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OUTDOOR ENTERTAINING Backyard & Picnic Party Foods

by Renée Loux

Summer is the high season for outdoor gatherings to celebrate warm weather and make the most of evening's lingering natural light. When it comes to outdoor entertaining, simple is generally better. Backyard cookouts and picnic takeouts call for tasty fare, light foods and nothing too fancy or fussy.

In most parts of the country, summer brings a bounty of just-picked produce, and the fresher it is, the fewer the steps required to make delicious dishes. By keeping just a few staples on hand—cold-pressed olive oil, garlic cloves, fresh herbs and lemons, a good sea salt and freshly ground pepper—the cook will always be prepared to put together a delectable, trouble-free spread. Options run from grilled goodies to marinated and tossed salads that give the hosts time to enjoy their company. Complete the treat by serving skewers of fresh, ripe, cut fruit for dessert—an easy, healthy and welcome alternative to rich and complicated or store-bought sweets.

Creating a fun and festive atmosphere for backyard gatherings is easy, without a lot of fanfare. String up twinkly

lights and use natural wax votive candles placed in empty jam and jelly jars to protect them from the wind. To ward off mosquitoes and generally keep bugs at bay, encircle the patio, deck or park picnic area with citronella candles or incense. Fire pits always make an outdoor gathering feel more special. A mesmerizing center of attention, they also warm up the evening as the temperature drops.

To keep serving and cleanup easy, use eco-friendly disposables. Look for plates made from recycled content or bagasse (derived from sugar cane fiber), cutlery sourced from biodegradable, plant-based plastic and recycled-paper napkins. Give guests instant access to a nearby compost bin, garbage can and recycling bin, or designated carry-away bags.

Happy summering!

Renée Loux is an organic chef, restaurateur, green expert and media personality. Her books include Easy Green Living and The Balanced Plate. Visit ReneeLoux.com.

Tasty Ways to Savor Summer

Grilled Black Bean Quinoa Patty

These flavorful patties are a hearty and complete source of protein, a popular, plant-based option for traditional burgers. Ground flaxseed mixed with water works to bind the ingredients together in place of eggs. When grilling, be careful to flip them gently, so that patties stay together; they're equally delicious cooked in a skillet on the stove. Serve on a whole-grain pita and load on the toppings. For a gluten-free alternative, use ground tortilla chips instead of breadcrumbs.

Yields 6 to 8 burgers

- 1 15-oz can black beans, rinsed, drained and spread out to dry for 20 minutes; divide into two equal parts
- 2 Tbsp Vegemise
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1/4 to 1/2 tsp crushed red pepper (optional)
- 1 Tbsp ground flaxseed, mixed with 3 Tbsp water
- 1/2 cup cooked quinoa
- 1/2 cup breadcrumbs or ground tortilla chips, as needed
- 1/3 cup finely chopped red onion
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro
- Sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Toppers

- Salsa
- Avocado slices
- Lettuce
- Sliced red onion
- Pickles

1. Drain and rinse black beans in a colander. Shake and let stand for a few minutes for excess liquid to drain. Spread out on a clean, dry towel; blot dry with another clear, dry towel; and let stand to dry for 20 minutes. This can also be done in the oven—spread on a cookie sheet and dry at 300° F for 15 minutes.

2. In a food processor, place half of the beans, Vegemise, cumin, oregano, garlic powder and crushed red pepper. Chop in pulses to create a coarse purée. Transfer to a medium bowl.

3. In a small bowl, mix ground flaxseed and water. Let stand 5 minutes to thicken. Mix into the black bean mixture and add remaining beans, quinoa, breadcrumbs or ground tortilla chips, onion and cilantro. Mix until combined. If the mixture looks too wet to hold together, add more breadcrumbs or ground tortilla chips. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

4. Form into 3- to 4-inch-circumference patties. If time allows, let chill in the refrigerator for 2 hours to firm and for flavors to develop.

5. On a grill preheated to medium-high and brushed with oil, cook patties until crisp and brown, turning once, 5 to 6 minutes on each side. Or heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat and cook until browned, turning once, 5 to 6 minutes on each side.

Grilled Portobello Mushrooms with Quinoa, Tomatoes and Herbs

Grilling mushrooms brings out their savory flavor. Stuffed with protein-rich quinoa, this dish is satisfying enough to be served as an entrée.

Yields 6 servings

6 Portobello mushrooms, stems and gills removed
3 Tbsp olive oil
1 tsp balsamic vinegar



photo by Stephen Gray Blancett

½ tsp dried thyme
Sea salt
1 Tbsp olive oil
3 scallions, chopped
1 large clove garlic, minced
¾ cup uncooked quinoa
1½ cups water
1 low-sodium vegetable bullion cube
2 medium heirloom tomatoes, diced into ½-inch pieces
2 Tbsp chopped herbs—basil, parsley and/or mint
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Preheat grill to medium-high.
2. Whisk together olive oil, balsamic vinegar and thyme. Brush cleaned mushrooms with mixture and sprinkle with salt. Let stand 20 to 30 minutes.
3. Grill on each side until grill marks appear, about 4 minutes per side. Or roast mushrooms under the broiler until juicy, about 10 minutes (optional).
4. In a skillet with a tight-fitting lid, heat olive oil over medium heat, and sauté garlic and scallions with a pinch of salt

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and pepper just until fragrant, for about 1 minute. Add quinoa, water and bullion cube. Turn up heat, cover and bring to a boil. Stir once and reduce heat to low to simmer for 20 minutes or until all the liquid has been absorbed. Remove from heat and let stand for 10 minutes.

5. Fluff quinoa with a fork. Fold in tomatoes and herbs. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

6. Place mushrooms cap-side down on a serving platter. Fill the cavity of the mushrooms with the quinoa mixture. Serve warm or at room temperature.



photo by Stephen Gray Blancett

Watermelon Mediterranean Salad with Tomatoes, Cucumbers, Avocado and Olives

This dish embodies the zenith of summer, when watermelon and tomatoes are at their height. Paired with refreshing cucumber, buttery avocado, savory olives and bright herbs, this pastiche of flavor and texture is a perfect accompaniment to any backyard or picnic party.

Yields 4 to 6 servings

3 medium heirloom tomatoes, cored and cut into 3/4-inch pieces
1 cup watermelon, cut into 3/4-inch cubes
1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and cut into 3/4-inch cubes
1 avocado, cut in half, pitted and cut into 3/4-inch cubes
1/2 cup pitted green olives, chopped (Castelvetro olives recommended)
1 Tbsp chopped basil
1 Tbsp chopped mint
2 Tbsp olive oil
2 Tbsp white balsamic vinegar or champagne vinegar
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. In a bowl, place tomatoes, watermelon, cucumber, avocado, olives, basil and mint. Toss gently.

2. In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, vinegar and a pinch of salt and pepper. Pour over tomato-watermelon mixture and toss gently to mix. Season to taste with more salt and pepper. Serve immediately.

Pesto Grilled Corn on the Cob

A pesto-packed twist on a backyard party classic, grilling corn in its husk yields tender kernels and a delectable natural sweetness.

Yields 6 servings

6 ears unhusked corn

Pesto

1 cup packed basil leaves

Simple Tips for Great Grilling

by Chef Renée Loux

Preheat the grill properly. Charcoal takes about 40 minutes, gas about 20. Brush the grill with vegetable oil before cooking to prevent food from sticking. To create perfect grill marks, rotate grilling food 45 degrees halfway through cooking time on one side. Flip and repeat on the other side.

If a grill isn't available, use the kitchen oven's broiler feature to achieve a similar taste.

photo by Stephen Gray Blancett



- 1 clove garlic
- 2 Tbsp pine nuts
- 1½ Tbsp lemon juice
- 1 tsp sea salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 6 Tbsp olive oil

1. Oil grill and preheat to medium high.
2. Fill a large bowl with cold water.
3. Keeping the husks attached at the base, peel back the husks of each cob and remove the silk. Cover the cobs again with the husk.
4. Soak the corncobs in cold water for 5 to 10 minutes to prevent husks from charring too quickly.
5. In a food processor, place basil, garlic, pine nuts, lemon juice, salt and pepper and chop in pulses for maximum mixing. With the motor running, slowly drizzle in olive oil. Set aside.
6. Place corn, covered in its husk on the grill. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes on each side. Remove from the grill, let it cool enough to touch and then remove

husks. Return to grill and cook, turning to lightly char all sides, for an additional 5 to 7 minutes total.

7. Remove from grill and generously brush with pesto. Sprinkle with sea salt and pepper if desired and serve hot.

Brown Rice Summer Succotash Pasta Salad

This festive summer pasta medley is a great picnic food. Brown rice pasta is a tasty, gluten-free alternative to traditional wheat pasta and full of whole-grain goodness.

Yields 6 to 8 servings

- 1 lb brown rice pasta—elbow, penne or rotini shape
- 4 Tbsp olive oil; divide into two equal portions
- 1 cup chopped red onion
- 1 large clove garlic, minced
- 4 ears corn, kernels cut off (2 to 2½ cups)
- 3 cups cherry tomatoes, cut in half
- 2 cups frozen shelled edamame, thawed
- ¼ cup chopped parsley leaves
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a rolling boil. Add pasta and stir. Cook until firm to the bite, *al dente*, according to the directions on the package. Be careful not to overcook the pasta, as it will become mushy. Drain in a colander, rinse and drain again. Drizzle with a touch of olive oil to prevent sticking and let cool in the colander, stirring occasionally.

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2. Heat up a large skillet to medium hot. Add 2 tablespoons olive oil, onion and pinch of salt and sauté, stirring occasionally until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add corn, tomatoes and edamame, and stir to combine. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook until corn is tender, stirring occasionally, about 10 to 15 minutes. Remove from heat.

3. In a large bowl, place pasta, vegetable mixture and parsley and mix to combine. Add remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, lemon juice and season to taste with salt and pepper. Let cool, then place in the fridge to chill.

Napa Cabbage Asian Slaw

This colorful, Asian-inspired slaw is fresh, flavorful and a great complement to grilled foods and summer feasts. Almond butter in the dressing lends a light creaminess and scallions, ginger and garlic create a savory, spicy triumph of taste.

Yields 4 to 6 servings

Dressing

3 Tbsp olive oil
3 Tbsp rice vinegar
2 Tbsp almond butter
1½ Tbsp soy sauce
1 Tbsp minced peeled fresh ginger
1 clove garlic, minced
1 Tbsp maple syrup or honey
1 tsp bottled toasted sesame oil
¼ tsp dried chili flakes (optional)

4 cups thinly sliced Napa cabbage
4 scallions, thinly sliced
1 medium carrot, shredded
1 red bell pepper, cut into matchstick strips
1 cup thinly sliced snow peas
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, rice vinegar, almond butter, soy sauce, ginger, garlic, maple syrup or honey, sesame oil and chili flakes (if desired). Dressing can be made up to one day ahead. Let come to room temperature before tossing and serving.

2. In a large bowl, mix together Napa cabbage, scallions, carrot, bell pepper and snow peas. Add dressing and toss to thoroughly coat. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Let stand 15 minutes before serving for flavors to develop.

Fruit Skewers

Fresh, ripe summer fruit is a perfect, simple dessert, and serving it on skewers brings a bit more fun and pizzazz to backyard and picnic parties.

Yields 6 servings

6 cups fresh fruit chunks—peaches, plums, strawberries, cantaloupe, watermelon, grapes

1. Thread fruit chunks onto bamboo skewers, alternating colors.

2. Serve cool.

Homemade Cherry-Vanilla Soda Pop

This crimson, creamy soda is reminiscent of the classic version. Reducing the cherry juice sweetens and intensifies the flavor; no additional sugar is required. Fresh vanilla bean is key and worth seeking out.

Yields 6 servings

3 cups 100 percent unsweetened black cherry juice
1 vanilla bean (about 6 inches long)
Seltzer or soda water

1. Place black cherry juice and vanilla bean in a medium-size saucepan. Cover and bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat, then reduce heat to low and simmer uncovered for 35 to 40 minutes, until liquid has reduced to 1 cup. Remove from heat and let cool until comfortable to handle.

2. Remove vanilla bean and chill the syrup in a sealed glass jar in the fridge. It will stay fresh for up to 2 weeks.

3. To serve, pour ¼ cup syrup into a tall glass, top with 6 to 8 ounces chilled seltzer or soda water, and stir. Add ice as desired.

Peach Basil Green Iced Tea

Peaches and basil are a refreshing flavor combination to embellish this cooling iced tea. Green tea is loaded with antioxidants and good-for-you phytonutrients.

Yields 4 to 6 servings

6 peaches, pitted, peeled and sliced
½ cup agave nectar
4 cups water
4 green tea bags
1 cup basil leaves
4 cups boiled water
Basil leaves for garnish

1. In a saucepan, place peaches, agave nectar and 4 cups water. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to simmer for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool for a few minutes.

2. Place peach mixture in a blender and blend until smooth (always be careful when machine-blending hot foods). Pour through a sieve or strainer lined with cheesecloth to strain into a pitcher.

3. Bring an additional 4 cups water to a boil. Pour over tea bags and basil and steep for 5 minutes. Remove tea bags and basil. Pour into pitcher with peach nectar and chill in the fridge until cold. Stir before serving, as the peach nectar tends to separate; serve over ice garnished with basil leaves.

Strawberry Honey Lemonade

This honey-sweetened lemonade is flush with fresh strawberries for a perfect balance of flavor and thirst-quenching enjoyment.

Yields 4 to 6 servings

1 pint strawberries, washed, trimmed and cut in half
1 cup fresh lemon juice (about 4 lemons)
⅔ cup honey
½ cup warm water
5 cups cold water

1. In a blender, place strawberries and ¼ cup lemon juice and blend until smooth. Pour through a fine sieve and press with the back of a spoon or pour

through a strainer lined with cheesecloth to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard pulp.

2. In a pitcher, mix together honey and warm water and stir until honey is dissolved. Add strawberry juice, remaining lemon juice and cold water. Mix well and serve over ice.



Watermelon-Mint Limeade

1 small watermelon (or half of a larger melon), diced
⅓ cup fresh lime juice
⅓ cup agave nectar
2 Tbsp chopped mint
1 Tbsp chopped basil
Pinch crushed sea salt
2 cups ice

1. Using a chinois or other fine-mesh strainer, push the watermelon through the mesh using a sturdy wooden spoon, to push through all the liquid into a bowl, leaving behind the pulp and seeds. Pour the liquid into a pitcher with the lime juice, agave nectar and a pinch of salt. Chill well.

2. Just before serving, add the mint and basil to the liquid, and blend the mixture in the blender in two batches, adding a cup of ice to each batch.

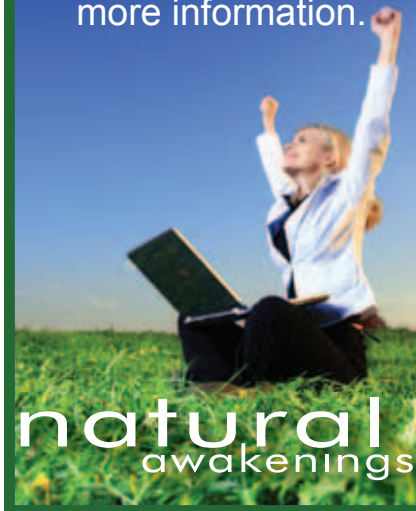
Future fun: Freeze leftover portions into popsicles for an easy treat on another day.

Recipes from The Balanced Plate and Living Cuisine, by Renée Loux, and ReneeLoux.com; limeade recipe courtesy of Beth Bader, co-author of The Cleaner Plate Club.

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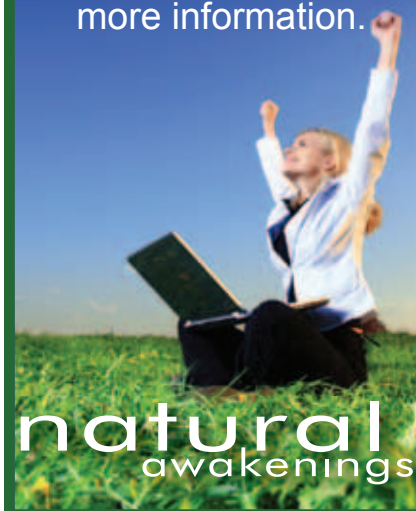


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