

Empire Lounge's Jim Cohen offers simple rules for picnic food

Go for flavor, portability and fun.

by Cindy Sutter, Camera Food Editor
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What makes a good picnic dish?

Jim Cohen of the Empire Lounge has done some thinking about this, since the restaurant offers picnic dinners to go and to eat in at the restaurant in Louisville.

His requirements: "That it tastes good at room temperature, that it's durable enough to be carried around, that it's summery and light."

His a la carte menu with items such as an Asian-influenced Momo chicken, a shrimp and avocado BLT with lemon pepper aioli, a watermelon and goat cheese salad, jalapeno-cilantro slaw was designed with the Louisville Street Faire on Friday evenings downtown, but has become a popular part of the restaurant's summer menu.

"I like something that has some pop to it, flavor-wise," Cohen says.

What would he choose for himself among the restaurant's picnic options?

"I love the Momo chicken. The house-made pickles are a nice contrast. Some are spicy. I would probably get potato salad with that," he says. "Then just a nice strawberry shortcake."

Yum.

Brian Benham of Dish Gourmet in Boulder says the most important thing in coming up with picnic dishes is "keeping it simple stupid."



"A lot of people get carried away with trying to overdo it," he says. "(They should be) having fun using their imagination and using what they have, too. If you don't have basil, use sage. Just use the recipe as a guideline."

Take the way he and his wife, Stacey, came up with Dish Gourmet's sandwich menu: "Me, my wife and a couple of friends sat down with a bottle of wine. We started chatting," Benham says. "(I said) we need a turkey sandwich. Someone's like 'Bacon!' and 'It needs cheese.' 'What kind?' 'Muenster.'"

Thus was born the "gobbler" with house roasted, all-natural 'Wisdom Farm' turkey, avocado, muenster, lettuce, tomato, bacon, pesto mayo, on ciabatta bread.

Benham advises buying high quality cheeses and local meats and keeping seasonal with local vegetables.

"In a couple of weeks, a caprese sandwich will be fantastic," he says. "The tomatoes are coming around, basil. You can find some really nice cheese at the market."

Another suggestion: "Grill up a rib-eye. Slice it. Use up whatever vegetables you have in the garden. I'm sure it would be fantastic."

Just remember. It's summertime, and the living should definitely be easy.

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Momo Chicken

For the chicken:

4 chickens, each cut into 8 pieces
Peanut oil for frying

For the brine:

1/2 gallon water
1/2 cup salt
2 1/2 tablespoons honey
1 bay leaf
4 garlic cloves
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 sprig fresh rosemary
1 sprig fresh thyme
6 sprigs fresh parsley
Zest of 1 lemon

For the glaze:

8 tablespoons finely diced garlic
8 tablespoons peeled, fresh ginger, finely diced
1 teaspoon diced pickled jalapeno chilies
1 cup rice wine vinegar
1 cup light soy sauce
8 tablespoons grapeseed oil
1 tablespoon sesame oil
6 tablespoons sugar
Black pepper to taste

Directions: For the brine: Combine all ingredients in large stock pot. Bring to a simmer, and let simmer for 30 minutes. Pull from the heat and let steep 1 hour. Strain liquid. When completely cool, pour over chickens to cover. Let chickens sit in brine 3 hours. Remove chicken and discard used brine.

For the glaze: Combine all ingredients in large bowl and whisk vigorously to combine sugar.

The day before you want to serve it, steam the chicken in a bamboo steamer until inner temperature is 160 degrees. Let cool unwrapped in cooler overnight.

When ready to serve fry in 350 degree peanut oil until crisp on the outside and warm on the inside. Toss hot chicken in the glaze and serve immediately or let cool and serve at room temperature over rice with pickles.

Source: Jim Cohen, Empire Lounge



Cucumber Cholula Salad

2 small cucumbers, sliced in discs
1/2 teaspoon lemon juice
1-2 dashes Cholula hot sauce
1/2 teaspoon rice vinegar
1/2 tablespoon chives, chopped
Extra virgin olive oil to taste
Crumbled feta cheese to taste

Directions: Combine all ingredients except cheese. Season with salt and black pepper. Transfer to plate and top with crumbled feta cheese

Source: Jim Cohen, Empire Lounge

Soy Shiitake Pickles

1 cup sugar
1 cup light soy sauce
1 cup sherry vinegar
3-inch knob fresh ginger, peeled and sliced
2 pounds shiitake mushrooms, stems removed and sliced

Directions: Combine all ingredients except the mushrooms in a pot and bring to a simmer. Let simmer for 30 minutes.

Remove stems from mushrooms. Slice caps into 1/3-inch slices. Pack mushrooms into quart containers or jars, pour hot brine over them to cover.

Can be eaten immediately or stored in refrigerator for 2 weeks.

Source: Jim Cohen, Empire Lounge

Connie's Strawberry Shortcake

For the shortcake:

1 cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 tablespoon baking powder (double acting)
1/8 teaspoon salt
2 ounces butter (very cold)
1/2 cup heavy cream (very cold)

For the shortcake glaze:

1/8 cup heavy cream
1/8 cup raw sugar

For the strawberry filling:

4 cups strawberries
2/3 cup water
1 cup granulated sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1 teaspoon lemon juice

For the whipped cream:

1 cup heavy cream
1/3 cup powdered sugar

For the garnish:

Mint leaves or powdered sugar

Directions: Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper. In the bowl of a food processor, combine all dry ingredients and pulse for a few seconds. Cut the (very cold) butter into small pieces and add it to the bowl of the processor. Pulse until it forms a crumb. Add cream and pulse just long enough for a ball of dough to form. Turn dough out on to a work surface that has been sprinkled with flour (to prevent sticking). Roll dough with a rolling pin into a rectangle that is about 1/2 inch thick. Cut into 8 square pieces.

Place dough squares on parchment paper and chill in refrigerator for 1 hour. Remove from refrigerator and brush each square with cream, then sprinkle with raw sugar. Bake in 350 oven for 15 - 20 minutes, until golden brown.

While the shortcakes are chilling you can make the strawberry filling.

Pick through the strawberries and set aside 1 cup of the most ripe ones. Take the remaining 3 cups of strawberries and clean and slice them into quarters; set aside in the refrigerator.

In a small heavy bottom sauce pan combine 1 cup of strawberries, lemon juice and water. In a small bowl completely combine sugar and cornstarch, then add to strawberry mixture.

Place pan over medium heat and stir with a heavy wire whisk or wire food masher. Mash the strawberries while you stir. When mixture starts to bubble and thicken, remove from heat and chill.

For the whipped cream: Combine cream and sugar and whisk in a mixer or by hand until medium peaks form. Set aside in a cold place.

To assemble shortcakes: In a bowl, combine cold thick strawberry sauce with remaining 3 cups of sliced strawberries. Place one shortcake square on a 9-inch plate, scoop about 1/2 of the strawberry mixture on top, then dab whipped cream on top of strawberries. Place another square of shortcake on top of whipped cream at an angle. Garnish with fresh mint leaves or powdered sugar.

