

Food & Wine

Grab some things and go: It doesn't take much for an alfresco adventure



Photos by Audrey Hall from "Picnics"

Serve hot or cold: Stuffed Italian Chicken with Oven Roasted Tomatoes from Hilary and Alex Heminway's new book, "Picnics."

Simply, Picnic

By **DIANE PETERSON**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Stray ants and yellowjackets aside, Wine Country offers an ideal, relatively bug-free setting for all kinds of plein-air picnics and alfresco summer dining.

Yet, how many of us actually take advantage of these possibilities so nearby — the gently rolling hills and sand dunes, the red-wood-shaded trails and the rustic, back-road wineries — to enjoy an impromptu, moveable feast?

A summer picnic can be a lot less work than a sit-down meal, and a lot more fun when you remember to bring along your sense of adventure. That's the idea behind a new cookbook, "Picnics" (Gibbs Smith, 2007) by mother-and-son team Hilary and Alex Heminway.

"I think everyone loves to go on a picnic, especially the ones that are spur of the moment," Hi-

lary Heminway said in a phone interview from her Connecticut home. "You just grab what you have and put it in a basket or a backpack and off you go."

The Heminways' ode to outdoor dining includes plenty of yummy recipes, but you won't find safety tips on preserving mayonnaise here. Between the whimsical lists and the poetic prose written by Alex, the insect illustrations by Hilary and the stunning photographs by Audrey Hall, the cookbook offers three parts inspiration to one part advice.

"It's more visionary," Hilary Heminway said. "I think it's just saying that everyone and anyone can do this . . . when you think of it, picnicking is just taking your lunch somewhere. And we've expanded that to breakfast, lunch and dinner."

If picnicking seems like too much work in your already busy schedule, "Picnics" can expand

TURN TO **PICNIC**, PAGE D6

INSIDE: Get it on the way — Wine Country sources for picnic essentials. **Page D7**

PICNIC: Creativity a primary picnic ingredient

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1

your horizons a bit. You don't need a fancy basket, a designer tablecloth or a four-course tasting menu. Even a handful of trail mix in a paper bag, a PB&J sandwich or a baguette and some cheese qualify as a picnic in Heminway's book.

"Picnics adapt to wherever you want to be," she noted. "You could be sitting on a steel girder 1,000 feet over Fifth Avenue in New York — like that famous photo — and be having a picnic."

For Heminway, a picnic simply means gathering yourself up and transporting yourself a little bit out of where you are.

"Some people are just as happy sitting on a blanket or a log, or bring the folding chair," she said. "If you're feeling rushed and overwhelmed by office work, why add to that pressure? Why not just make a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sit somewhere where it's peaceful?"

Sure, some picnics require a bit of planning — the family reunions and the clambakes and other elaborate celebrations. But the requirement for most American picnics is simply an appetite.

"It started with farmers, who

Heminway suggests that in order to be picnic-ready on the spur of the moment, stock a small basket or backpack with picnic essentials.

were fed in the field," Heminway said. "They would set up tables and sit there, and it was up to the women to bring the food to them."

These days, picnics are less of a daily ritual and more a spontaneous rite of summer. Heminway suggests that in order to be picnic-ready on the spur of the moment, stock a small basket or backpack with picnic essentials.

"Every kitchen should have one little cupboard that is picnic ready, set, go," she said.

In Heminway's picnic hamper, she keeps a stack of tin plates, some old, mismatched silverware and a bunch of red bandanas to use as napkins. "I don't believe in paper plates, because they blow away and get caught in a tree and you can't retrieve them."

She also sets aside salt and pepper shakers, a cutting board and knife, and a can opener and corkscrew. Bug spray, sunscreen, and a handful of marshmallows round out her kit. When the urge strikes, she simply throws in some olives, cheese and a loaf of bread, and she's ready to go.

The cookbook kicks off with a few "picnics for one" — a sunrise picnic of coffee cake at the beach and a "five-mile-high" ham and cheese sandwich for an airplane ride.

For the romantically inclined, there's also an unusual picnic in bed, complete with lamb chops and steamed asparagus. And in case of inclement

weather, there's a rainy-day spread of watercress soup and water crackers, bacon-wrapped water chestnuts and watermelon salad.

Heminway, who holds down a day job as an interior decorator and works all over the country, spends a lot of her spare time at her family's ranch and fishing camp in Montana.

One of the more unusual chapters in the cookbook offers a series of saddlebag picnics, with menus for everything from a trail ride to a "Day on a Hog," complete with olives, summer sausage and Biker Bread Salad.

"Once I stopped in a gas station and there were some bikers," she said. "I always wanted to know what bikers eat. A guy comes up and says he really likes olives and feta cheese. So that's how I came up with the Mediterranean feast."

Some of the cookbook's simplest picnics are designed for children, who are content to graze through raw carrots and celery, bananas and strawberries, peanuts and chocolate.

"If you have a bunch of kids and they're antsy, just go on a picnic," she said. "That's much better than sitting down at a table."

Heminway also provides sensible tips on keeping bugs away naturally, identifying poison oak and walking lightly on the land.

After all, you want to leave your perch spotless for the next picnic, without providing a free lunch for the ants.

FINDING ESSENTIALS

Short on picnic fare and ware? No time to cook? Here are a few Wine Country sources for cheese and charcuterie, wine and cork pulls and other essentials for le pique-nique.

The Kitchenette, 405 First St. West inside the El Dorado Hotel in Sonoma, is a new cafe serving gourmet lunches, sandwiches, salads and wine. You can also buy a luxury picnic basket, equipped with glasses, blanket, wine opener, utensils and napkins for \$25. A standard basket, with only utensils and napkins, is \$10. 7 a.m.-9 p.m. daily; www.eldoradosonoma.com.