Many hikers and climbers know of John Muir’s minimalist approach to preparing for a wilderness adventure: “I rolled up some bread and tea in a pair of blankets with some sugar and a tin cup and set off.” (In this he resembled the South African Bushmen, who make ready for a journey of a thousand miles in 90 seconds.) A closer examination of the dietary habits of the Sierra Club’s founder suggests a connection between Muir’s spartan fare and the elegiac quality of his prose: the great man was starving to death.

Austerity was part of Muir’s heritage. As a child, he was raised on paternal severity and Calvinist self-denial. His Scottish diet featured oatmeal porridge with a little milk or treacle for breakfast; vegetable broth and mutton for lunch; boiled potatoes, barley scones, and tea with milk and sugar for dinner. “We were always hungry,” Muir lamented, “about as hungry after as before meals.” As William O. Douglas noted in Muir of the Mountains, at a very young age Muir “acquired the habit of eating very little—a habit that was to stay with him all his life.” The most Muir ever weighed was 148 pounds; the least, 90. Both extremes were recorded when he circled the globe in 1903 and 1904; ptomaine poisoning in Russia caused his diminution.

When asked what kind of bread he took to the mountains, Muir replied, “Just bread.” At his home in Martinez, California, he’d buy sourdough at an Italian bakery. In Yosemite, he’d secure French bread at Black’s Hotel, or soda bread from Degnan’s. Sometimes he would bake cakes of unleavened flour over the coals. His preference, however, was “feeding on God’s abounding, inexhaustible spiritual beauty bread.”

In the autumn of 1872, Muir set out for the summit of Mt. Ritter, a crust of bread fastened to his belt. His immutable breakfast of bread and tea that morning was almost his last. Scaling a cliff, he came “to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I must fall.” He didn’t. Summoning preternatural strength from an unknown source (“the other self, bygone experience, instinct, or Guardian Angel”—apparently not protein reserves) he gained the top. Power does not come from PowerBars alone.

When traveling with others, Muir could sometimes be persuaded to expand his menu. On an expedition to Mt. Whitney in 1875, each participant carried, in addition to bread and tea, “a block of beef about four inches in diameter, cut from the lean heartwood of a steer.”

“Muir never lived off the land,” reports historian Michael P. Cohen. “Since he wasn’t a hunter or fisherman, he was frequently hungry.” Even when his money ran out and he was “faint” and “giddy” from hunger on his 1,000-mile tramp from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico in 1867, he rejected wild rice and corn, subsisting instead for five days on soda crackers and water. When money from his brother arrived, he broke his fast with gingerbread.

Only in desperate circumstances did Muir dine directly from nature. In the autumn of 1871, “far and high in the mountains” with bread gone, he feasted on manzanita berries “like a bear.” Another time he followed the example of hummingbirds and sucked nectar from the long tubes of Zauschneria, California fuchsia. He also savored the sweetness of sugar-pine sap, preferring it to maple sugar.

In the forests of Nevada, in October 1878, Muir observed Indians harvesting pine nuts, “their main dependence—their staff of life, their bread.” His account is matter-of-fact. How unlike fellow naturalist Henry David Thoreau, who found in wild food a path to transcendence! In 1851, for example, Thoreau discovered white acorns to be “unexpectedly sweet and palatable.... To my taste they are quite as good as chestnuts. Their sweetness is like the sweetness of bread...the whole world is to me the sweeter for it. How easily at this season I could feed myself in the woods!”

Thoreau would try anything once—even oak sap. The poet Ellery Channing, who walked with him frequently, said he had an “edible religion.” “Gathering berries in our field,” Thoreau wrote, was “gathering health and happiness and inspiration and a hundred other far finer and nobler fruits than berries.”

Even the austere Scotsman indulged in wild berries with unabashed pleasure: “Never before in all my travels, north or south, had I found so lavish an abundance of berries as here [in Alaska],” he wrote, “the largest and finest-flavored of all the huckleberries and blueberries I ever tasted.” Yet he does not...
extol these fruits with Thoreau’s sacramental verve. He is not swelled with ecstasy and gratitude. They do not release his sensuality, as do the wind and the rain.

Nor did our daring explorer exhibit the slightest sense of adventure in his choice of beverages. He recognized only two varieties of tea, “weak and strong, the stronger the better.” He didn’t care for herbal infusions. Once in Alaska, having run out of black tea, he boiled a common heath, Ledum groenlandicum, for his companions, but declined to drink the “rank-smelling liquor” himself. Thoreau, by contrast, rejected conventional stimulants (“Think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea!”), preferring the delights of the sylvan herbarium. In the Maine woods, he agreeably sampled every plant his Indian guides did: “We could have had a new kind of tea every night.” His favorite was the winter-green flavor of creeping snowberry, Gaultheria hispidula.

Fasting was an intrinsic part of Muir’s explorations, so much so that he resented the necessity of eating. “Rather weak and sickish this morning, and all about a piece of bread,” he complained in 1869, “Can scarce command attention to my best studies, as if one couldn’t take a few days’ saunter in the Godful woods without maintaining a base on a wheat-field and grist-mill. Like caged parrots we want a cracker.”

In 1873 Muir returned to Yosemite after a heavy dose of civilization “to run out for a while to say my prayers in the higher mountain temples.” Provisions were unimportant, even unwanted: “A fast and a storm and a difficult cafton seasoned with boiled spruce and other spicy roots.” He did not care for herbal infusions. Once in Alaska, having run out of black tea, he boiled a common heath, Ledum groenlandicum, for his companions, but declined to drink the ate a veritable feast of “clam chowder, fried porpoise, bacon and beans, ‘savory meat’ made of mountain kid with potatoes, onions, rice and curry, camp biscuit...” Finally, over dessert of wild strawberries and coffee, Muir told of his perilous crossing of a crevasse on an ice bridge, the story of Stickeen.

Yet Muir was not always so ascetic. In 1880, he traveled in Alaska with the Reverend Samuel Hall Young and Young’s dog Stickeen. Rising one morning at five to explore Taylor Glacier, Muir left untouched the breakfast of bread, beans, venison, and coffee that Young had thoughtfully prepared the night before. He took with him only bread—and Stickeen. Seventeen hours later the two returned, wet and weary. On this occasion, before telling Young of their adventures, Muir ate a veritable feast of “clam chowder, fried porpoise, bacon and beans, ‘savory meat’ made of mountain kid with potatoes, onions, rice and curry, camp biscuit...” Finally, over dessert of wild strawberries and coffee, Muir told of his perilous crossing of a crevasse on an ice bridge, the story of Stickeen.

Another rare recorded instance of the stirring of Muir’s gastronomic juices was when dining with the Indians of Admiralty Island. There he ate gull eggs and wild celery (“the petioles were hollow but crisp, and tasted well”), liked the potato-salmon stew, but was most pleased—wouldn’t you know it?—by the turnips they served peeled and sliced.

“These we ate raw as dessert, reminding me of turnip-field feasts when I was a boy in Scotland.”

While Muir roamed from one end of the continent to the other, his tastes were bounded by the stone walls of the croft. When his Native companions ate “the hips of wild roses entire like berries,” Muir was “laughed at for eating only the outside of this fruit and rejecting the seeds.” Sometimes we may sympathize with his squeamishness, as when he politely declined “the back fat of a deer, preserved in fish oil and seasoned with boiled spruce and other spicy roots.” He did attempt seal once in Alaska, finding it “excellent, dark-red, and very tender, with a taste like that of good venison.” He notes the Natives eating seal liver, walrus, whale skin, and blubber, but seems content to have watched from a distance. (All great naturalists had their bounds. Even John James Audubon, who often ate the birds he painted, balked at steamed buffalo brains.)

“I live on the fat of the land without getting fat,” Muir wrote, “crackers and claret and a birdpicking of fruit.” Even this diet proved too rich for the old Scotsman, who dreamed of “going back to the faith of my fathers—a poke of oatmeal, a luggie of parritch and a bicker of brose [translation: oatmeal, oatmeal, and oatmeal].” In the end, Muir longed for the taste of childhood. But his only appetite was for wilderness. ▲