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Picnic: a movable feast

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By Linda A. Odum, Globe Correspondent | August 8, 2007

To assemble a picnic, you need a few elemental things: something to carry the menu, something to sit on, utensils, and the food itself. Since everything tastes better outdoors, grab the essentials and pick a spot on a sunny beach, a favorite park, or your own backyard.

Picnics need little planning, so they make the best impromptu meals. If you picnic all the time -- and everyone yearns to be outside on a sunny day -- you probably know instinctively how to get organized on a moment's notice. Otherwise, get your checklist handy.

A picnic basket can be traditional, or use a backpack, tote bag, or cooler on wheels. You don't want to find yourself wheeling something over rocky terrain or carrying a heavy basket to a remote hillside. On the other hand, if you're driving to your spot, a milk crate or deep roasting pan might do the trick.

Add the basics: a blanket, tablecloth, or plastic tarp to sit on. If you want to get elegant, pack reusable plastic dinnerware, cloth napkins, even inexpensive wine glasses.

A last-minute escape to the outdoors might mean that the menu consists of a baguette and cheese, so you'll want a sharp knife; a cutting board will be handy, as will a bottle opener or corkscrew. Also include insect repellent, sunscreen, and a garbage bag for taking everything home.

Now all you need is food.

The rule of thumb for summer dining is to keep cold foods chilled and hot foods hot. The easiest way to do this is to wrap the containers in a towel, cloth, or newspapers. They act as insulation. Cold items should be covered with ice packs to keep in the chill. To minimize spills of soupy or saucy items, even in plastic containers, lay several sheets of plastic wrap on the counter and set the container on top, then wrap from the bottom up. Or slip the container into a small garbage bag. Nothing is worse than spilling dinner all over the trunk of your car en route to your site.

You can make this salad of rice-shaped orzo and chicken breasts entirely in advance. Or if your picnic area includes a grill, bring along a zipper bag with the marinating chicken and grill it when you arrive. The meat will be quite good warm and smoky on top of dressed pasta with zucchini, squash, and tomatoes.

Insulated thermos containers are also good for keeping foods cool. Fill them with ice water to chill the lining. At the picnic, you can pour spicy gazpacho -- made with red and green bell peppers, chili peppers, cucumber, and celery -- into small cups. Add a dollop of sour cream; without it, the soup is fat-free.

Then pack olives or pickles, crusty bread, cheese, fruit, and a few chocolates.

So, what are you doing still indoors? ■

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