

The *summer* OF THE PICNIC CLUB

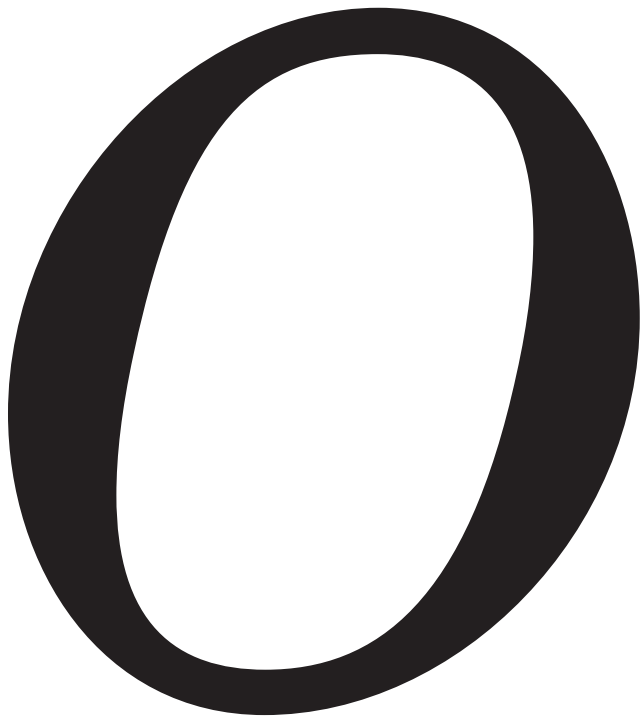
*For a warm-weather twist on a DINNER PARTY,
these PORTLAND FRIENDS take it outside.
Here's their step-by-step to EATING IN THE PARK.*

BY MARNIE HANEL | Photographs by TARA DONNE

Scout your spot

We hold our picnics in a different Portland park each month. (This one was at Cathedral Park.) After winding up in a few less-than-choice locations within a park—like next to a pack of unicyclists—we began sending one person to grab a spot 30 minutes ahead of time. When the rest of us get there, we set up a buffet table and spread blankets on the grass.





OF ALL THE GREAT MEALS I've eaten in our food town, some of the best have been at picnics. Everything tastes better outside. In fact, my friends and I are so enamored with picnics that last year we formed a club around them: the Portland Picnic Society.

The club started at the suggestion of food writer Jen Stevenson, who was looking for a way to gather friends without the pressure of having to read a book or cook a big meal. When she mentioned meeting in a different park one evening each month throughout the summer, we jumped at the idea. The concept is simple: Each member brings a dish, a bottle of wine, and her own glass. We meet. We eat. We often attract groupies. (A stranger always asks for a plate.)

For most groups the planning would end there, but because we're all passionate about food, that's just the beginning. Before each club, emails ping-pong across the city as we plan a menu of bites and salads, and divide the supplies. One of us scouts the location. Two people bring the blankets plus bags for recycling and trash. I bring the plates. And we often wear bright picnic attire, although we've never discussed that.

MORE IS MORE

Is it overdoing it to bring fresh flowers for the table or a croquet set? Probably. And that's how we like it. A barbecue is casual; a picnic is fancy. It also looks better on Instagram (#pdxpicnic).



**We meet. WE EAT.
WE OFTEN ATTRACT GROUPIES.**



Keep it real

We favor a picnic of the *Downton Abbey* variety—with real plates, serving pieces, and cutting boards. (Plus, after our first meeting, we were racked with guilt over using disposable dishes.)



BOOZE!

Our picnics wouldn't be complete without plenty of rosé or a premixed cocktail. Before you uncork, suss out your park's open-container policy.



At every gathering, I discover a new food or recipe from my friends' offerings. Mona Johnson works at the Portland Farmers Market, and her tuna Niçoise salad, packed in tiers of a tiffin tin, seems uniquely designed to show off produce. Cookbook author Andrea Slonecker tests her recipes on us. Lila Martin, who works in travel PR, brings a locally made cheese. Spirits publicist Katie Burnett is a magician with a cocktail shaker. Brenda Crow, who runs a specialty-foods website, makes whole-grain salads, while Jen is crazy for canapés. And Michelle Cairo has no choice but to bring a charcuterie board from her *salumeria*, Olympic Provisions; my husband counts on the leftovers. As for me, a journalist, I use picnics as a chance to explore a new subject. My hits have included *gougères*, a browned butter raspberry tart, and a Spanish tortilla. (My misses, an atomic pimento cheese.)

But our picnic club is about more than the food. On a warm day, when Mt. Hood is out and the crickets are just starting to chirp, there's nowhere I'd rather be than sitting cross-legged on a blanket, surrounded by friends. ☘



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PLAN A MENU

Email ahead to sort out who's bringing what. Sometimes we select a theme (like tapas), but often one suggestion inspires the next. Single bites play well, since everyone wants to try everything.



***Keep
a record***

After each picnic, I email the group to collect recipes for that evening's fare. Most replies begin, "I don't know if you could really call this a recipe, it's so simple..." But that's the joy of summer cooking: The ingredients do all the work. At the end of the season, we compile all the recipes.



Styling by MIRANDA JONES