

IT'S NO PICNIC UNLESS YOU VISIT THE FARM!

Eating out is likely to take on a whole new meaning this summer, with picnicking set to become the must-do for lazy afternoons and worry-free weekends, according to the North West Farm Tourism Initiative (NWFTI).

To celebrate a resurgence in the desire to get outdoors and eat at one's leisure, the NWFTI has produced some tips on how to create the perfect picnic, if you wish to be the host or hostess with panache, as well as panini.

Its research has found that a picnic packed with fast food such as pizza or processed fruits or meats just won't pass muster, with 80% of consumers telling the NWFTI that when it comes to fast food v farm food, the farm wins every time.

The perfect picnic should, therefore be based upon nutritious, fresh-tasting local products harvested from the land in which the picnic is taking place. 72% Of consumers say that the fewer miles food travels, the better it is for them, whilst 68% and 58% respectively believe that farm food is healthier and can be trusted more than that from other sources.

The perfect picnic needs to be sourced locally, either ordered prior to arrival, or put together close to the chosen location, by visiting a well-stocked farm shop, or genuine farmers market. In this way, your picnic hamper can be filled with wonderful local dishes and treats, giving you the opportunity to sample unique recipes, whilst simultaneously appreciating why farm food tastes so much better.

If you opt to order a picnic from a quality local supplier, such as Cumbrian-based Lakeland Picnics from Savin Hill Farm (015395 68410), expect to enjoy something fantastically out of the ordinary. This might be a steak and damson or pork and gooseberry pie, some wondrous local sausages and exquisite bottled damsons, or hand-made chocolates, for dessert, with all recipes exuding a local influence and flavour.

Your picnic may be the central part of a day out in the countryside, or be integral to a complete taste of luxury enjoyed in one of the venues that participate in the NWFTI's Luxury in a Farm initiative (<http://www.luxuryinafarm.co.uk>)Here, you can tailor-make your own experience, selecting little touches such as a luxury picnic hamper to run alongside your stay in a four or five star farm property that may have started life as a coach house, granary or miner's dry.

The North West Farm Tourism Initiative's Top Picnic Tips are:

Opt for locally sourced produce that will give you a true taste of the landscape in which you are enjoying your al fresco treat.

Be prepared to adventure into new taste territory, experiencing local flavours and food combinations that farmers have relished for centuries.

Remember that finger food usually goes down best on a picnic, but fast food is overwhelmingly second best to farm food in most people's eyes, according to the NWFTI's research.

Recognise that foods such as salad, cheese and even sandwiches do not travel well, particularly in high temperatures. Plan to visit a local farm shop, or pre-order a hamper from a picnic specialist such as Savin Hill, remembering that unrefrigerated food only usually lasts for around 2 hours without wilting or tasting unpalatable.

Keep it simple and do not overcomplicate the range of flavours that you are serving up. For this reason, it can be advantageous to have your hamper prepared for you, by experts.

Don't forget the little touches that can make all the difference in terms of pickles and spreads. A farm shop such as Low Sizergh Barn, based at Sizergh, near Kendal, the UK Farm Retailer of the Year (2005) offers a wide selection of condiments which can really light up the meats and fruits being served.

Cater for the fact that the ground may be damp or uneven. Bring along a good rug, or groundsheet.

If you are driving, a bottle of wine is not the drink to accompany your spread, but that doesn't mean you cannot spoil yourself. Many farm shops will produce delights such as homemade lemonade, or fresh fruit juices squeezed from fruits grown on the farm. Why not indulge in these.

Respect the countryside. Take all of your rubbish back home with you and remember to close any farm gates that you may have opened to reach your location, even if you cannot see any animals around. Only picnic where you are allowed to do so!

If you need to source a great picnic location, why not take advantage of local knowledge. You can either pre-book a stay at a farm through a site such as <http://www.golakes.co.uk/enjoythefarm> or ask the local farmer for advice whilst you are buying your picnic selection.

If you are one of the 47% of 24-35 year olds who want to make a picnic part of a farm holiday that you feel will invigorate your life, according to research from the North West Farm Tourism Initiative, then you may wish to indulge all of your senses. This can be achieved through a luxurious farm stay that will introduce you to a world of herdwick throws, green oak architecture, slate floors and hearty farm breakfasts. Such delights can be accessed from 16 farms within the Luxury in a Farm initiative, with details on <http://www.luxuryinafarm.co.uk>

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