

# Freeze-Dried Luxury

Eugene chef and restaurateur makes fancy freeze-dried meals for hiking, van life, emergencies or forays into space

BY SADIE GUSTAVSON

SARA WILLIS, CEO AND CHEF OF LUXEFLY BASECAMP. Photo by Eve Weston

As a single mom of four, entrepreneur and established restaurateur who has opened eight restaurants in Mexico and Eugene — most recently Santo de la Torta on East 19th Avenue — Chef Sara Willis didn't have much time to do something for herself until her kids were old enough to self-sustain.

Willis, now 54, started backpacking at 48 when the idea for Luxefly Basecamp was born: freeze-dried meals that make you feel energized, not keeled over in your tent wondering what the hell you just put in your body.

Luxefly Basecamp offers “fancy astronaut food” curated by Willis with organic,

locally sourced ingredients. Meals range from filet mignon beef stroganoff made with grass-fed beef from Long's Meat Market, cheese chile relleno with Myco-Logical chiles, and vegan butternut squash soup. “I can eat one of these and hike for 19 miles and I feel good,” Willis says.

Willis grew up on an organic farm in Pleasant Hill eating farm-grown produce and meat. It's what she grew up eating and what she feeds her kids. At 20, Willis had a baby and turned to food delivery and restaurant work to support herself. From then, her career took her to San José del Cabo, Mexico, where she was a private chef and opened her first restaurant, Fandango.

In 2001, she returned to Eugene and opened Red Agave with a friend from high school; it ran successfully for more than 10 years.

All components of Luxefly meals are cooked and dried separately before getting sealed into a 6-ounce bag that can be stored for up to five years. Add a cup of boiling water, stir, seal it up and three to five minutes later your meal is ready to eat straight out of the bag.

Willis recalls attending the Pacific Crest Trail Days annual summer festival to pitch her product to hikers coming off the trail. “Every single person had swollen ankles,” Willis says. “I just felt like it was because they weren't eating right.”

As someone who wants to hike the PCT myself one day — a 2,653-mile trail from the Mexican to Canadian border that takes five months to complete — I've binge watched way too many PCT hikers' video diaries on YouTube. The nutrition always stuck out; thru-hikers are often traversing 20 miles or more a day and fueling themselves with Skittles, tortillas, processed meat sticks and candy bars. It seems it's become part of the culture of thru-hiking to deprive your body of nutrition for the sake of packing as many calories as possible into a small space.

Willis wants to change that. “I'm hoping it's gonna be something people think about in a new way.”

Even though backpacker meals is where the idea started, Willis envisions Luxefly meals being utilized anywhere from fire camps to outer space. Whether you're prepping an emergency go-bag, driving 12 hours through a food desert or you're a college student struggling to feed yourself, you deserve to treat yourself to luxury, handmade ingredients.

With Luxefly, Willis is using all the expertise that she's gained over the years in business and professional cooking to create and sell products she feels proud of. “I dropped out of high school and I've run a bunch of businesses and I feel like I have what it takes to take this company where it needs to go,” Willis says. “The majority of people who are business owners started with business school. I don't have any of that. But I've learned so much along the way.”

“I'm really coming to these points where I have to put my big girl panties on and run with the big dogs,” Willis says.

*Luxefly Basecamp meals average \$20 each and can be ordered at LuxeflyBasecamp.com or picked up in-person at Santo de la Torta, 1607 East 19th Avenue. You can also find them on the shelves at Sundance Natural Foods, 748 East 24th Avenue; SeQuential Biofuels, 86714 McVay Highway; and Provisions Market Hall, 296 East 5th Avenue.*

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