were returned to the owners by the corporal or squad leader.

Beginning in February 1915, mobile field kitchens began appearing in the French army and became the dominant way of preparing food by that summer. Nicknamed *roulantes* or "rollers" (see photos [1](#) and [2](#)), their incontestable advantage over cooking fires theoretically rendered certain squad camping implements superfluous. Drawn by two horses, several different models were produced, all of which were equipped with a fire-box, cooking chambers and four wheels. The "rollers" held either one to four stew pots that totaled roughly 90 gallons in volume. A separate 18-gallon stew pot was included strictly for the purpose of coffee. The kitchens

were heated with both charcoal and wood.

Once the meals were prepared, if the men were in the rear or support lines, they queued up and the food was distributed out into their individual mess-kits. If the men were at the front, the meals were transported up to them normally by a ration party sent back for this purpose.

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