

Warm days are perfect for picnics

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Published: Wednesday, Jul. 12, 2006

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Staff photos by Bob Hammerstrom

Picnic basket put together by Liz Barbour of Hollis, complete with pans, plates, tablecloth and flowers.

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It's time to dust off your picnic basket. The lazy, hot days of summer are here. The kids are out of school and itching for a fun-filled activity to fill the day.

Spontaneous. Last minute. Elaborate. Romantic. Picnics have two things in common: ants and good food.

Seven-year-old Dylan Lestico of Nashua loves the picnics his mom, Cindy, plans on their front lawn. Along with several neighborhood kids, Dylan and his friends chow down on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, chips and cookies.

When Cindy Lestico was a kid growing up in the Midwest, her mother's idea of a picnic was purchasing buckets of cooked chicken from the local market, along with coleslaw and mashed potatoes.

Liz Barbour, chef and owner of The Creative Feast, says that whether picnics are last minute or planned, they don't have to be elaborate. She suggests keeping a "picnic pantry" on hand to eliminate scurrying around when spontaneous picnics arise.

In the picnic pantry, Barbour suggests staples such as canned tuna, white beans, honey and spicy mustard, mayonnaise, curry paste and olive oil.

Red onions, black olives and baby red bliss potatoes are handy items to keep in the refrigerator. And cilantro, parsley and basil add flavor and panache to any dish.

Barbour suggests keeping feta, Gorgonzola and cheddar on hand to garnish dishes with or just to nibble on for those who can't wait until the picnic basket is emptied.

When Marie Cloutier of Nashua's daughters, Amy and Angela, were young, they had little money, so the family went on many picnics.

"We didn't go to restaurants very often," Cloutier says, so picnics were a lifesaver. "I would pack up whatever the kids would eat: sandwiches, chips, cookies and juice boxes."

Barbour, who teaches cooking classes in local retail stores and has been a cooking instructor for the past four years, suggests elevating the family picnic from peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Adding vegetables or herbs to a dish at the last minute changes an ordinary salad to something special.

Barbour suggests not packing any mayonnaise-based dishes. If mayonnaise is necessary, she advises taking a container filled with mayonnaise to the picnic and adding it at the last minute to prevent spoilage.

"But," Barbour adds, "using vinegar instead of mayonnaise is better. Vinegar also makes a lighter dressing."

Even leftovers, according to Barbour, make a fabulous picnic. Cold leftover pizza or last night's chicken makes a tasty sandwich or salad for the diet conscious. If it's too hot to cook, Barbour advises starting with store-bought chicken.

"Pull the chicken off of the bone before you leave the house," she advises. "It's easier."

Dessert, the best part of any picnic, doesn't have to be difficult, according to Barbour. She suggests strawberries dipped in brown sugar, a honeydew melon salad or watermelon dipped in balsamic vinegar. "Fruit," she says, "is light and refreshing" and a great way to end a picnic.

Need help with that anniversary picnic or that romantic night for two? Barbour suggests a loaf of French bread, a stick of Italian soprasata (cured Italian salami) sliced thin, fresh tomatoes with a touch of basil, a squeeze bottle of extra virgin olive oil and a pint of ripe strawberries.

What to drink for that picnic under the stars? Barbour suggests a cool Cuban Mojito: seltzer water, fresh lime aid and a flask of good rum, topped off with fresh mint and ice.

Not a rum drinker? Take heart. Barbour suggests a bottle of Perseco followed by pound cake with sweet cut-up strawberries, drizzled with vanilla yogurt

Besides food, Barbour says it's important to set the mood for a picnic by having the correct utensils. Start with a large cotton blanket or tablecloth to sit on. She suggests carrying all the food for the picnic in a wicker basket, not a cooler. The top of the basket can double as a table.

And no picnic can be complete without plastic cups, forks, spoons, knives, sturdy paper plates, napkins, sealable plastic bags to put leftovers in (who's Barbour kidding). Trash bags to bring your trash home. Bug spray for those pesky mosquitoes. Ice packs to keep food cold and for those for sprained ankles and knees. Low chairs. Flowers and a vase for the middle of the blanket. And finally, a hearty appetite.

MEXICAN CHICKEN SALAD

1 roasted chicken (2½-3 pounds), warm

½ pint cherry tomatoes

½ small red onion, sliced thin

1 cup fresh cilantro, chopped

¼ cup olive oil

2 limes, juiced

2 large chipotle peppers, chopped

2 ripe avocados

Salt and pepper

Mixed greens

Remove the meat and skin from the chicken into edible chunks. Place it into a large bowl. This is best done while the chicken is warm, so the meat pulls apart easily. If you plan to serve this salad cold, refrigerate the chicken before proceeding.

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Putting together the picnic, Barbour fills plastic bags with salads and veggies before packing the basket.

Add the tomatoes, sliced onion and chopped cilantro to the chicken.

In a small bowl, combine the olive oil, lime juice and peppers. Mix well and set aside.

Slice the ripe avocados into a small bowl, and toss lightly with 2 tablespoons of the dressing. Set aside.

Toss the chicken with the remaining dressing, and add salt and pepper to taste.

Portion the chicken salad onto beds of mixed greens and top with the slices of dressed avocado for garnish. This can be served hot or cold.

Makes 6 servings.

(Recipe from Liz Barbour, www.thecreativefeast.com)

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Staff photo by BOB HAMMERSTROM
Mexican Chicken Salad can be served hot or cold.

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POTATO SALAD, DRESSED UP

2 pounds, 1-inch round baby red potatoes
1 15-ounce can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
½ cup feta cheese, crumbled
3 tablespoons fresh chive, chopped
3 tablespoons fresh dill, chopped
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper

Place the potatoes into a large saucepan, and cover with cold water. Bring to a slow boil, and cook until just fork tender. This should be about 15 minutes after the water comes to a boil. Try not to cook too long, or the potatoes will fall apart.

Strain the cooked potatoes. You can either work with them hot and serve this salad hot, or run the potatoes under cold water and let cool for a cold salad.

To the potatoes add the chickpeas, feta, herbs and extra virgin olive oil. Toss gently, and finish with salt and pepper.

Serve hot or cold.

Makes 6 servings.

(Recipe from Liz Barbour, www.thecreativefeast.com)

This recipe is perfect for a picnic on a hot summer day. Store all the ingredients in the refrigerator so they are already cold if you plan to serve right away. If you are planning a picnic, prepare the salad right into a plastic bag. Store in the refrigerator until ready to pack your basket. Serve right out of the bag or bring along a large plastic bowl for serving.

SUMMER HONEYDEW-LIME SALAD

1 large honeydew, ripe (smell the ends of the melon, they should smell like a honeydew)
2 limes, juiced
2 tablespoons canola oil
¼ cup fresh chives or red onion, chopped
½ cup fresh cilantro leaves, chopped

Salt

Pepper

Peel and seed the melon. Cut into 1-inch chunks, and place into a large plastic bag.

Add the lime juice, canola oil, chives or red onion and cilantro leaves. Season with salt and pepper as needed.

Serves 8.

(Recipe from Liz Barbour, www.thecreativefeast.com)

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