

# The Lost Art of Picnicking

Where to find the best places to spread out

BY ELIZABETH JOHNSON

**T**here's an old postcard yellowing in a plastic box in my basement. The edges are creased and rounded, and the postmark is fading.

On the front is an image of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, the Impressionist painting of a group of friends picnicking on a balcony after a day on the Seine. On the back is a phrase my late father once scribbled in haste: "Aren't they having fun!"

Yes, Dad. They sure are.

Theirs is the picnic I aspire to have every summer when I pack my cooler and sling my table-in-a-bag over my shoulder and head down the hill to the waterfront in Nyack, N.Y., where bands play in the gazebo that frames the view of the Hudson River and the hills beyond.

Theirs is a magical picnic, one where all the cares of the world are forgotten—at least for the time being.

Picnicking "takes people back to a simple way of life when nothing else mattered but the current moment," says Jennifer Breaux Blosser, an owner of Breaux Vineyards in Purcellville, Va., where picnickers take a bottle and a basket and head for Cherry Park Hill to dine alongside her merlot vines. "They're enjoying nature and it's nice outside—it's relaxing and it takes us away from the stress of our jobs."

That must be why about this time each year, I dust off the old Bambi comforter that used to cover my childhood bunk bed, and fold it next to that cooler and table. With each picnic, I'm heading back to a simpler time.



At right: Pierre-Auguste Renoir's (1841-1919), *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880-1881. Oil on canvas. Acquired in 1923.



### O PIONEERS!

Picnics as we know them started out in the Middle Ages, not as a diversion, but as a celebration—a pep rally of sorts before men would head out for a hunting expedition. (I suppose, technically, man has been picnicking since prehistoric times, but I’m talking about dining outdoors on purpose, not out of necessity.)

*The Oxford Companion to Food* by Alan Davidson cites a 1387 work called *Le Livre de Chasse*—the hunting book—which “gives a detailed description” of a hunting expedition and the meal beforehand. Two centuries later, an author named George Tuberville describes a picnic after the



spend time going to the picnic than making the picnic,” says Ellen Yin, the owner of Fork:etc, a specialty foods shop in Philadelphia where people pick up picnics packed in a woven baskets with flip-top lids and walk over to the big lawn in the block of Independence Park between Chestnut and Walnut and Third and Fourth streets.

In the spring, a Fork:etc. basket might include a spinach-artichoke dip with crispy pita chips and a smoked salmon sandwich on multigrain bread, served with an edamame and a fresh radish salad or perhaps an orzo salad with scallions, fresh herbs and pine nuts. For dessert, lemon bars.

When the weather cools down in fall, Yin might pack a roast turkey, bacon, avocado and manchego sandwich alongside

chase—an outdoor meal centered on the spoils of the hunt. But, as the Oxford book also notes, picnicking blossomed in the Victorian era, nudged on by the works of such authors as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.

“It was a big deal for the wealthy to be outdoors,” says Francine Segan, an author and a food historian who has lectured on the history of picnics. “They’d bring tables, they’d have beautiful china, wicker baskets.”

Naturally, it was the servants who’d head off early to do the setup, and the cooks would prepare the food—the more elegant the better.

“In the Victorian age, they wanted you to be neat,” Segan says. “They chopped up everything, and it would be perfect: fig and nuts and cream and cheese, watercress, egg salad—and a lot of pickling.”

Sounds an awful lot like picnics today, except without the servants.

### ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES

Still, there’s no reason the modern picnicker can’t have someone else do the prep work.

“A lot of people are on the run and would rather

some charcuterie like salami and prosciutto, with cheese and fresh pears, grapes and heirloom apples. For dessert, something chocolate—perhaps a brownie.

“We all work so hard cooped up in our offices, so any beautiful day is worth having a picnic,” Yin says.

Blue Ribbon Bakery Market in Manhattan helps New Yorkers take to any park in style with cheeses, cornichons and brick-oven breads on which to spread duck confit and pate. With 24 hours’ notice, they’ll pack up a feast for four and hand it to you in two very totable canvas bags.

At the Birchwood Inn in the Berkshires, you can wheel your picnic—complete with table, chairs, glasses, silverware and cloth napkins—to the hill you find has the best view. And at Chaddsford Winery near West Chester, Pa., \$30 gets you a picnic lunch for two to pair with the

**ACCESSORIES**  
A table-in-a-bag  
is available from  
Crate & Barrel for \$40.  
You’ll also find other  
accessories, such as  
blankets  
and linens.  
[arrivemagazine.com](http://arrivemagazine.com)

Spring Wine, a light, crisp and young white.

Back at Breaux Vineyards, Jennifer Breaux Blosser says visitors can pair a bottle with the cheeses, charcuterie and dips the vineyard offers in its gourmet shop or, with advance notice, her staff will put together anything from a small basket for two for around \$25 to a 10-person feast for around \$150.

“And where we are, cell phones don’t work,” she says. So people can really get away from it all for a few hours and “indulge in simple pleasures.”

### BACK TO THE MASTER

The pleasure of the table is what attracted my dad—and later me—to the Renoir. (And the fact that it’s a beautiful, classic painting, of course.)

“It’s the most common of subjects—what’s left of lunch,” says Jay Gates, director of The Phillips Collection, the museum in Washington, D.C., where *Luncheon of the Boating Party* is again on display after four years on tour. “But there’s such a conviviality about it. It’s about friends gathering in a beautiful spot along the river to share each other’s company over a meal after boating on the river.”

The wine is still on the table. The fruit is there for snacking. And, Gates says, the painting itself is delicious.

“Impressionism is a visually delicious art form that celebrates the present,” he says. “And picnicking was one of those great pleasures.”

No wonder I’m not the only one who packs the cooler for those nights in Nyack. The whole village is there—the white-haired music teacher and his wife, the owner of the wine shop, even the mayor. Some of them set up lawn chairs; others sit on the grass. Just like Renoir’s friends, we’re all having fun. But I’m the only one with a Bambi blanket. 🐇

Top: Fork: etc. in Philadelphia offers gourmet takeout lunches and serves as a market, specializing in sauces, marinades, artisanal foods and produce from local purveyors.





## Picnic Supplies

Blue Ribbon Bakery Market, 14 Bedford St., Manhattan. **212-647-0408**. Call ahead for a picnic packed in canvas tote bags.

Brix Marketplace, 1330 Thomas Jefferson Parkway at routes 732 and 53, Charlottesville, Va. **434-295-7000**. Stop by for a gourmet, takeout lunch along the Monticello Wine Trail.

Cobblestone Foods, 199 Court St., Brooklyn. **718-222-1661**. Part farm stand, part gourmet shop with prepared foods and artisanal cheese; perfect for Prospect Park nearby.

Fork:etc., 308 Market St., Philadelphia. **215-625-9425**. [forkrestaurant.com](http://forkrestaurant.com). Pick up a picnic packed according to the season and throw your blanket down in Independence Park.

## Picnic Places

Some historic sites don't allow picnicking, so call ahead to ask. Also consider wineries for picnics. They're likely to have supplies at the tasting rooms.

Birchwood Inn Bed and Breakfast, 7 Hubbard St., Lenox, Mass. **413-637-2600**. [birchwood-inn.com](http://birchwood-inn.com). As a guest, you can ask to wheel your picnic table—complete with linens and stemware—to your favorite spot with a view.

Breaux Vineyards, 36888 Breaux Vineyards Lane, Purcellville, Va. **540-668-6299**. [breauxvineyards.com](http://breauxvineyards.com). Call ahead for a picnic to take to the wrought iron tables next to the merlot vines on Cherry Park Hill.

Chaddsford Winery, 632 Baltimore Pike, Chaddsford, Pa. **610-388-6221**. [chaddsford.com](http://chaddsford.com). A \$30 basket for two includes entree, fruit and dessert.

Memorial Park, Nyack, N.Y. A tiny park on the Hudson River waterfront. Outdoor concerts are held in the gazebo in July and August. **845-358-0229**.

Independence Park, Philadelphia. The park is best known as the home of the Liberty Bell but happens to be a great place to spread out a blanket. **215-965-2305**.