

Picnics by the book: A basketful of new cookbooks helps make picnicking even more pleasurable

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Food always tastes better when it's accompanied by the sauce of fresh air and someone you love to eat it with.

Minus those uninvited mosquitoes, ants and the food poisoning that show up at picnics all too often. And then there are those unfortunate basket blunders with less than appetizing results.

Fruit salad too warm? Cookies rock-hard? Veggie dip leaked all over your new capris? Learn how to avoid classic picnic pitfalls like these through a number of new books that take you through every step of setting up the perfect outdoor repast. Here are a few of the best guides to dining al fresco:

n In *Picnics: Easy Recipes for the Best Alfresco Foods*, Robin Vitetta-Miller (Clarkson Potter, 2005) shares easy-to-make recipes divided into five simple sections: finger foods, wraps and sandwiches, salads, dips and spreads and sweet temptations such as pecan squares and almond biscotti.

Vitetta-Miller provides some handy pointers (don't forget to bring those little extras like trash bags, antibacterial wipes and a bottle opener) and tips on wrapping, packing and keeping your basket goodies fresh.

Here's a tip: to keep your cookies moist, add a few apple slices or a piece of bread to the sealable plastic container they're in. And to prevent sandwiches from becoming soggy, wrap them in plastic and put them in resealable plastic bags.

Make sure to separate bread and wet ingredients like tomato slices with dry lettuce leaves.

n For those of the hedonism-in-a-hurry variety, who prefer skyscrapers to farmhouses, and are more likely to take a

15-minute bicycle ride to the park than a SUV-fuelled day trip, *The Urban Picnic* by John Burns and Elisabeth Caton (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004) is for you.

It's not just a cookbook, but a handy reference tool on everything you ever wanted to know about the history of the picnic.

There are no photographs, but there are loads of quotations, trivia, song lyrics and

advertisements of yore to distract you from cooking or, conversely, help you while away some time while the chicken is grilling and the raspberry tarts are setting.

A quirky feature is the list of suggested menus, complete with wine pairings and music soundtracks. Try the vegetarian "hipnic" set to the tunes of Ani DiFranco and Elvis Costello while noshing on Jalapenos Stuffed with Chevre and Caramelized Oranges with Greek Yogurt. Or how about a backpack picnic that includes vegetable sticks with Sun-Dried Tomato Hummus, Bacon and Egg Pie, fresh fruit and lemonade to wash it down.

In *Picnics: Simple Recipes For Eating Outdoors* (Ryland Peters & Small, 2005), a team of food writers has come together to offer heart-healthy recipes that incorporate loads of fruits and veggies, as well as modern twists on classic brunch favourites.

Try Bagels with Smoked Salmon and Wasabi Sour Cream, using Japanese horseradish instead of the usual cream cheese spread.

Mini Pork 'n' Apple Pies, Chicken and Tarragon Pesto Pasta, and Fava Bean Salad with Mint and Parmesan promise to please the most discerning of palettes without breaking the bank or having to spend all day in the kitchen.

And for dessert, try making Pear Gingerbread or Nutty Candied Apples. Your dentist won't be happy with this recipe, say the authors, but you and the kids will be.

There's ideas for every possible kind of setting in *Picnics* by David Herbert (Conran Octopus Ltd., 2004). And contrary to what some may believe, what's on the menu should vary depending on whether lunch is on the road, in the car, on a boat, on the beach or with the kids.

Teatime in the park requires significant catering to those with a sweet tooth -- nothing like beating off those mid-afternoon sugar lows with cake and all its gooey variations, like hazelnut macaroons and banana bread.

If you're heading off to your picnic via bicycle, you'll need food that requires minimal packaging and can stand up to rough treatment as you bump along the pathway.

That means robust wrapped baguettes, high-energy goodies like Chewy Cranberry Bars and savoury offerings like Feta, Cheddar and Chive Muffins.

None of the recipes recommended for a romantic picnic contain even a hint of garlic -- so as not to spoil the post-picnic kisses, explains the author.

Choose your spot carefully, so as not to be disturbed by rowdy hikers or, worse yet, any errant cows. And an armful of cushions can go a long way toward enjoying an idyllic afternoon.

Each of Herbert's recipes is conveniently followed by preparation, storage and serving tips to ensure your feast is an experience you'll want to repeat.