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Basket Bounty

SASKATOON HAS PLENTY OF PLACES TO HELP YOU PACK FOR THE PERFECT PICNIC
by Noelle Chorney

Cooperation from the weather or not, the calendar says that summer is here. Officially, summer solstice takes place June 21 — and with it comes the promise of dog days, salad days, and most importantly, picnic days.

It doesn't take much to make a picnic. Heck, a bucket of chicken on a park bench might work for some. I think I might have even done that once — although it was chicken (and fantastic corn fritters) from a little mom-and-pop chicken shack in Calgary, and the park bench overlooked downtown Calgary and the mighty Bow River, so it's a touch more classy than it sounds.

Still, that was back in my college days — now, while good fried chicken can still turn my head, my palate generally yearns for more sophisticated nosh. And nothing makes me or my palate happier than a blanket on the grass, covered in so many different kinds of foods that there's no room for me to sit.

One of my favourite places to shop for picnic items is the Saskatoon Farmers' Market. Because you have to get there so early in the morning to get the good stuff, I tend to make a breakfast picnic out of the Farmers' Market wares.

To tide over the initial hunger pangs, we usually stop at Wild Serendipity Foods to pick up a scone. A warning: they tend to fly off the shelves and sell out by 10 am, so you have to get up pretty early to snag one (or six). The flavours change all the time — on my last visit I opted for a cheddar herb and a maple oat. Pumpkin and sour cherry are two others that I've enjoyed as well.

If you're planning on continuing your picnicking later in the day, Wild Serendipity also has pre-made salads, hummus, sushi and one of my many weaknesses, west coast fudge oat bars. These delightful confections are a creamy, oaty chocolate sugar hit, flashbacks of which might stop you in your tracks days later.

Sometimes I arrive too late to catch the scones, so I head straight for the Prairie Pie Wagon for a latte and a flax black currant muffin. These also sell out quickly, but if you get there in time, the sweet-tart flavour of the muffins, stuffed with resinous currants, is worth a try.

Keep in mind that coffee and a muffin are not considered 'breakfast' in this case; they're just a temporary



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- CONTESTS & GIVEAWAYS
- DINING GUIDE
- SUBMIT LISTING
- ADVERTISE
- CAREERS
- ARCHIVES
- SEND LETTER TO EDITOR
- CONTACT US
- BEST OF SASKATOON, 2009



diversion from the real breakfast focus, which is fantastic, creamy, savoury quiche from Giuseppe's. Every time I order that quiche, in one of many flavours (two favourites are the classic ham, cheddar and caramelized onion, or mushroom tarragon), I can't get over how smooth and rich it is. The little chunks of cheese and ham nestled against the tender crust tend to send me into paroxysms of pleasure.

If the weather is nice enough — and sometimes even if it isn't — we often haul our plates of quiche and our cups of coffee out onto Market Square, find a bench by the art installation and dig in. Not exactly your classic park picnic, but I find the Farmer's Market to be just as soothing to my soul as communing with nature.

If you do want to head out to a park instead of hanging out in the plaza, you could get your quiche to go, but I would seriously recommend a different approach in that case, since there are so many other choices available. Scout out dessert options from the Farmer's Market vendors — like mini cupcakes from Sliced Decadence or the orgasmic taste explosions otherwise known as Chocolates by Abrielle. (With flavours like fleur de sel caramel, and star anise and pink peppercorn, you'll never look at chocolates the same way again.) Perhaps pick up some artisan breads and any other delights that strike your fancy, and head out to your next stop for the rest of it.

On a recent picnic adventure (on the one nice day in May), I divided my foraging between the Bulk Cheese Warehouse and Saskatoon Sous Chef. Sous Chef carries Christie's Bakery baguettes, so I happily grabbed one of those, as well as a jar of intriguing-looking fig relish and a block of house-made, cherry-smoked gouda. It's an excellent little store, both for ready-made items and gourmet ingredients alike — and I'm planning to go back and shop for flavoured salt (of which they carry a dozen or so) and truffle oil.

Of particular note for any salsa fans: Sous Chef carries Frontera Grill salsas, which have changed my relationship to nachos in a most enjoyable way — the roasted chipotle and tomatillo salsa will rock your world. I first tried them at Frontera Grill, a Chicago restaurant owned by Rick Bayless (of Food Network fame). I promptly bought one of his cookbooks and have been making those salsas myself for the last several years. Now, Saskatonians can buy them ready-made.

I also noted that Sous Chef carries compostable plates and spoons for eco-conscious picnickers, and if you call ahead (384-3434), they'll put together an eco-pack for you or even a gourmet weekend getaway pack to haul up to your cabin.

We rounded out our picnic collection with goat cheese, tabbouleh, black bean and corn salad, house-made beef jerky and various samosas from the Bulk Cheese warehouse and headed to Rotary Park.

The only drawback to dining in a public place like that is our antiquated liquor laws, which prohibit public alcohol consumption. This is just hearsay, but I've been told that some people sneak rosé to the park in children's sippy cups or thermoses — not that I would ever consider doing such a thing. Alternatively, you could solve that problem by setting up your picnic in your own backyard.

Having been reminded how lovely it is to gather with friends and eat outdoors, whether at the Farmers' Market, on a rolled out blanket or at a picnic table, I now approach all my favourite dining establishments with an eye for picnic-friendly items. Strombolis from Caffé Sola, for example: perfect little self-contained sandwiches filled with pesto, roasted veggies and cheese, they travel well and taste even better. Fresh salad rolls from Lien Thanh, satay chicken buns from Ki Sum bakery... here's to hoping there are enough warm summer days to work through all of Saskatoon's fantastic picnic options.

