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What could be more romantic than sharing a meal (and a few smooches) alfresco? Below, tips on where to go, what to eat, and how to up the intimacy.

By Celeste Perron

The perfect plot of grass: Your goal is to find a picnic spot surrounded by lots of natural beauty, obviously, but not one so popular that half the world will be hanging out there on a sunny weekend afternoon. For off-the-beaten track ideas, look up national parks near you at www.nps.gov, or check out your local Parks and Recreation Department online. One practical consideration: Look for a spot with accessible public restrooms. If you venture to a super-private spot and nature calls after downing a thermos full of lemonade, hunting for facilities can kill the mood quickly.

The right gear: You don't *need* a picnic basket, since a cooler or even a big canvas bag can tote your goods, but a proper basket will make your meal seem more genteel. Look for one that's structured and boxy, so your food can't get squashed en route, and preferably made of classic wicker. You can find baskets for every budget at www.epicnicbasket.com. You need a blanket, though, ideally one with a waterproof bottom, to keep moisture in the ground from soaking through to *your* bottoms. Try the waterproof blanket from ourcornermarket.com.

Top-notch dishware: For plates and bowls, try the latest thing in throw-away dishes—bamboo, which is sturdier and more stylish-looking than paper, and will impress your date with your eco-consciousness (the plates biodegrade entirely in under six months). (Bambu plates, \$7.50 for eight, Cooking.com). Sip your drinks out of lightweight acrylic glasses—much nicer than disposable plastic, but won't break when you toss them in the

picnic basket. Look for a selection in chic colors like fuschia and green (\$12 for 6) at www.crateandbarrel.com—they even have plastic wine glasses, in case you want to drink vino out of indestructible stemware. And since you'll be eating off of your laps you need big, thick napkins to prevent wearing your meal. Bring cloth ones for a classy touch. (Check out the country-floral print napkins, \$12 each, at www.pierredeux.com.)

Don't forget to pack: Looking for a great picnic blanket bonding activity? Try Kismet, a Yahtzee-esque dice game that two can play, or Spinergy, which asks you to weave random words into different types of sentences (e.g. a pick-up line, a limerick, or an excuse you'd give a police officer who'd pulled you over for speeding). (Kismet, \$10, Spinergy, \$40, www.amazon.com)

If your date's a literary type, or just a sucker for sentimental gestures, pack a book of poetry (like *The New Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*, www.amazon.com) so you can read to each other under the trees.

Classic thirst-quenchers: No picnic feels complete without lemonade. Maire O'Keefe, owner of Thyme Catering in Los Angeles, recommends you give yours a modern twist by adding 10-15 pureed fresh raspberries and 2 Tbs of coarsely chopped fresh ginger steeped with sugar to a thermos-full. You can make your rendezvous a little racier by spiking the lemonade with vodka (use 2-4 ounces of vodka per quart of lemonade). If openly drinking alcohol is allowed at the spot where you're parking your blanket, pack a bottle of rose wine—the preferred alfresco drink in the south of France, where they've elevated picnicking to an art form. (Try Bonny Doon "Vin Gris de Cigare," \$10, www.klwines.com)

Stellar sandwiches: Sandwiches are the perfect outdoor edible because they're so easily tote-able. The trick to making a sandwich picnic-proof lies in choosing the right bread. Anything too thin will get soggy, so think thick slices of a sturdy whole grain or country white loaf. Or slice a crispy baguette in half, hollow out the center of one side and fill it with your sandwich fixings. No matter what kind of bread you choose, use this trick from NYC foodie Eli Zabar, whose restaurant, Eli's Vinegar Factory, is known for packing delish picnics for Central Park-bound New Yorkers: "Spread a thin layer of butter along the inside of each slice," says Zabar. "Not only does it provide an incredible flavor, but it acts as a barrier between the bread and the sandwich contents so that the bread doesn't get soggy." As for what to put between the bread, Zabar recommends fresh mozzarella with tomato and basil, or turkey with arugula, tomato and honey mustard—two popular picnic sandwiches from Eli's.

Delicious side dishes: "Pick salads that don't need to be refrigerated and taste best at room temperature," says Zabar. Skip the leafy greens, which will go limp in transit, and think crisp, crunchy veggies or potatoes. This salad recipe from O'Keefe is a good choice because the super-crunchy veggies will still taste fresh hours after you pack it, plus "it's bright and colorful, which is what you want out of summer food," she says.

Asian Vegetable Slaw

2 servings

Using a food processor or sharp knife, julienne the following vegetables until you have about 1/3 cup of each: red cabbage, Napa cabbage, carrot, and radishes. Peel and slice 1/4 of a small cucumber, thinly slice one scallion, and seed and mince one small jalapeno pepper. Then make a dressing by mixing together 2 Tbs mayonnaise, 1/2 Tbs rice vinegar, 1/2 Tbs white-wine vinegar, 1/4 Tbs soy sauce, and 1/4 Tbs lemon juice. Add 1/2 cup bean sprouts to the vegetables, and toss in the dressing. Season with salt and serve.

Indulgent dessert: Stick to things that “can stand up to the heat and aren’t too messy or cumbersome to eat,” says Zabar. Think cookies and brownies for a classic finish. If you’re using brownie mix, liven it up with a handful or two of dried cherries thrown into the batter before baking.

Alfresco extras: To keep bugs at bay, bring a few Skin So Soft Insect Repellent towelettes, which are individually wrapped and make a better choice than sticky, smelly gels (www.avon.com), and if your picnic is an evening affair, pack a travel candle, so you can see each other as the light fades.

Romantic touches: Gallantly put together a bitsy bouquet for your date using whatever wildflowers and greens are available. Or offer up a post-dessert treat that’s even sweeter: A long, languorous shoulder massage or foot rub. And if you’re still outside at sunset, check out www.stardate.org before you go to find out what stars and constellations to look for that night. As you and your date gaze at the darkening sky you can max out the romance of the moment by identifying different features of the cosmos.

Celeste Perron is the author of Playing House: A Starter Guide to Being a Grown Up, out in August.

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