

# Gourmet Al Fresco

## PERFECTLY PREPARED PICNICS

Liz Tarditi

*A book of verses underneath the bough,  
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou.*

THESE IMMORTAL LINES FROM THE *RUBÁIYÁT* have defined the romantic ideal of the picnic for generations. Yet the soul of these verses is far older, reaching back to 11th-century Persia and the astronomer-poet Omar Khayyám. And still, the message remains timeless: the greatest joy is found in the pleasure of a meal shared out in nature.

In the Brandywine Valley, we're fortunate to live in "America's Garden Capital," boasting the highest concentration of historic,

cultivated landscapes in North America. With an unparalleled selection of 38 public gardens within a 30-mile radius, the splendors of Mother Nature call for something more than a sandwich on a park bench.

To elevate your outing, this month's Brandywine Table features a gourmet-to-go menu designed for both elegance and portability. We've reimaged the classics: a vibrant Salad Niçoise layered in a mason



jar to keep the greens crisp plus an Asian Chicken Pasta Salad. For small bites, Heirloom Caprese Skewers offer a fresh, mess-free burst of flavor. To finish, add "Found My Thrill" Blueberry Hand Pies — perfectly portioned pockets of summer — along with a sophisticated Cold-Infused Rose Hibiscus Iced Tea. This botanical infusion is deep and complex and can be made to sparkle with a splash of something bubbly for a truly grown-up toast.

If you're feeding a crowd — perhaps at a local equestrian tailgate — the ultimate pro move is to minimize utensils. Take a cue from the late Queen Elizabeth, whose Balmoral picnics were so strictly staff-free affairs that she even hand-washed the dishes.

No need to DIY your picnic prep. Use picnic-friendly catering from our many fine local gourmet markets, offering artisan charcuterie boards, gourmet cheeses, finger foods and desserts to make hosting effortless.

Another secret to a perfect afternoon lies in stealing tricks from glamping. Ditch the loose ice and freeze water bottles to keep your hamper chilled and provide hydration as they melt. Prepare your feast a day in advance to let flavors marry. For the "jug of wine," opt for Champagne or a high-quality screw-top bottle to leave the corkscrew at home. Finally, invest in a waterproof-backed picnic blanket and a solar power bank for your phone to play music and real-time weather alerts — essential for our sudden afternoon thunderstorms.

Before heading out, check your destination's rules. Many gardens limit picnicking to designated areas and have pet policies. If bringing your furry friend, remember their safety, hydration and "good citizenship" bags. With a little planning, your picnic can be a masterpiece.

### Picnic-Ready Heirloom Caprese Skewers

*The quality of the ingredients really counts in a recipe this simple. And feel free to get creative! Fresh local peaches or strawberries pair beautifully with balsamic, plus basil comes in striking red and purple varieties as well as green.*



Serves 6

#### For the skewers:

- 36 cherry tomatoes
- 18 mini mozzarella balls
- 36 basil leaves, any color or flavor variety
- 18, 5-inch appetizer skewers

#### For the dressing:

- 5 T. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 T. balsamic reduction
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Thread each skewer with tomato, basil, mozzarella, basil and tomato. If making the day before, pack in a container with a damp paper towel and refrigerate overnight.

Combine the dressing ingredients in a small lidded container. Just before serving, shake the dressing to emulsify and then drizzle lightly over the skewers.

### Mason Jar Salad Niçoise

*A classic French composed salad, this version is reimaged for the picnic basket — layered, portable and just as elegant when shaken and served. A vinaigrette keeps things light and picnic-friendly.*



Serves 6

#### Per jar\*:

- 2-3 baby potatoes, cooked and halved
- 1/3 C. green beans, blanched
- 1/3 C. cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 T. Kalamata olives
- 3/4 C. mixed salad greens
- 1 egg, hard-cooked and sliced
- 1, 5-oz. can oil-packed tuna, drained
- \*Note: multiply ingredients above by 6, for assembling

#### For the dressing (pack separately):

- 1/3 C. red wine vinegar
- 2/3 C. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 T. minced shallot
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Layer jars with potatoes, green beans, tomatoes, olives and tuna. Add egg and finish with greens. Seal and refrigerate.

Combine dressing in a lidded container and refrigerate. Before serving, shake, drizzle, then reseal and shake to coat or pour into a bowl.

### Asian Chicken Pasta Salad

*Savory, satisfying and full of contrast. This make-ahead salad is even better the next day, when the noodles absorb the savory-sweet dressing and the peanuts become tender-crunchy.*

Serves 6

#### For the chicken:

- 3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1/4 C. soy sauce
- 2 T. brown sugar
- 2 T. peanut oil

#### For the dressing:

- 1/2 C. soy sauce
- 1/2 C. brown sugar



## Hey Boo-Boo! A Natural Guide to Bug-Free Bliss

When it comes to a peaceful afternoon, being smarter than the average bear means outsmarting insects without resorting to harsh chemical sprays. To win, you must understand how these uninvited guests find you.

Most biting insects are biological trackers, following the plumes of carbon dioxide we exhale and the heat our bodies radiate. By understanding these scent trails, we can use strategies to mask our presence and keep the pic-a-nic baskets to ourselves.

Start by creating an invisible barrier with aromatic lawn incense sticks. The gentle smoke doesn't just smell lovely — think lemongrass, rosemary, citronella — it also physically masks our chemical signals, making it difficult for insects to lock onto their target. Stagger when you light them, and remember a breeze makes them burn faster.

Or craft small bouquets of fresh rosemary, lavender and clove-studded lemons in mini mason jars. These are beautiful, aromatic and help weigh down blanket corners. The botanicals release volatile oils like limonene and eugenol that confuse the sensory systems of gnats and flies.

For those who love tech, consider a small battery-operated camping fan to create a localized breeze. Because mosquitoes are weak fliers, even a low setting on the fan creates enough turbulence to disrupt their flight. More importantly, the moving air dilutes and scatters those carbon dioxide plumes before bugs can track them to your blanket. By combining botanical deterrents with a steady breeze, your gourmet picnic remains a comfortable, bite-free zone.

*"Mr. Ranger, I've learned two things from stealing pic-a-nic baskets. One, light mayonnaise is not nearly as good as regular mayonnaise. And two, you can't fail if you never stop trying." — Yogi Bear*

¼ C. peanut oil  
¼ C. water

### For the salad:

1 lb. angel hair pasta or soba noodles  
¾ C. shredded red cabbage  
½ C. shelled edamame  
½ C. carrots, julienne  
½ C. red or yellow bell pepper, julienne  
½ C. unsalted peanuts  
½ C. chopped green onions (optional for a *romantic* picnic!)  
Crushed red pepper flakes or chili crisp, to taste (optional)

Combine soy sauce, brown sugar and peanut oil and marinate the chicken at least 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 375°. Remove chicken from the marinade and discard marinade. Place chicken on a lightly oiled baking sheet and

bake 20–25 minutes, until cooked through. Let rest until cool enough to handle, then shred.

In a separate container, combine the dressing ingredients and stir until the sugar dissolves.

Cook pasta in salted water until al dente. Drain, rinse under cold water and transfer to a large bowl. Toss pasta immediately with about half of the dressing so the noodles absorb the flavor and don't stick.

Add chicken, cabbage, edamame, carrots, bell pepper, peanuts and green onions. Toss with remaining dressing, adding a little water if needed to loosen. Chill until ready to serve, stirring occasionally.

Garnish with crushed red pepper flakes or chili crisp, if desired.

## Cold-Infused Rose-Hibiscus Tea

*A vivid, floral infusion with a tart edge. This tea is refreshing, elegant and perfectly suited for warm-weather entertaining. For a sophisticated picnic cocktail, fill a flute one-third full with the tea and top with chilled bubbly.*



Makes 2 quarts (64 oz.)

6 T. culinary-grade dried rose petals  
4 T. dried hibiscus flowers  
2 quarts (64 oz.) filtered water  
Honey or simple syrup to taste (optional)

Place the rose petals and hibiscus in the mesh infuser of a 2-quart infuser pitcher. (If you don't have an infuser pitcher, tie the botanicals in cheesecloth to make a large tea bag to use in a pitcher.) Fill with cold filtered water, ensuring all botanicals are submerged. Refrigerate 12–24 hours for full color and flavor. Note: Infusion pitchers seal tightly and can be laid on their side for better extraction and easy transport.

Remove the infuser or strain into a carafe. Sweeten with honey or simple syrup, if desired, then chill.

## Picnic Picks

Pack a basket and settle in — these public gardens and estates welcome picnicking, from relaxed lawns to designated scenic spots. Policies vary, so check posted guidelines, and be sure to pack out what you bring in — leave each spot as beautiful as you found it.

**Chanticleer.** Picnicking is permitted in four designated areas. Blankets and chairs are allowed on Friday evenings, 5–8 p.m., May through September. 786 Church Rd., Wayne. [ChanticleerGarden.org](http://ChanticleerGarden.org)

**Hagley Museum & Library.** Picnic on the grounds or at tables in the Powder Yard, Workers' Hill and near the Visitor Center parking area. 200 Hagley Creek Rd., Wilmington. [Hagley.org](http://Hagley.org)

**Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens.** Enjoy your picnic in designated areas on the Tree Canopy Deck and in the picnic grove. 631 Berwyn Baptist Rd., Devon. [JenkinsArboretum.org](http://JenkinsArboretum.org)

**Mt. Cuba Center.** Dine in the shaded picnic area, find a seat within the gardens, or borrow one of their picnic blankets to use on the grounds. Light refreshments are available onsite. 3120 Barley Mill Rd., Hockessin, DE. [MtCubaCenter.org](http://MtCubaCenter.org)

**Nemours Estate.** Bring a blanket for the lawn — picnic tables are limited. 1600 Rockland Rd., Wilmington. [NemoursEstate.org](http://NemoursEstate.org)

**Tyler Arboretum.** Picnic tables are available near the Visitor Center, or spread a blanket throughout the arboretum. Snacks and drinks are sold in the Visitor Center. 515 Painter Rd., Media. [TylerArboretum.com](http://TylerArboretum.com)

**Welkinweir.** Picnicking is welcome at the pavilion adjacent to the Visitor Center parking lot. 1368 Prizer Rd., Pottstown. [Welkinweir.org](http://Welkinweir.org)

**Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library.** Picnics are allowed throughout the grounds, provided you remain at least 25 yards from all buildings. Food is available at the Visitor Center Café. 5101 Kennett Pk., Winterthur, DE. [Winterthur.org](http://Winterthur.org)

Serve over ice in clear glasses to showcase the color. Or serve with bubbly.

## Found My Thrill Blueberry Hand Pies

*Here's a nostalgic favorite with a floral twist, featuring bright blueberries wrapped in flaky pastry and finished with lavender sugar. Use your favorite pie dough recipe or a high-quality store-bought with a high butter content.*

Serves 6

### For the lavender sugar:

½ C. granulated or coarse sugar



Feel free to try a lattice top for your hand pies

1 T. culinary-grade dried lavender

### For the filling:

2 C. fresh blueberries  
⅓ C. sugar  
¼ tsp. ground cinnamon  
1 T. cornstarch  
1 tsp. lemon juice  
Pinch of salt

### For the pastry:

2 discs chilled pie dough  
1 egg, beaten with 1 T. water

Pulse the sugar and lavender in a spice grinder or blender until finely ground and fragrant. Set aside.

Combine blueberries, sugar, cinnamon, cornstarch, lemon juice and salt in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat until berries begin to burst and the mixture thickens slightly, about 5–8 minutes. Remove from heat and cool completely.

Preheat oven to 400°. On a floured surface, roll dough to ⅛-inch thickness and cut 24 circles using a 3-inch cutter, rerolling scraps once if needed.

Place a heaping tablespoon of filling in the center of 12 rounds. Brush edges lightly with water, top with remaining rounds and press to seal. Crimp with a fork and cut a small slit in the top of each pie to vent. Brush tops with egg wash and sprinkle with lavender sugar. Transfer to a parchment-lined baking sheet.

Bake 20–25 minutes, until golden and bubbling. Cool completely on a wire rack before serving. Transport in a box or basket to keep the crust crisp. ♦

*Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.*



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