

It's a PICNIC!

A GUIDE TO HAPPY MEALS OUTDOORS IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

By Katie Egan

katie.egan@naplesnews.com; 239-263-4785

On Thursday, the world will pay homage to red-and-white gingham tablecloths, wooden wicker baskets and Victorian-era traditions.

But out of the sea of nonbelievers, there's still one Naples couple keeping the tradition alive.

Susan and Paul Jones don't use a tablecloth. A simple blanket suffices. Sometimes they use their picnic basket. Other times, they use their backpack. It has pouches to keep things organized — even one for wine.

Three years ago, when their youngest child left for college, Susan Jones, determined not to become an empty nester, decided she would fill the week with activities, “rain or shine, happy or sad.”

Monday night meant picnics.

If it rains, she and husband Paul picnic on their patio. If the forecast is on their side, they mix it up — biking to downtown Naples, the Gordon River Greenway Park, beaches along Gulfshore Boulevard or their favorite destination — Lowdermilk Park.

(For more picnic hot spots, visit naplesnews.com.)

“It depends on our mood and how much time we have,” Jones said. “We like to be outdoors and we live so close to the beach and we don't take advantage of it.”

In the winter, when the days are shorter, she said they often picnic in the dark because the sun starts setting around 5 p.m. She prefers picnicking in the spring or fall, she said, because it's not as hot.

Sometimes they venture out alone. Other times, they recruit anyone who's available to join. It's also not uncommon for random beachgoers to strike up a conversation. When that happens, Jones explains why they're there, and “they think it's a unique idea.”

Recently she got one of her acquaintances a picnic basket so they could carry on the tradition.

“It doesn't matter how old or young you are. Everyone can enjoy a picnic,” she said.

FUSS-FREE SET UP

Marla Ottenstein, owner of Professional Organizer

WHAT TO KEEP IN YOUR PICNIC BASKET

Above all, a clear, watertight checklist is a must. Either keep it inside the picnic basket or tape a 3-inch by 5-inch note card on the front of the container and replenish supplies as soon as you run out so you don't hit any speed bumps later on.

ON THE CHECKLIST, YOU SHOULD HAVE:

- Matches — in resealable bag
- Plastic bags
- Trash bags
- Flashlight
- Corkscrew
- Bottle opener
- Swiss Army knife
- Bug spray and sunblock
- Paper towels (replace immediately so you don't run out)
- Ice packets, stored in freezer
- Hand-held fan with flat bottom (it can sit on the table and blow the bugs away)
- Citronella candles
- Clorox or other disinfecting wipes
- Moist towelettes
- Visor, hat and/or sunglasses

Florida and Naples Daily News “Get Organized” columnist, recommends a setup that can keep you organized and help the environment.

A designated picnic container is a must so you're ready to go when the mood strikes. She suggests a large plastic container, “So if it rains, you can throw everything in there and run.” Try a basket with a tight-fitting lid and clear storage containers with interlocking lids and integrated handles so you can see exactly what's inside.

When you get home, Ottenstein recommends putting everything in the dishwasher and making sure all of your supplies end up back in the container, “so you're not searching for things later on.”

To help make this easier, she advocates a watertight checklist inside the container or a 3-inch by 5-inch notecard taped to the outside.

“Plastic utensils and cups are the way to go,” Ottenstein said. “As far as plates or glasses are concerned, I'd like to start seeing people use plastic. It's washable, and you don't have to buy more when you run out.”

She suggested melamine plastic because it's heavy-duty, washable and environmentally friendly.

“Wash them and put them right back in,” she said, adding that, “People throw the red Solo cups out and most people don't recycle.”

She also suggests heavy-duty recycled plastic containers

versus their Glad or Ziploc counterparts.

“If you put the inexpensive ones in the dishwasher a couple times, the plastic breaks down and it's not healthy.”

A separate cooler is ideal, too, she said, adding that “whatever you buy, it has to be something you can lift up.”

But above all, replenish supplies the moment you run out or make a note to do it later.

NUTRITIOUS PICNICS

Geri Leonard, head chef at Lorenzo Walker Institute of Technology, thinks traditional picnic foods are getting a more health conscious makeover.

“A lot of people are going healthier now — eating more of a quinoa salad and arugula salad than a potato salad,” she said, adding that she would choose French bread, a parfait, cheese or fruit over corn on the cob, fried chicken or barbecue.

Cold soups are also a good choice, adding that you can “put things in Mason jars — like pickled cucumbers — as well.”

Another easy option? Make your own sandwiches, but opt for meats on heartier breads. Soft loaves don't travel well, Leonard said. Neither does anything with butter or sugar.

As a rule of thumb, “drier foods travel well, and so do things in a vinaigrette or mayonnaise. But nothing with whipped cream.”

For dessert, sweet breads such as pumpkin or banana will hold up well.

“Get creative with drinks, too,” Leonard said. Try a berry iced tea or lemon grass iced tea or iced coffee with a flavored syrup.

HEAT, SHADE, CRITTERS

In the summer, it can be hard to enjoy the great outdoors when your skin is sticky with sand, your body is bitten by mosquitoes or you're on the verge of passing out from the heat.

One important factor to consider when choosing your picnic location is shade.

“All county parks and pools have picnic areas, and it depends on how secluded or active an area you want,” said Lee County spokeswoman Betsy Clayton.

Morning, she said, is the best time to beat the rain and the heat. “Utilizing a pool location or beach lets you cool off in the water,” she said. “Watch the sky and weather apps for approaching thunderstorms.”

Collier spokeswoman Kate Albers asks that food be kept away from playgrounds because “Food attracts animals like raccoons. Kids and raccoons don't mix.”

To reserve a Collier or Lee picnic area for a special event, both Albers and Clayton recommend calling the park you're hoping to visit and speaking to a staff member about rates and availability.

 inthe239.com | Watch a video and explore an interactive map

PLACES TO PICNIC

LEE COUNTY

- 1 Barefoot Beach State Preserve, 505 Barefoot Beach Blvd., Bonita Springs
- 2 Koreshan State Historic Site, 3800 Corkscrew Road, Estero
- 3 Lovers Key State Park, 8700 Estero Blvd., Fort Myers Beach
- 4 Bunche Beach Preserve, 18201 John Morris Road, Fort Myers Beach
- 5 Bowman's Beach, 1700 Bowmans Beach Road, Sanibel

COLLIER COUNTY

- 6 Cambier Park, 755 Eighth St., Naples
- 7 Lowdermilk Beach Park, 1301 Gulf Shore Blvd. N., Naples
- 8 Collier-Seminole State Park, 20200 U.S. 41 E., Naples
- 9 Naples City Dock, 880 12th Ave. S., Naples
- 10 Sugden Regional Park, 4284 Avalon Drive, Naples



JOURNAL MEDIA GROUP