

Divine Deserts of the Trails: A Retrospective Analysis of Memorable Hike Food and the Moments they Created

By Liz and Zi

What makes a multi-day hike special? Surely, it is the collection of moments that the hike gives birth to; moments between friends, within nature, and moments that extend beyond the bounds of normal of daily life and into the spectacular.

Some of the most precious of such hike-moments, are produced by and centred around food. Oftentimes upon a trail a simple Vita wheat with humus and avocado carries a decadence far beyond its standard, and a three-day old soft cheese that has slightly hardened and matured evolved into a complete delicacy. However, this article is not concerned with the way normal can become special. It is concerned with the magic that can arise when focussed and dedicated effort is made to curate a particular culinary delight upon the trail. For this is when truly memorable moments are born.

To honour the special food-moments that made several multi-day hikes deeply memorable, this article highlights, reviews and assesses five desserts consumed by a subset of Wild.Awe:Earth members between 2023 and 2025. The food category of desserts was chosen as to highlight the impact of additionality – while desserts may not be an everyday aspect in most hikers normal life, the Wild.Awe:Earth members in this study do prioritise this meal, as a staple for every night of every hike.

This article starts by painting culinary context to the five desserts. It then introduces the assessment criteria and scoring. Finally, it provides the multi-criteria assessment and interpretation.

The Desserts

Wild Chocolate Decadence

The most anticipated and converted of all trail snacks must surely be chocolate – the Mars bar squirreled away for an emergency after a 22 km day, or the classic Cadbury's Fruit & Nut bar – meted out in pieces to make it through rain and mud. But what if someone was willing to hike with the raw ingredients? Could chocolate be made in the heart of a national park, hundreds, maybe thousands of kilometres from confectionary kitchens? It turns out, the answer is yes!! This is a feat we doubt has occurred before (or will ever happen again) in the Fiordland's of New Zealand, if not the Australasia-Pacific region...

With a rest day in hand, Kate created magic and produced not one, but a whole range of chocolate desserts, inspired by everyone's favourites - dark chocolate with freeze dried raspberries and ginger (separate bars), a Golden Rough, a Bounty bar and even a Snickers bar - and the cocoa percentage varied to match. Unreal!!

Kate's culinary skills and creativity were of curiosity to fellow hikers, who likely hadn't seen chocolate made before, let alone at McKellar Hut on the Caples-Greenstone trail! And, the chocolates were fabulous – creamy, smooth dark chocolate, crunchy peanuts, coconut.... prepared with care and set using the brisk cool air rolling off the Greenstone River. This dessert was truly wild!

Anzac Apple Crumble

Apple crumble is a classic camp food, at least for car camping when weight isn't an issue. But not all crumbles are created equal. This one is delicious, and has become a keystone in all good, multi-day hikes. The trick is to craftily hide (or carefully reserve) some of Lorraine's Anzac slice for topping. Crumble it liberally over stewed apples (rehydrated and puree are best), then serve with the best camp-style, hot custard. Such a winner! Whether hiking the

Routeburn, Caples or Three Capes, the addition of pan toasted almond flakes adds extra crunch and a fancy finish.

Berries and Chocolate Custard

Homemade custard is temperamental. It takes a balance of low heat and careful stirring to make a thick, creamy and lump free dessert. Over a small cook stove, this can be a precarious, time consuming and anxiety inducing act! Facing multiple challenges, including interruption by a very long hut induction, Saideh and Bec manage to produce a much anticipated and appreciated berry dessert with chocolate custard. Refined during an hour of giggles, the custard upheld high dessert standards on the Routeburn.

Christmas Bread and Butter Pudding

In a well-appointed kitchen, a practiced cook can whip up a cosy bread and butter pudding with relative ease. But (and it's a big one), until December 2025, no-one had attempted this oven-baked dessert in a cabin, on a cook-stove, mid-way through the Caples-Greenstone hike. Then Kate arrived, with a spare Christmas panettone. We still don't know where she found room in her pack! The dessert cooking process started with stewed fruit, reduced to a compote (with a few rogue chia seeds for good measure). The compote was spooned into the base of a large dessert bowl, then the panettone added in rustic, bite-sized pieces. The custard was added on top, then the dessert cooked over an expertly managed cook-stove flame. On serving, the dessert was inverted, with great flair, stewed fruit presenting on top!

Three Capes Cheesecake

Cheesecake can be baked or set. They usually take a bit of practice and aren't as straight forward as making a cake. Imagine - a vista of coastal heathland and eucalypt forest - sloping gently away to the cliff top, then a spectacular view over Port Arthur on sunset. Behind, the award-winning Surveyors Hut (night one on the Three Capes Track), with its expansive veranda and the murmur of tired, happy hikers settling in for dinners of rehydrated stew. There, in a quiet corner of the veranda, exposed to a cool breeze off the Tasman Ocean, is a cheesecake in the making – settling slowly with nightfall and the anticipation of southern aurora lights. Novel – yes! Delicious – absolutely!

Editor reflection: Having deep consideration of hike-weight complexities, a cheesecake box mix was chosen. With thrifty use of the limited hut kitchen resources, a bowl carefully placed in the wind upon the deck, enabled the setting of the cheesecake. The deck also created conditions that led to a dramatic incident which nearly resulted in the loss of the setting bowl – due to the strong wind conditions. There was much awe expressed from hungry camp neighbours to whom desserts had not been considered a necessity. The deconstructed cheesecake provided a solid foundation for what is possible.

Methodology

Criteria

The criteria used for this assessment are outlined in Table 1, Appendix A. The criteria cover physical and tangible elements such as *aroma*, *mouthfeel* and *flavour profile*, as well as experiential elements including *presentation*, *experience* and “*wow*” *factor*.

There are also criteria to consider how special the dessert was within the context – including *uniqueness in the location* as well as the *trail to commercial weigh ratio*, which rewards creative low-weight low-volume innovations. There was some discussion as to whether trail to commercial weight ratio should reward effort however it was decided that weight related effort is not ideal for longevity of the dessert as an option in the future, whereas the preparatory effort criteria rewards high effort particularly on the trail.

Critically, the criteria inform a broad and holistic approach, considering the joy and decadence that the desserts can create, which results in truly exceptional trail moments.

Assessment

Each dessert was assigned a rating for each criterion, between 1 to 5 (see Table 2), where higher scores were considered better.

Values were assigned in discussion between 2 primary investigators of this study. This involved reflection and discussion on the context, review of photos (where available) and consensus. If the investigators disagreed on a value for a criterion, a discussion was had to achieve consensus. This involved refinement of the criteria as appropriate.

While the assessment only included two of the hiking group's members, the discussion and enthusiasm which underpinned the assessment, as well as the dedication to a careful and insightful learning journey, created a thoughtful and insightful assessment.

Results

The Full Assessment Table can be found in Appendix B, Figure 2: Assessment Table.

All five desserts scored a total between 20 and 40, out of a possible maximum of 50. The highest scoring was the "Wild chocolate decadence" enjoyed in at McKellar Hut on the Caples-Greenstone trail in 2025, scoring 40 points. This was followed by the Christmas Bread and Butter Pudding, also enjoyed on the same trip, at a close 37 points. Next was the Three Capes Cheesecake and the Anzac Apple Crumble at 31 and 27 points respectively. Finally, the chocolate custard, while a product of a process laden with joy, score 20.

Discussion

While hours of hiking can turn a simple lunch into a satiating precious experience, the domain of desserts takes this to a whole new level. It is a shame that many people do not partake in dessert indulgence while hiking, especially considering the rewarding experience that it can be. But it is not for the feint-hearted – it takes foreplaning, packing and carrying, and the effort after a long day.

The five desserts assessed within this article represent a diverse and also impressive mix. From the humble packet mix set cheesecake using Tasmanian wind instead of a fridge, to the innovative Christmas panettone bread and butter pudding inverted on a table in a warm hut – none of the desserts disappointed. All five required careful consideration, and sufficient energy at the time of preparation and serving, and all with their own "wow" responses.

However, as the results point to, there was something particularly special about the chocolate at McKellar Hut on the Greenstone and Caples track in New Zealand. Kate, with her foreplaning and thoughtfulness, surveyed her hiking companions prior to departure in order to custom-compile chocolates tailored to each of us. This had the added value – which was not captured by our criteria, of making each and every hiker feel listened to.

Conclusion

This article adds to the bodies of literature on hike food, hike joy, experiential dessert, and associated intersections. Through five examples, it provides foundational insight into what makes hike desserts special. Although it goes some way to provide insight into the magic ingredients, it also highlights the importance of values-aligned hiking buddies, and area for further research. Special thanks and commendation goes to Kate for all her efforts.

Appendix A

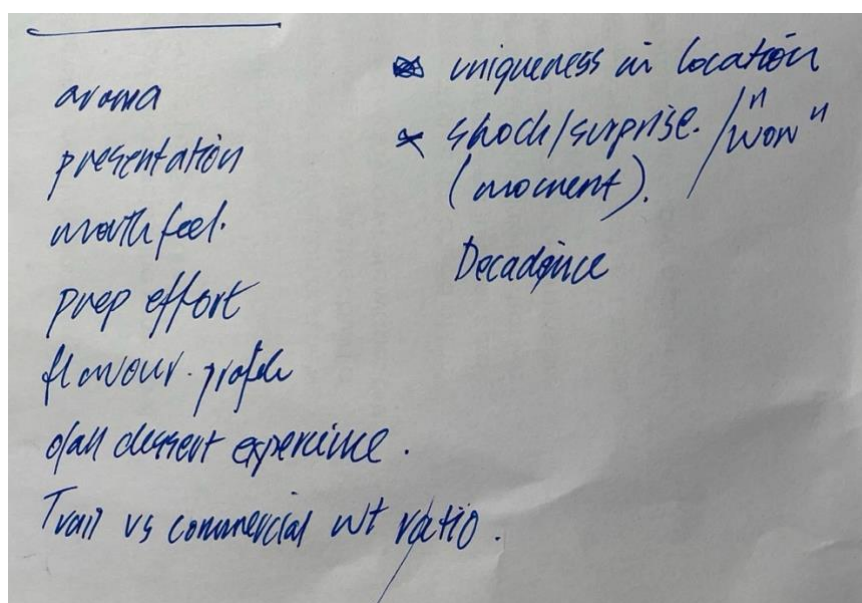
Table 1: Criteria for dessert assessment and high level explanation

Criteria	Explanation
Aroma	The smell of the dessert upon serving.
Mouthfeel	How the dessert feels within the mouth.
Flavour profile	The mix of flavours experienced while eating.
Presentation	The aesthetic value of the dessert upon serving.
Decadence	How decadent the dessert feels in general.
Overall experience	In a broad sense, the overall experience of the dessert.
Uniqueness in location	A measure of how unique the dessert is within the location.
Trail to commercial weight ratio	A proxy for the practicality of carrying the ingredients of the dessert compared to carrying the commercial equivalent for the hike (low score – not very practical)
Preparatory effort	How much effort went into planning, procuring ingredients, preparation, cooking and serving the dessert (low score – low relative effort)
“Wow” factor	An overall assessment of the “wow” induced by the dessert, usually but not limited to, the moment of serving. This also considers responses from neighbouring hikers.

Table 2: Scoring Explanation

Value	Assignment
1	Solid
2	Pretty good
3	Bloody excellent
4	Amazing
5	Extraordinary

Figure 1: Criteria as Developed



Appendix B

Figure 2: Assessment Table

	chocolate	chocolate	chocolate custard	apple crumble	Panacotta (recouff.)
1. Aroma	2	2	2	3	3
2. Mouthfeel	4	2	1	4	4
3. Flavour profile	4	2	2	3	3
4. Present ¹	4	2	1	2	3
5. decad.	5	3	3	4	5
6. overall exp.	5	4	3	2	4
7. unique in context	5	5	1	3	5
8. T: C wt [*] ratio	1	4	4	2	2
9. Prep effort	5	3	1	2	3
10. Menu	5	4	2	2	5
	[40]	[31]	[20]	[27]	[37]