

A woman is shown from the waist down, wearing a bright yellow cardigan over a white, pleated skirt. She is standing outdoors, with a tree trunk visible to her left and a blurred background of greenery. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

{Picnic Perfect}

A look at the pastoral repast.

EVERYBODY LOVES A PICNIC. Formal dinners can be a bore, breakfasts little more than a pot of coffee and a hasty bagel, and don't let's start with the state of lunch—these days either wedged between meetings and conducted at your desk during frantic email sending or overlooked altogether. If it is carried out at all, lunch is rarely executed with half the imagination of the ordinary picnic, which is always buoyant, always welcome. It's the single unassailable feast. Not even Nabokov could sully its sunny reputation (the cause of antagonist Humbert Humbert's mother's death in *Lolita*? "Picnic, lightning," we're told).

A picnic is pure Americana, all gingham-lined hampers and barbecued goodness, and, in fact, we're right to claim it for our own. Whatever al fresco dining existed in Europe before the Victorians got hold of it lacked the sense of free-spiritedness we associate with it, today. For the Victorians and, later, Emily Post, etiquette doyenne of the 20th century, a picnic was a decisive break with routine, characterized by its being outdoors and not, as it had been, a matter of practical circumstance. Post, who guided us in our endeavors to behave well on every occasion, had only a few things to say about the picnic (which you'll find, alongside sections like "On the Subject of Elbows" and "The Kindergarten of Etiquette" in her 1922 masterwork, *Etiquette*), but the gist of what she said is still relevant: dress for outdoors, wear sunblock and don't litter.

BY AMY NANCE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SICKLES

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According to local historian Jeff LaHurd, Sarasota has a long tradition of picnicking. "It extends back to Ben Stickney's big picnics on Siesta Key at the turn of the century. A lot of the townspeople used to come, and he was beloved for them." Uncle Ben,

as he was called, was the owner of the De Soto Hotel and the man for whom Stickney Point Bridge was named. Because recreational options were limited in the 1890s, "Stickney's beach parties were well attended," LaHurd says. "An entire family worked sunup to sundown, so they had little energy for fun. Stickney was really a force of recreation."

Picnics have long been fodder for the literary imagination as well and not solely the purview of Emily Post, who may have told us what to do, but couldn't capture what we actually do when we eat in the great outdoors. So, while the reputation of the happy picnic is still firmly in place, there are writers who have been just as happy to use it as a way to show us who we are.

PICNIC: A SUMMER ROMANCE

If we tasked American Literature alone to reflect the spirit of the picnic, we'd be hard pressed to find in its pages a rosy image. Take William Inge's 1953 play, which, despite its title and its setting (Kansas, Labor Day, backyards) is a complex little treatise on mid-century sexual politics. In this Kansas, nothing is as innocent as it seems, not even that beloved, small-town institution, the picnic. Still, there is a romance that unfolds at the town picnic, a humble affair put together by the neighborhood folks that is as traditional as it gets. Inge uses the inherent romance of the picnic—the sense of anticipation, the idea that anything can happen outdoors, the efforts made to decorate—as much as he critiques it.

It isn't difficult to imagine a menu for Inge's neighborhood picnic. It's food that represents a small departure from what you would typically eat for lunch at home—a chicken salad sandwich on a crossiant from Hillview District's Southside Deli, for example, sweetened by fresh grapes and accompanied by a carton of tabouleh salad. Southside owner Joe Mancari calls the sandwich "the best in the store" and says the trick is in the marinade. "We use chicken breast only, broil it and then soak it overnight in the secret marinade. It keeps it nice and moist." The chicken salad gets its crunch from celery, while the tabouleh's unusual charm comes from its spare use of parsley and the addition of dried cranberry. Southside deli will prepare a picnic basket packed with fresh fruit and dessert (try the deli's trendy frozen yogurt Pinkberry). Stage your picnic at Phillippi Estate Park, where the grounds provide a woody, creekside feel and lots of soft grass. The gazebo will provide the requisite nostalgia.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

Peter Weir's adaptation of the Joan Lindsay novel took the idea of the picnic to new heights. True, *Picnic* has all of the Victorian trappings, right down to the gaggle of prim schoolgirls dressed in their outdoor whites and eating in the sun in turn-of-the-century Australia. But these girls aren't carrying out the decorous Victorian luncheon—they have escaped any mood of formality and are busy liberating themselves from their manners, as well as their musty tights. When some of them set off to climb the rock and never return, picnicking at a place like Hanging Rock becomes a dark message about losing oneself.

And it's true that one essential quality of a picnic is the sense of remove, of escape, a feeling you're certain to get from a jaunt to, say, Egmont Key State Park. There is a long tradition of travel associated with the idea of picnicking, which evolved from medieval hunting parties (when the intrepid gatherers returned, they were so ravenous that there was no pretense made of going indoors to eat). Adventure and expedition are at the core of going on a picnic, even if feeling imperiled is not.



Coconut macaroons and Mini Black & White cookies from Toojay's Deli. Far Afield salad plate, \$12, Antalya placemat, \$16; Anthropologie. Rattan round mat, \$9.95; Sur La Table

The key to sustaining a picnic that involves going further afield is to bring food that is easily transportable and not likely to suffer too much in the getting there. A stop at Mixon Fruit Farm's super convenient pick-up window in Bradenton is a smart short

cut—you can place your well-wrapped goodies straight into your cooler without even getting out of the car. Hardy Cuban sandwiches and pork barbecue are items that will last and provide a bit of energizing protein when you eventually reach Egmont's shores (try Island Adventures ferry service, with boats leaving from Bradenton's historic Cortez fishing area). The farm's Citrus Splash Salad is a refreshing treat, too, as is the key lime pie. Fruit, an important picnic component, is not in short supply at Mixon: choose from pink seedless grapefruit, Valencia oranges and tangerines. And one jar of Mixon's honey mustard to put on some rustic bread is a swift, simple bite.

PICNIC BOAT

There's an aspect of solitude to the picnic, too, and with it an opportunity to exclude, for the time being, everyone and everything else. Watch, from a distance, a couple enjoying their own quiet picnic on the beach, and you might feel aligned with Carl Sandburg's policemen who observe a picnic boat returning to shore in his poem "Picnic Boat" (see page 102). It is the policemen's solitude here that is disrupted, of course, by the picnic boat. It is the "my" here who is troubled out of his silence. Sandburg's poem reminds us that picnics are also quiet occasions, private and intimate and often better enjoyed in select company.

Sunday night and the park policemen tell each other it is dark as a stack of black cats on Lake Michigan.

A big picnic boat comes home to Chicago from the peach farms of Saugatuck.

Hundreds of electric bulbs break the night's darkness, a flock of red and yellow birds with wings at a standstill.

Running along the deck railings are festoons and leaping in curves are loops of light from prow and stern to the tall smokestacks.

Over the hoarse crunch of waves at my pier comes a hoarse answer in the rhythmic oompa of the brasses playing a Polish folk-song for the home-comers.



Chicken salad sandwich from Southside Deli. Grilled corn on the cob and potato salad from Mixon Fruit Farms. Aviary melamine dinner plate, \$4, Breda nut bowl, \$4, Zinnia Sketch placemat, \$32 Anthropologie. Petite Caribbean casserole dish, \$17.95; Sur La Table. Below: Mixon Select Grapefruit Riesling from Mixon Fruit Farms.



For peace of the sort that won't be broken by festoons and folk-songs, try Caspersen Beach and a picnic of traditional fixings. Load up your basket with staples: an egg salad, turkey or Reuben sandwich, potato salad and cole slaw sides. One or two spreadables are a must. Toojay's Deli offers cottage cheese and hummus and a delish hot corned beef (good especially if you know you're going to be swimming and want a warm bite waiting for you). Follow up with a tray of sweets: the deli's popular blintzes, black and white cookies and brownies will all hold up well in the shade of your umbrella. A classic, American-style picnic is a good bet for summer, when cold cuts and fresh fruit won't overwhelm the palate. And Caspersen is the area's throwback beach—remote and undeveloped. Take along a bottle of wine: according to Sarasota County Parks and Recreation, alcohol is permitted on beaches outside of city limits (but glass is prohibited, so transport your vintage in a thermos).

ALICE IN WONDERLAND, A MAD TEA-PARTY

Yet another version of the picnic in literature stretches the very definition—and the patience of whomever may try to duplicate it. Lewis Carroll's Hatter, snoozing Dormouse and March Hare aren't having a picnic, exactly, but their version of the tea-party sure belongs to the canon. Here, an atmosphere of general kookiness prevails, exactly the sort of predicament in which we find ourselves after too much sun, too many people and too much to drink. The Hatter's untenable riddles undo poor Alice, who seems game for anything but the silly rhetoric of the very mad Hatter. Indeed, the conversation is as circular as the constant switching of chairs around the table.

But we do love a good party, and sometimes the madder the better. Even Alice betrays some regret when she jumps up to leave, slighted for the last time: "... neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her..." To recreate the scene, one need only be a little clever in packing the picnic hamper. Start with vichyssoise and a pint of salad from Harry's Deli. It's easier to maintain cold soups when eating outdoors, and Harry's vichyssoise is crisp and crunchy, the perfect light summer fare. Salads come in pint sizes here, a thoughtful touch for on-the-go gourmards who may have to divvy up what they take away. Choose from corn, tomato, seafood and fruit salads or get some of all and pass them around: An office picnic on your lunch break is just the thing to keep you and your co-workers from going mad. And if you do go it alone, Ken Thompson Park's urban location keeps it upbeat and busy, great for people-watching from your picnic table. ☺

THE SOURCE

Caspersen Beach, 941-957-1877; Egmont Key State Park, 727-893-2627; Harry's Continental Kitchens, 525 St. Jude's Dr., Longboat Key, 941-383-0777; Island Adventures, 941-795-2700; Ken Thompson Park, 1700 Ken Thompson Pkwy., 941-861-7275; Mixon Fruit Farms, 2712 26th Ave. E., Bradenton, 941-748-5829; Phillippi Estate Park, 5500 S. Tamiami Trl.; Southside Deli, 1825 Hillview St., Sarasota, 941-330-9302; Toojay's Deli, Westfield Shoppingtown, Southgate, 3501 S. Tamiami Trl., 941-362-3692