

Picture-Perfect Picnic

Written by Written by Melissa Larsen / Photography by Cassandra Tomei

For the rest of the country, picnic season doesn't start for a few months. Valley dwellers, though, are breaking out the blankets and heading to their nearest park now that the temps are back to two-digit territory. Read on to learn how to whip up two lavish Alfresco spreads, brought to you by Executive Chef Todd Sicolo of Arizona Biltmore Resort and Pastry Chef Tracy Dempsey of Cowboy Ciao.



The Friendly Feast by Todd Sicolo

Beer-can barbecue chicken sandwich, potato salad and watermelon-ginger mojito.

Barbecue Chicken Sandwich

Barbecue sauce (1 cup)

Coca-Cola soda - open to let soda become flat (1 cup)

Bottle beer, any kind (1)

Balsamic vinegar (1/2 cup)

Ginger, minced (1 T)

Garlic, chopped (1 T)

White onion, chopped (1)

Baguette of French bread (1)

Season and sear chicken breast, and place into a small pan with sides. Pour beer, ginger, garlic, balsamic vinegar and soda into pan. Put into a 400-degree oven and braise for one hour until poultry can easily fall apart with a fork. When the chicken is completely cooked, remove to cool. Cool and reserve liquid. With fork, pull the meat so it is shredded. Toss chicken meat mix in reserved barbecue sauce. Serve on crusty French bread. Yield: Four servings.

Potato Salad

Russet potatoes, peeled and cooked tender in boiling salted water (2)

Mayo (1/2 cup)

Diced celery (1/4 cup)

Diced white onion (1/4 cup)

Chopped thyme (1 T)

Salt and white pepper to taste

Mix well and serve as side salad.

Watermelon and Ginger Mojito

White sugar (1/2 cup)

White rum (6 oz.)

Watermelon, seeded, skinned and diced small (1)

Ginger (1 tsp)

Purée all ingredients until smooth. When ready to serve, take watermelon mix, add crushed ice and blend until slushy consistency. Top with a

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rum floater and then serve. (For a nonalcoholic version, omit rum and add pineapple juice.) Yield: Serves four.

The Romantic Repast by Tracy Dempsey

Chocolate fleur de sel caramel fondue with homemade vanilla bean marshmallows, coconut macaroons, cream puffs and strawberries.



Coconut Macaroons

Macaroon coconut - also known as unsweetened desiccated or finely grated coconut; available at Asian and Middle Eastern Markets (1 1/2 cups)

Butter, melted (1 T plus 3/4 tsp.)

Granulated sugar (1/2 cup)

Egg whites - be careful not to get any yolk into the whites (2)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a medium bowl, combine the coconut and half cup sugar; set aside. Drizzle the melted butter over the coconut mixture. Stir to combine. In the bowl of an electric mixer, whip the egg whites to form peaks. Fold whites into the coconut mixture. Use a small scoop or a tablespoon to form mounds of batter and place on a parchment-lined sheet pan. Do not flatten the cookies. Bake until golden brown.

Cream Puffs

Water (1/2 cup)

Unsalted butter (3 T)

Granulated sugar (1 1/2 tsp)

Pinch of salt

All-purpose flour (3/8 cup)

Large eggs (2)

Vanilla extract (1 tsp.)

Heavy cream (1 cup)

Powdered sugar (3 T)

Combine the water, butter, sugar and salt in a saucepan. Bring to a boil. Whisk in the flour. Use a wooden spoon to stir in the paste until it forms a ball of dough in the pan and comes away from the sides of the pan. (You are cooking the flour—like making a roux.) Transfer the paste to the bowl of an electric mixer with the paddle attachment. Allow the paste to rest for about 10 minutes before continuing. Meanwhile, crack your eggs into a separate container. Set aside. Start mixing the paste and add one egg at a time. (Sometimes you will use all of the eggs and sometimes you may need fewer—it depends on the weather and how much moisture is in the air.) The paste will be a little runny. Stir in the vanilla. Scoop mounds of the dough onto a parchment-lined sheet pan and bake in a 400-degree oven. The cream puffs should be golden brown, crispy outside and still a little soft on the inside. Cool completely before storing or filling. Before filling the puffs, poke a small hole in the bottom of each puff. In the chilled bowl of an electric mixer with the whip attachment, whip the heavy cream and powdered sugar to stiff peaks. Transfer the whipped cream to a pastry bag with a plain pastry tip. Fill cooled puffs with chilled sweetened whipped cream. Refrigerate or freeze filled cream puffs.

Chocolate Fleur De Sel Caramel Fondue

Fleur de sel caramel:

Sugar (1 1/2 cups)

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Water (1/2 cup)

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Fleur de sel, finely ground (1 tsp)

Heavy cream (3/8 cup)

Butter (1 1/2 T)

In a medium saucepan, combine the sugar, water and juice. Bring to a boil over medium- high heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Once the sugar is dissolved, cease stirring (continuing to stir will cause sugar crystals to form and will ruin the caramel). Cook the mixture to a deep amber color. Meanwhile, combine the fleur de sel, cream and butter in a bowl. Set aside. Once it reaches the deep amber color, remove from the heat and very carefully add the cream mixture. The caramel may bubble and sputter a bit; stand back and wait for it to settle down. Once the bubbling subsides, stir the caramel sauce to combine. If the caramel is lumpy, return pan to heat and cook until smooth. Allow to cool while you prepare the chocolate fondue.

The chocolate fondue:

Unsweetened cocoa powder (3/4 cup)

Water (1 cup)

Granulated sugar (1 1/8 cups)

Corn syrup (3/8 cup)

Heavy cream (1 1/8 cups)

Semisweet chocolate chunks (8 oz.)

Dark rum (1/3 cup)

Sift the cocoa into a mixing bowl and set aside. Place the water and sugar into a pot and bring to a boil. Allow to simmer for several minutes. Pour the cocoa powder into the mixture and blend with a whisk until smooth. Return the chocolate mixture to the stove and continue cooking over medium heat. Add heavy cream, bring to a boil and allow to simmer for five minutes. Remove from heat and stir in chocolate chunks. Stir until chocolate is completely melted. Add the rum; stir. Add the fleur de sel caramel to the chocolate fondue, stirring to combine. If not serving immediately, put bowl of fondue on an ice bath to chill. Refrigerate. Gently warm chilled fondue over low heat or rewarm in microwave. For picnicking, transfer warmed fondue to an insulated thermos and pack a ceramic fondue pot for two with a few tea lights and matches. Yield: About one quart.