

## A Year of Picnics: Recipes for Dining Well in the Great Outdoors

**Ashley English**

**Jen Altman, Photographer**

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*A Year of Picnics is a thoughtful antidote to often hurried times.*

Ashley English presents twenty inspired picnics in *A Year of Picnics: Recipes for Dining Well in the Great Outdoors*. This charming guide packs savory comfort foods in a valuable call to fellowship. Jen Altman's romantic photography captures artful scenes in North Carolina's wilderness.

"Spring and Summer" and "Fall and Winter" sections feature themed picnics. Each includes a preface with personal reflections, three to four recipes, and ideas for group activities. From a Bird-Watching Picnic that highlights Carbonara Nests to a Sacred Tree Picnic, which uses ingredients sourced from trees, English connects food to their settings. There's an occasional tendency to indulge in aesthetics—one picnic details a DIY table project, another includes instructions for building a cornhole board—but there's never a sense that hosting requires perfection.

Classics are given an upscale twist. Curried egg salad is served in cucumber cups. Grilled ham and cheese includes mustard aioli and pear. Roasted chicken is topped with chimichurri. Global delights, such as Romanian Meatball Soup and a Karelian Hot Pot, add plentiful interest for experienced cooks. Many recipes use bold spices, such as paprika and cardamom, or rich dairy. With clear instructions for preparation, these selections comprise a welcome departure from typical finger-food fare. English wisely limits the menu for each outing; the result is an achievable, yet imaginative, sampling.

Meals aside, it's often the story that takes center stage. The book is steeped in a slow-food and homesteading ethos. As such, it emphasizes high-quality, whole-food ingredients and considers the environment when it comes to packing dishware and choosing sites.

In subtler ways, it also underscores the importance of community. English makes a strong case for exploring the outdoors with loved ones. The book is rife with Montessori-friendly ideas for families. Tying the Fibonacci sequence to patterns in nature, making leaf gradients, snow painting, practicing with a compass, map reading, and other creative ways to work together skillfully demonstrate how a simple picnic can become an anticipated event. Suggestions suitable for adults are also provided.

English, whose interest in naturalism informs the work, repeatedly encourages people to appreciate beauty. *A Year of Picnics* is a thoughtful antidote to often hurried times. Dining outside becomes a lifestyle, and an art.

KAREN RIGBY (March/April 2017)

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