

# Eat to Win

Nutrition strategies for the busy dressage rider and competitor

BY JENNIFER M. MILLER







SHUTTERSTOCK



**W**e scrutinize every aspect of our horses' nutrition: how and what they eat, how much they drink or don't, which supplements they need for optimum health and performance. Meanwhile, we rush from work to the barn or from riding horses to teaching lessons, grabbing whatever sustenance is handy.

Early mornings, late nights, and hectic days make eating healthfully a challenge for many dressage enthusiasts. The problem can be even worse at horse shows, where erratic schedules and show nerves can make it hard to eat at all, much less eat well. But it *is* doable. We talked with nutrition experts—themselves experienced equestrians—who have developed ways to keep riders well-fueled on the go. We also got tips from USDF members, both a dressage professional and an adult amateur.

## Healthy Life Hacks

Start by realizing that healthful eating, like dressage, is a journey. Take the long view.

“Ditch the diet mentality, and don't aim for perfection,” advises Los Angeles-based Registered Dietician Nutritionist and amateur hunter/jumper rider Natalie Gavi, MS, RDN, whose Gavi Equestrian offers services including customized nutrition counseling and meal plans for riders. “It's not the one time you eat a cheeseburger that will trigger a heart attack, but years of poor eating.”

Strive for balance and healthful eating over time, Gavi says. Small changes add up. Put one more fruit or vegetable on your plate each day. Make at least half of your grains whole. Eat more plant-based proteins. All of these will help you to feel more satisfied, with fewer cravings. At a show bombarded with junk food? Try not to dwell.

“Consistency is the key,” says Leah Nelson. “If you build good habits, you can make good decisions when you're crunched for time. Tweak your habits until you meet your nutritional goals.” A dressage pro who operates Sweet Water Equestrian at Spring Hill Farm, Duluth, MN, Nelson is a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist and a USDF-certified instructor through Second Level who holds a BS in food and nutrition.

If you develop a dietary regimen that works for you, you'll have one less thing to think about on busy days and you'll routinely reach for healthful choices, says USDF bronze and silver medalist Laura Fay, who owns and operates Aering Green Equestrian Center in Schodack, NY. “I often have multiple lessons or rides, so I try to eat the same foods that give me energy but are easy to consume in the short time between horses and riders.”



AN APPLE A DAY: Good for both rider (dressage pro Laura Fay) and horse (Laurie, a four-year-old Hanoverian mare by Liberty Gold)

Planning ahead is critical in keeping Madelyn Bricken's hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) under control. Bricken, an FEI-level adult-amateur rider and a USDF bronze and silver medalist from Boerne, TX, says, “I'll stick a small variety of snacks into my purse so I'm never without something. If you're bouncing from the office to the barn, plan on having food with you.” (She blogs about “nosh and fitness,” among other topics, at [TheBlondeAndTheBay.com](http://TheBlondeAndTheBay.com).)

## Long Days, Little Time

“Start each day with breakfast to help give you energy and prevent you from overeating,” Gavi advises. “A quick and healthy breakfast is plain yogurt topped with frozen fruit, nuts, seeds, and/or oats. Overnight Oats are also a great option.” (Overnight Oats is a popular no-cook oatmeal recipe from the Food Network. Find it in “Steal This Recipe” on the opposite page.)

Fay, also a fan of breakfast, favors a quick, light meal of cottage cheese and fruit or a skinny bagel with light cream cheese.

Eating well can be a challenge for dressage pros who spend most of the day at the barn, Gavi acknowledges, but try not to skip meals and choose whole foods (foods processed or refined as little as possible, and free of additives or other artificial substances) when you can. If you don't have time to sit, grab a snack and refuel between rides and chores.

Here again, a little forethought pays off. “Making hasty decisions at the gas station on the way to the barn does not set you up to make great choices, so plan ahead,” says Nelson, who advises developing a list of nutritious, filling snacks and then always keeping them on hand.

Do you ride after school or work? Assemble a selection of portable snacks. “I like to keep individual nut-butter packets with me that I can squeeze onto my apple (good for you and your horse!), prepackaged trail mix, and low- or no-sugar granola bars,” says Gavi. (For Gavi’s complete list of go-to quick eats, see “Best Portable Snacks and Quick Meals for Busy Riders” on page 38.)

After long days at work and at the barn, preparing elaborate dinners is probably not tops on your list. Fay uses meal kits that she puts together ahead of time, often with salad as a base; she adds veggies and shrimp for a wholesome, easy evening meal.

Gavi’s quick-dinner suggestions: scrambled eggs with pre-sliced veggies; low-sodium soups; rotisserie-chicken meat on a sandwich or in a salad; canned-salmon salad or tuna-salad sandwiches; and precooked black beans heated with brown rice, paired with a prewashed salad mix tossed with oil, lemon, and vinegar.

Getting home late leaves Bricken little motivation to cook dinner. She will stop at a fast-food restaurant for a grilled chicken sandwich, and at home she’ll pair it with a bag of mixed microwaveable vegetables. (“I’m getting my fast-food fix, but instead of french fries I’m opting for a cauliflower medley.”)

## Performance Nutrition: What to Eat Before, During, and After You Ride

*Before:* Focus on carbohydrates with a little protein for a steady release of energy, says Gavi. Carbs get broken down into glucose and stored as glycogen—your body’s fuel source. Thirty minutes to one hour before you get on, eat a 100-to-150 calorie snack, Gavi advises; wash it down with eight to 20 ounces of water or other liquid, Nelson adds.

If you find that you experience gastrointestinal distress when you ride, Gavi suggests avoiding eating insoluble fiber (examples are fruit with the skin, raw vegetables, and whole wheat) before you saddle up. Bricken, who rides in the morning, opts for gluten-free toast with almond butter and fresh blueberries: “It’s light enough that I won’t feel sick when I’m riding, but filling enough to ward off pesky hunger.”

*During:* Hydrate. Gavi suggests downing one bottle of water per one-hour ride. If it’s hot or you work for more than an hour, consider keeping one bottle of water on hand plus a sports drink to help replenish lost electrolytes.

(See more hydration recommendations and get a do-it-yourself sports-drink recipe in “Leah Nelson’s Hydration Tips” on page 40.)



## Steal This Recipe

### OVERNIGHT OATS

From the Food Network ([foodnetwork.com](http://foodnetwork.com))

1/3 to 1/2 cup liquid, such as dairy milk or almond, cashew, or coconut milk

1/3 to 1/2 cup old-fashioned rolled oats

1/3 to 1/2 cup yogurt (optional)

1 tsp chia seeds (optional but recommended)

1/2 banana, mashed (optional)

Add ingredients to a jar or container and stir. Refrigerate overnight or for at least five hours. The mixture will keep for up to two days (up to four days if no banana used).

In the morning, add additional liquid if desired. Top with your choice of fruit, nuts, nut butter, seeds, protein powder, granola, coconut, spices, citrus zest, or vanilla extract.





**ENERGIZED:** Adult-amateur rider Madelyn Bricken and her Dutch Riding Horse-cross mare, Ulfilia DG (by Wolfgang)

*After.* If you can, eat a complete meal that includes complex carbohydrates, protein, and healthy fats. If a full meal is not an option, eat a portable snack that contains protein and carbs to help replace nutrients lost during your ride, says Gavi. And drink more water, adds Nelson, who likes to complete the refueling process by having a small, unprocessed snack within 30 minutes of a ride.

## Pre-Show Meal Strategizing

With the whirlwind of activity involved in getting ready for a dressage show, thinking about what and where you're going to eat may seem like one more chore you don't have time for. Nutrition experts say that would be a mistake.

"The best thing you can do is plan ahead," says Nelson. "You wouldn't bring your horse somewhere and just plan to feed him whatever you find along the way. There are two athletes to take care of, so plan for yourself as well as for your horse."

Start by packing "nonperishable, healthy snacks," says Gavi, "and if you can bring a cooler, add peanut butter and jelly or turkey or hummus with veggies on a whole-wheat wrap."

Research food and dining options before you leave home, Gavi advises. What grocery stores and restaurants are located near the competition venue? What kinds of food options will be available on the show grounds? With the advent of food-delivery services such as Uber Eats (ubereats.

com) and the Texas-based Favor (favordelivery.com), more and better meal choices can come to your (stall) door, even if you're too busy at the show to get off the grounds to eat, Bricken points out.

If you'll be eating out, Gavi and Nelson agree that baked or grilled options are best bets. Ask for any dressings on the side, and include fruits and vegetables with your meals. If a horse show isn't a horse show without french fries, order the smallest portion size—and try to eat the healthful stuff first, Gavi says.

Competitors at "away" shows requiring overnight stays generally choose between hotels and house or room rentals. In the mornings at a restaurant or a hotel's breakfast buffet, go for fruit with cereal (preferably whole-grain), add a veggie to eggs, or make toast with whole-grain bread, Gavi recommends; and make sure you're well hydrated before you head to the show grounds. When they show, Fay and her clients prefer to rent a house so that they have access to a kitchen. Having a kitchen also allows picky eaters or those with special dietary needs to fix exactly what they want.

When she shows, Bricken is realistic about meals. "Horse shows are not the weekend to diet. A salad and a plate of vegetables will not give you energy, especially if you

## Best Portable Snacks and Quick Meals for Busy Riders

**W**hen you need quality, low-fuss energy, try these snacks and simple meal items as recommended by equestrian and nutrition expert Natalie Gavi, MS, RDN.

### Snacks

- Trail mix with nuts
- Seeds and dried fruits
- Fruit leather (recipe, p. 39)
- Granola bar with minimal or no added sugar
- Smoothie with protein powder
- Pre-sliced vegetables with hummus
- Apple or banana dipped in peanut, almond, or sunflower-seed butter
- Single-serving container of Greek yogurt with nuts and berries
- Hard-boiled eggs (prepare at home), string cheese, apple sauce, and whole wheat crackers.

### Quick bites

- PB&J (or peanut butter and banana) sandwich
- Turkey (or another grilled lean meat) in a whole-wheat wrap.

ride a physically demanding horse at the FEI levels." She says she aims to balance comfort foods and treats with solid nutrition. "I'm not going to pass up chips and queso, but I'll order beef and vegetable fajitas with a side of rice." At least one meal each day contains a protein, a carb, and a vegetable, she says, for more balanced nutrition.

## Fuel Your Performance: Show-Day Nutrition

"A lot of riders experience show nerves, which makes them reluctant to eat while competing," says Nelson, who recommends that competitors with a case of the butterflies "try to drink your nutrition with fruit and protein smoothies." ⇨

## Steal This Recipe

### FRUIT LEATHER

From the Food Network ([foodnetwork.com](http://foodnetwork.com))

Mix  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup no-sugar-added fruit preserves with 1 tsp cornstarch. Spread into a 2" x 12" strip on greased parchment. Bake 45 minutes at 225° F. Cool; then trim the parchment and roll up.



THIS IS NOT A MEAL: For lasting energy to fuel your dressage performance, steer clear of junk food

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Not right before you get on, though. “Try to avoid eating anything right before a ride,” says Gavi. “When riding, your body’s priority is to fuel your muscles, not digestion.” Eating too close to a ride can cause gastrointestinal pain or discomfort, she says.

Three to four hours before your ride time, Gavi recommends, eat a balanced meal that includes carbs, protein, and a little healthy fat. Class at dawn? Thirty minutes to one hour before you put a foot in the stirrup, eat a 100-to-150-calorie snack, such as a hard-boiled egg with a piece of toast, peanut butter with banana and toast, oatmeal, or applesauce with a handful of nuts.

Bricken is a fan of “grazing” at shows, saying she eats something every few hours during the long competition days.

“Competition weekends are so physically demanding that my body needs extra fuel,” she says. “Snacking gives me energy to perform my very best.”

If you snack, snack wisely, advises Nelson. Avoid sodas, sugary junk foods such as doughnuts and candy, and highly

processed foods. All will produce a quick burst of energy and then you’ll crash, she says. Instead, choose whole fruits and vegetables mixed with quality proteins (such as eggs, cheese, and nuts) for lasting energy.

Don’t forget to drink! Many competitors experience headaches, irritability, “brain fog,” fatigue, dizziness, muscle cramps, or side stitches at shows. Riders tend to attribute these symptoms to stress and show nerves, but they actually are signs of dehydration, according to Nelson. Don’t wait until you’re thirsty to drink because by then you’re already dehydrated, Gavi adds.

When she goes to one-day shows, Fay fills a container with a spigot with water, ice, and fruit—a quick and handy way for her students to grab a refreshing drink before and after their tests.

After you’re done riding, replace nutrients and help your tired muscles recover by noshing on a combination of carbs, protein, and “good” fat, preferably of the whole-foods variety, Gavi suggests.

## Leah Nelson’s Hydration Tips

**T**he recommended water intake over the course of a normal day is two liters for women and three liters for

men—more if you’re exercising or sweating, says dressage pro Leah Nelson, who has an academic background in nutrition.

Don’t drink enough because you dislike the taste of plain water? Add a little lemon or lime juice to your water bottle, or try sparkling water, with or without no-sugar flavoring.

Sports drinks can replenish electrolytes lost in sweat in hot weather or after heavy exercise, but some brands contain a lot of added sugar or artificial sweeteners, so read labels before you buy, Nelson advises. Or make your own sports drink by adding some unsweetened coconut water and lime juice to water.



**BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER:** Hydration is key to achieving peak performance in the saddle. Canadian Olympian Jacquie Brooks takes a pre-ride swig before entering the arena on her longtime partner, the Swedish Warmblood gelding *D Niro* (by *D-Day*).

## Find the Foods That Work for You

Every person has unique nutritional needs and preferences. To identify the foods and consumption schedule that help you feel and perform your best, keep a food journal, Gavi suggests. Note what and when you ate and drank and how they affected your rides. Pay particular attention to times when you felt or performed better or worse than usual, and see if you notice any patterns related to your pre- or post-ride food and liquid intake.

If you want to try making a change in what or when you eat, Gavi and Nelson both advise doing your experimenting at home. At shows, they say, avoid eating anything unfamiliar and stick to your usual routine.

It can be difficult to change our eating habits, especially when we’re busy or tired and the lure of quick, easy, cheap junk and fast food is strong. Bricken says it’s been a process learning to weed out the good snacks from the bad snacks. But through trial and error, she’s succeeded in finding things she likes that are healthful and that give her the energy her body needs to perform well.

You take great care of your horse—but you’re an athlete, too. Don’t neglect your own nutritional needs. Fuel your body as carefully as you fuel your horse’s. You’ll feel better, ride better, and bring out the best in your horse as a result. ▲

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