A HISTORY OF THE GREAT BRITISH PICNIC

Food writer and cook, Rachel Walker, opens the hamper of history and serves up the story of the picnic

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"Everything tastes better outdoors," writes Claudia Roden in ***Picnics: And Other Outdoor Feasts.*** "There is something about fresh air and the liberating effect of nature which sharpens the appetite and heightens the quality and intensity of sensations."

It's a quote that really captures the optimism of the great British picnic, that summery institution built on our resilience to overlook washout days, swarms of wasps and the dubious joy of warm white wine. But the in-built desire to eat outdoors is so strong in all of us it feels like it must be embedded in our heritage. Not even the ominous thundercloud can dampen our spirits on a high July sports day or at a back-garden barbecue. So where does this al fresco food passion come from?

The history of the English picnic may be traced back as far as the Middle Ages when it was as a purely practical exercise involving taking food to huntsmen on horseback. The pork pie and the Cornish pasty have similar origins; they were designed to be complete meals eaten away from home. Of course, they weren't called picnics then. The origin of the word is French and thought to date to 1692 and the book ***Origines de la Langue Française***, which features "pique-nique" to describe a group of people dining in a restaurant who brought their own wine. It is believed that the concept of a picnic held the connotation of a meal involving everyone contributing something.

However, it wasn't until around the mid-1800s, that the picnic became a common English word and a serious pastime and food fashion, all fuelled by the Romantic movement. As poets swooned over the sublime, sighing in delight at the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness", so the upper classes in this country became inspired to escape the formality of the dining room and move meals outside where nature provided the fashionable backdrop.

Delicacies were created specifically for picnicking occasions. In 1738, London grocers Fortnum & Mason's laid claim to the Scotch Egg – that classic picnic centrepiece – while cooks began setting cold meats in aspic jelly. In Mrs Beeton's ***Book of Household Management***, she devised lavish picnic menus that seem nothing short of gut-busting: "a joint of cold roast beef, a joint of cold boiled beef, 2 ribs of lamb, 2 shoulders of lamb, 4 roast fowls, 2 roast ducks, 1 ham, 1 tongue, 2 veal and ham pies, 2 pigeon pies, 6 medium sized lobsters, 1 piece of collared calves head." And that's just the main courses.

By the Victorian era, the society summer season seemed to revolve around picnicking occasions. There was Henley Regatta and Glyndebourne, Ascot and Goodwood. "Look where I will…I see Fortnum & Mason," wrote Charles Dickens, at one Epsom Derby. "All the hampers fly wide open and the green downs burst into a blossom of lobster salad!"

It wasn't just in Britain's green and pleasant land where picnics were all the rage, but wherever the map turned pink throughout the Empire outdoor eating provided an opportunity to put on a show. Safari tents were pitched on the savannah, Mughal tents were erected in the Indian foothills, and elaborate displays duly unfolded, with china crockery and cut glass, table linen and Persian rugs.

Fortnum & Mason in particular was quick to capitalise on this age of adventure. They created an in-store Expeditions department dedicated to sending home comforts overseas – anything from mustard and baked beans, to butter knives and sauce boats. In 1922, the British Everest expedition famously loaded Sherpas with 60 tins of Fortnum and Mason quail in foie gras, and four-dozen bottles of Champagne. Small wonder they didn't make the summit.

As the long Edwardian Summer ebbed, picnicking was an increasingly aspirational affair and a byword for summer. There was the "lashings and lashings of ginger beer" of Enid Blyton adventures, picnic panniers on punts in Evelyn Waugh novels and the famous passage from ***Wind in the Willows***, in which Rat opens a bulging hamper to reveal "cold chicken, cold tongue, cold ham, cold beef, pickled gherkins, salad, French rolls, cress sandwiches, potted meat, ginger beer, lemonade, soda water." All were designed to whet the appetite and bring to life those lazy summer days by the river.

The era of British supermarkets and packaged picnics might have robbed the occasion of some of its Victorian whimsy, but the new age of convenience extended the rug to everyone. With pre-sliced ham and pork pies, a Thermos, transistor radio and melamine plates, anyone could pack-up a bumper lunch, pop it in the boot of their car and head to a nearby beauty spot.

Britain's magpie cuisine has also meant that staples like smoked salmon sandwiches and Victoria sponges have broadened to olives and Parma ham, hummous and tabbouleh. While 34,000kg of strawberries is still shifted every year at Wimbledon and Henley Regatta remains a Pimm's-fuelled affair, the modern picnic is just as likely to include satay and salami, cheesecake and clafoutis.

Still, the consistent in the British picnic is an element of unpredictability and making do. That, and our strange sense of humour that so delights in a shambles unfolding. In his childhood memoirs, ***Cider With Rosie***, Laurie Lee describes his mother's monumental picnics which always started with such high expectations, before giving-in to the inevitable: "The milk turned sour, the butter fried on the bread, cake crumbs got stuck to the cucumber, wasps seized the treacle, the kettle wouldn't boil and we ended by drinking the jellies."

The truth is that all Brits have battled the crunch of sand in the sandwiches, but it's never dampened the enthusiasm for taking lunch outdoors. Any small inconvenience is outweighed by the rewards. Whether it's in a Cornish cove or on the craggy coast of Scotland, there's nothing better than sharing some sat-on sandwiches and packets of crisps reduced to powder, before licking a melted chocolate bar from the inside of a wrapper. It will always be the great leveller, bringing people together to break bread and make the best of a British summer.