

Everything Tastes Better Outdoors continued ...

Picnic season is upon us, so pack up the cooler and blaze a trail to your nearest park, lake, beach or backyard!

Picnic Essentials

Meal-planning tips:

Avoid foods that require last-minute preparation. The goal is to be relaxed, not frantic. Skip foods with drippy sauces or sauces that change consistency when they're cold. Finger foods are always a success at picnics. Except for the French sandwich pan bagnat, which means "wet bread," don't pre-assemble sandwiches. Place meats, cheese, vegetables and condiments in separate plastic bags or containers to assemble when ready to eat. Avoid or minimize dairy- or mayonnaise-based dishes as these are more difficult to keep properly chilled to prevent spoiling. Instead, go for vinegar-based dishes as they stay fresh longer and the flavor intensifies with time. Experiment with different beverages. There are many different bottled juices, teas and waters available; or treat yourself to homemade lemonade. Wine or champagne is delightful, but not if it's illegal to have at your picnic spot. Include fresh fruit in your picnic basket as a nourishing, refreshing snack or dessert.

Transporting and Storage Choose a cooler with high-quality thermal insulation. Check out the newer, soft-sided coolers that have excellent insulating properties. Reusable, gel ice packs are preferable to loose ice as the packs eliminate the worry of food getting wet from melting ice. Pre-chill the cooler with a few gel ice packs. Place food on top of these, moving it directly from the refrigerator into the cooler just before leaving home. Don't place warm food in the cooler; it should already be chilled if it's to be eaten chilled. Pack food and beverages in separate coolers if you'll be getting drinks out throughout the day; the more often the cooler is opened, the more likely food will warm up. Place food in unbreakable, air-tight containers. Arrange food in the cooler so that the items you'll be eating first are on top. Pack the cooler as full as possible. Consider getting coolers in several different sizes. Transport the cooler on the floor in the backseat of the car rather than in the trunk and keep it in the shade during your picnic. Select a sturdy, easy-to-carry basket for transporting plates, glasses, utensils, napkins, bottle openers and other picnic paraphernalia.

At Your Service

To be ready for a picnic at a moment's notice, have at least a few of the following items in a picnic basket stored in a closet: Go Victorian-elaborate with fine linens, china and silver or take an uncomplicated tack with inexpensive pottery or plastic plates, glassware and stainless-steel utensils. Either way, you've chosen "green" alternatives to throw-aways. Scout yard sales or flea markets and mix and match. Cloth napkins are another green choice. Spill-proof salt and pepper shakers eliminate waste and mess. Bottle opener and corkscrew. Cutting board and knife.

For Your Comfort and Convenience

To help remember everything, make a list and check off items as they're packed. Save the list and later add items that you wished you'd taken. Picnic blanket or tablecloth. If practicality is an issue, consider a vinyl-coated tablecloth. Cushions, pillows or folding stools or chairs, depending on the occasion and personal choice. A folding picnic table might be a luxury for some, but a necessity for others. Insect repellent and sunscreen are indispensable to health, safety and a pleasurable picnic. Also consider including a poison-ivy treatment such as Technu (www.teclabsinc.com). Games, books, Frisbees, balls and a badminton or croquet set.

For Cleanup Wet washcloths in a zip-top, plastic bag for washing fingers and faces both before and after eating. Cloth towels for drying hands and faces, mopping up any spills, and wrapping up dirty dishes. Trash bags for collecting trash so that it can be deposited in the proper receptacle.

For Your Safety Do not leave food out of a cooler for longer than two hours and for only one hour when the temperature is above 90 degrees F. If taking raw fish, poultry or meats for cooking at your picnic destination, wrap securely to prevent juices from cross-contaminating prepared food and pack with plenty of ice or frozen gel packs. Also, take a food thermometer to be sure that the food reaches a safe internal temperature. Bring plenty of liquids, especially water, to keep everyone hydrated. If kids are along on the picnic, be aware of any nearby hazards, such as busy roads, deep water or cliffs. Stay on the beaten path and check the rules and regulations for the area you're visiting. Keep a first-aid kit in the car.

About the Author: Maggie Oster writes about and photographs food and gardens from the family farm in southern Indiana, where she continues her family's tradition of frequent, spontaneous picnics

