



Cookouts and Picnics with Middle Eastern Flavors

By Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff

The joy of cooking and sharing food outdoors should not be experienced only by carnivores, even though cookout generally evokes a vision of a chunk of meat on an open fire. Vegetarians around the world enjoy open air cooking, some working in the field and others while traveling or on pilgrimages. During the busy seasons, farmers bring their meals to the field out of necessity. Many cultures have rituals of cooking and sharing new crops outdoors to celebrate the bounty. Urban dwellers like us also like to eat outdoors for pleasure. It is our way of bringing the

country to the city. Cooking out can also be collaborative - a welcome change from an isolating kitchen where the host cooks most of the food.

Here are some tips to make your cookout successful:

1. Pick a spot that is sheltered from heavy wind.
2. Plan a varied menu with colorful, hearty dishes.
3. Include plenty of beverages such as juice, soda, water and of course, a thermos of chai and/or coffee.
4. Be familiar ahead of time with your grill, charcoal, or whatever cooking medium you plan to use.
5. Make rice, pasta and salad dishes ahead of time.
6. Bring a ball, Frisbee or some other outdoor activity to keep everyone warm and busy.
7. Don't forget to bring a blanket, a ground cloth, and any necessary utensils.
8. Remember, grilled food is very hot! Be careful when cooking and serving it. Bring some kitchen gloves and tongs.
9. Pack a spray water bottle and plenty of trash bags, so that you can leave the site as clean for the next group.

Here are some food items for your picnic basket that you can find in at Other Avenues, followed by three Middle Eastern recipes that are perfect companion for a cookout.

- A large variety of juices, juice soda and root beer
- Organic wine, organic and micro brewery local beer
- Soy deli cold cuts, such as soy "salami," baked tofu, tofu dogs, soy and tempeh burgers
- A wonderful selection of local and imported cheeses
- Freshly baked bread and gluten-free baked goods
- Crackers and chips

Tabbouli

Tabbouli can be made ahead of time and be refrigerated for up to a week.

1½ cup bulgur (cracked wheat)

4 - 5 cups warm water

A large bunch curly parsley, minced after removing twigs (equaling 2 cups after chopping)

1 cup fresh mint leaves, minced after removing stems

1 bunch of scallions, chopped, with some of the green tops

1 large cucumber, peeled and finely chopped in cubes (about 1 to 1½ cups)

½ cup very small chunks of red bell pepper or a fresh tomato

Dressing:

4 tablespoons olive oil

4 tablespoons lemon or lime juice, freshly squeezed

¼ teaspoon oregano, dried or fresh and minced

½ teaspoon salt or to taste

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Soak the bulgur in warm water for ½ hour. Wash and drain parsley and mint thoroughly. Using a wide bladed knife or a food processor, chop the leaves briefly, being careful not to puree.

Prepare the rest of the vegetables as listed. Set the leaves and vegetables in a large bowl.

Drain the soaked bulgur completely by using a cheese cloth. Or take a handful of bulgur at a time and squeeze most of the water out. Add bulgur to the bowl of vegetables and mix well.

Blend together the dressing ingredients in a jar or a small bowl. Add desired amount of dressing to the bowl of tabbouli and mix thoroughly but gently. Serve right away or chill to serve later.

Makes about six to eight half-cup servings

Gluten-free Tabbouli

Since bulgur is a wheat product, here is a gluten-free option made with rice and quinoa.

¾ cup basmati rice, rinsed and drained thoroughly

¾ cup white quinoa, rinsed and drained thoroughly

1½ cups water

For Dressing:

Same list of ingredients as listed above for traditional tabbouli.

Boil the water and add the drained rice and quinoa. Cover and simmer the grains over a moderate heat for 15 minutes. Cool the cooked grains thoroughly by spreading them out on a platter. Set the plate aside. Prepare the vegetables as described in the recipe above and mix them with the cooked grains. Add the desired amount of dressing and serve or chill for the future use.

Makes about six to eight half-cup servings

Veggie Kebabs

For Marinade:

¼ cup balsamic vinegar, or rice vinegar for a milder flavor

½ cup olive oil, or peanut oil if using rice vinegar

¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice

4-6 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons fresh, minced herbs, such as oregano, basil, and thyme

Salt or soy sauce to taste

Freshly ground pepper to taste

For Kebabs:

2 zucchini, cut into 1-inch slices or into long thick strips
2 gold-bar squash, cut into 1-inch slices or into long thick strips
2–3 yellow-fin or red potatoes, washed and cut into thin slices
1 or 2 Japanese eggplants, unpeeled, cut into thick slices or long strips
12 large mushrooms, cleaned and trimmed
12 cherry tomatoes
16–20 oz. firm tofu, drained, dried, and cut into 1-inch cubes

Whisk all of the ingredients in the list of marinade except for the salt or soy sauce. Place the marinade in a large mixing bowl. Wash and cut the vegetables as listed and add them to the bowl along with the tofu. Set the bowl aside for at least an hour or overnight in the refrigerator. Prepare your grilling apparatus ready. Thread the vegetables onto skewers. Place the loaded skewers on a platter. Just before grilling, baste the vegetables liberally with the marinade. Save the leftover marinade. Wear oven mitts to handle the kebabs. As the vegetables cook, turn them frequently so that all sides cook evenly on the grill. Serve hot with remaining marinade.

Makes approximately 12 servings

Baba Ghanoush (Grilled Eggplants with Sesame Paste Dressing)

1 pound Japanese eggplants, 4 to 6 (preferred), washed and dried (keep them whole or 1 large global eggplant, washed and dried whole

Dressing:

3 tablespoons toasted or raw tahini (sesame seed paste)
2 tablespoons water
¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 teaspoon honey or sugar
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 tablespoons or more olive oil
1 tablespoon parsley leaves, chopped finely
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Small Japanese eggplants are preferred for this recipe because they have less or no seeds.

Make the dressing ahead of time by whisking all the ingredients in the list except for the parsley. Transfer the dressing into a jar and refrigerate until ready to take with you. Refrigerate the parsley separately and take it along. Pack the whole eggplants in your picnic basket.

At the cookout spot, roast the eggplant directly over the flame (or over charcoal amber), holding them with an oven mitt, two at a time. Turn them frequently, while roasting to allow the skin to blister and crack. When the flash seems to have softened completely, remove each eggplant from fire. Place the hot eggplants on a cutting board. Allow them to cool so that you can handle them. Remove all of the charred skin using your fingertips. Mash the pulp using a knife and fork.

Place the eggplant pulp in a mixing bowl. Add the dressing in, a few tablespoons at a time until a creamy pulp is formed. (Save leftover dressing - if any -for later use). Garnish baba ghanooj with parsley leaves and serve it with bread or pasta.

Makes eight to ten servings

Copyright Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff 2017