

THE PERFECT PICNIC

THE SUN IS LINGERING, FLOWERS ARE STILL BLOOMING, BUT WINTER IS PREPARING TO MAKE ITS RETURN. IT'S TIME FOR SOME LAST-CHANCE OUTDOOR EATING. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXAMINES THE MAKING OF THE PERFECT PICNIC.



An aerial view of The Parterre in the National Trust's garden at Cliveden

A few weeks back, I popped down to the local café for a brew. Walking through the park under grey skies, I felt a drop. Then a few more. Within moments, the light drizzle turned to rain. Did that deter the families out enjoying their socially distanced picnics? Not at all. Raincoats were donned, umbrellas opened, and the grazing resumed. Once started, a picnic just can't be packed away; it begs to be consumed. The British weather is, at best, unpredictable, but that just makes picnic planning all the more important. Lesson number one: prepare for everything; pack sunscreen; and a hat; and bring a broly or two – unless you like soggy sandwiches.

The second lesson involves choosing the perfect picnic spot. That brings us back to the weather. On a sunny day, a park with plenty of shaded areas is a good option or a beach with a beach umbrella.

Beaches lose their appeal with wind, though – the crunch of sand in a cucumber sandwich is far from ideal. The ideal spot is picturesque and peaceful, but also multi-faceted, with shade on a sunny day, shelter should the rain come and somewhere soft to lay out a picnic blanket.

I think I've found the perfect picnic spot.

Cliveden House in Berkshire was built in 1666 by the 2nd Duke of Buckingham as a gift to his mistress. Owned by the National Trust and operated as a private award-winning luxury hotel, the Grade I stately home is packed with antique furniture and period features, but it is the 376 acres of grounds that offer a multitude of picnic options. The hotel also provides picnic baskets, taking the angst out of preparation.



The Fountain of Love



A picnic at Cliveden is a luxurious affair



Cliveden as night falls



The Parterre

Walking past the Fountain of Love, a two colour marble sculpture by Thomas Waldo Story, you know you're somewhere special. The fountain was commissioned by Lord Astor in 1897 and depicts a woman with long, wavy hair, arms outstretched to welcome cupid. It's an apt welcome to Cliveden House proper, where we collect our baskets and head to the riverbank to dine.

Unrolling our picnic blanket on a grassy knoll, we pop the cork on the bottle of Veuve Clicquot feeling rather decadent. Flipping the lid on one of the baskets, we find champagne flutes, cups, canisters of hot water and milk in preparation for a cup of tea, a flask of chilled gazpacho and silver cutlery, wrapped in white napkins.

The second basket is where the magic really happens. Naturally, a picnic at Cliveden goes well beyond Scotch eggs and sausage rolls. With that said though, there's a savoury hamper available filled to the brim with potted shrimp, Scotch eggs, heirloom tomatoes gazpacho, British cheeses, quiche Lorraine, strawberries and cream, Scottish shortbread and chocolate brownies. That's not the one we went for, though. Instead, we chose the traditional afternoon tea hamper.

We lift up the first two packages, opening them to

reveal matching finger sandwiches, a stuffed mini croissant, a duck wrap and a trio of sweet treats. This is where Cliveden has put a twist on tradition, with the sweet elements of the afternoon tea based around the red velvet cake and its connection with New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, which was built by Cliveden's former owner, the 1st Viscount Astor. The Waldorf Astoria didn't create the cake, but it certainly enhanced its popularity back in the 1930s. It's popular with us today, in all its variations.

There are another two packages in the basket, housing a duo of scones with jam and clotted cream. We couldn't. We shouldn't. But we do, nibbling our way slowly through every morsel and washing it down with cups of tea, as we watch boats drift by on the river and families playing on the grass. This is a lovely way to spend an afternoon.

When the warm glow of afternoon starts to wane, we make our way up the 176 steps to the six-acre Parterre, where 16 triangular beds with box hedging and manicured yew topiary and a sweeping semi-circle bed on the north end lead to the façade of the house. We roam through the wonderfully scented Rose Garden, which was reinstated in 2014, based on an original 1950s design by renowned garden designer Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe. Over 900 roses are in full bloom in a rainbow of colours.

In the Long Garden, there is a collection of quirky topiary and sculptures and in the far-flung Water Garden, we admire the centrepiece, a six-sided Chinese pagoda, originally made for the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle. Past the pagoda, a heron sits so placidly on a rock in the lake that we debate whether it is real. The debate ends when the heron turns its head to look us in the eye.

As the drizzle starts, we stroll back to the car, arm in arm, smiles on our faces. We've discovered the ingredients for a perfect picnic: a beautiful location, a hamper of tasty treats and good company. Sunshine is optional. ■



INFO

To make a booking for lunch, afternoon tea or an 'iconic' picnic, please visit www.clivedenhouse.co.uk.

HERE ARE MORE OF OUR FAVOURITE PICKS FOR THE PERFECT PICNIC:



The Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company has put together a pack of summer favourites for a cheesy picnic in the park. The Summertime Picnic Pack includes Cheddar with Cider, Garlic & Chives; Traditional Cheddar; Cornish Sea Salt Biscuits; Red Onion Marmalade; Cheese Straws; Chilli Jam; and a few essentials. This is delivered in a reusable cool bag with napkins and a reusable ice pack to keep the cheesy goodness at its best. ■

www.cheddaronline.co.uk



Rockliffe Hall is a Victorian mansion in the heart of the bucolic English countryside in County Durham. Formerly a tradition enjoyed indoors in The Orangery, afternoon tea has moved al fresco on the 365-acre Rockliffe estate. Order flutes of champagne, pretty pastries and classic sandwiches, and find a secret corner. The tea is served on a fully sanitised tweed blanket and concierges are on hand to advise on the most picturesque spots. ■

www.rockliffehall.com



At the start of lockdown, London bakery GAIL's launched an At Home range including some of the favourite products and hard-to-get baking ingredients. Now, GAIL's has launched the next phase in their range: the GAIL's Hampers range. This consists of six curated gift boxes: Breakfast in Bed, Farmhouse Breakfast; Cookie Box, Sofa Picnic, Cake Box and a Cream Tea Box, providing picnic options aplenty, delivered to your door. ■

gailsbread.co.uk



In the grounds of a Hand Picked Hotel, a picnic is an elevated experience. The Chefs are as passionate about picnic food as they are about modern British dining, using locally sourced, fresh seasonal produce to create a delicious spread – including the beverages to go with it. These treats are arranged into a wicker basket complete with utensils, so you have an al fresco feast in the palm of your hand. ■

www.handpickedhotels.co.uk