Make the Most of the Summer by Hosting an Outdoor Party

Backyard parties are great opportunities to gather a crowd, with everyone pitching in. Usually, the hosts provide the main event- the steak. burgers, ribs, vegetables for grilling and the beverages, while guests brings sides and desserts. It's up to you to ensure that the menu is balanced. Before you start making phone calls or sending invites, determine which dishes you need to round out your meal. It's okay to be specific: " Tanya, could you please bring a salad?" Or divide your list alphabetically: A-Ms bring a side and N-Zs bring a dessert.

Setting the Table

For a sit-down outdoor dinner party, linens, china, and glassware are great, but for a barbecue or large crowd, paper or reusable alternatives like bamboo, tin, or melamine plates, cups, and utensils is the practical way to go. (You don't want the "good stuff" getting lost or broken." Find vintage tablecloths at a thrift shop, or purchase sturdy, easy-to-clean oilcloth (available by the yard in colorful patterns) and pretty cotton or paper napkins- all suitable for outdoor dining. Just be sure that whatever you choose will stand up to what you're serving. Anything that requires a knife and fork, such a steak or chicken, will need a sturdy plate and heavy-duty knives.

What to Serve

Outdoor barbecues tend to feature hearty, soul-warming, nonfussy grilled foods such as ribs, chicken, steak, burgers, hot dogs, and fish, with sides like corn on the cob, salads (especially potato or pasta), coleslaw, and baked beans. Foods dressed with olive oil dressings like grilled vegetables and grainy salads like bulgur wheat, wild rice, and couscous all hold up extremely well and can be made in advance. Beer, cider, and wine all complement the informality of a barbecue, as do big pitchers of margaritas, sangria, lemonade, iced tea, and iced coffee. Hors

d'oeuvres are of the simple and easy variety: chips and dips or salsas, deviled eggs, and the vegetables crudite platters. Don't forget the condiments- ketchup, mustard, hot sauce, BBQ sauces and mayo; mayo; relish and pickles; chutneys. Romesco, and tapenades- but serve each in a dish with a serving utensil, never directly from the jar. Cakes, cookies, cupcakes, brownies, pies, fruit salad, or sweet summer watermelon round out the menu.

Safety First

Outdoor entertaining means that food will be served and sometimes even cooked outside. You'll need to take extra precautions so that the food doesn't spoil in the heat and isn't attacked by insects. Set up all food stations in the shade and provide mesh covers for dishes if insects are a problem. Have lots of coolers on hand. To keep foods cool, especially those with a mayonnaise base, set bowls in larger bowls filled with ice or on wrapped cold packs. It's better to use smaller platters that you refresh often than to leave a larger one wilting in the heat. If cold is a problem, use Crock-Pots, hot trays, or thermoses.

Cooking Outdoors

Easy and fun, the backyard barbecue is a quintessentially all-American way to entertain. (Don't have a backyard? Check to see if a local beach or park can accommodate you.) You can host it yourself or, as is often the case, arrange a potluck or assign contributions. No matter what you cook- potatoes or a crock of beans baked in the coals, a pig roasted in a pit, s'mores toasted over a bonfire, or chicken sizzling on the grill- a barbecue takes any picnic to the next level. The critical element to successful outdoor cooking is timing- not just the kind of timing that brings the whole meal together so it can be served, but the timing that saves a beautiful steak from becoming a charcoal briquette. But since cuts of meat vary in thickness and some like it rare and some like it done, how do you know when to take it off the grill? Check out our grilling 101 section in "Great Get-Togethers"