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6 great spots to find picnic food

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picnic food

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Carey Sweet

Azcentral.com

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Apologies to Yogi, but, hey there, Boo-Boo! It's pic-a-nic basket season! And this weekend is the Great Arizona Picnic, one of the main highlights of the Scottsdale Culinary Festival. Yet why not plan your own picnic, too, for enjoying anytime, anywhere while we still have this glorious spring weather? Here are six places to help pack the perfect basket:

FoodBar

7114 E. Stetson Drive, Scottsdale

480-994-3663

It can be a challenge navigating the cafeteria-style line of high-end salads, soups, sandwiches and daily specials because so many of the choices are creative and well-prepared. Hint: Ask for a sampler, and if the café isn't too busy, the chefs will assemble custom platters. Portable offerings include hearty sandwiches like mozzarella, tomato and pesto; a crab salad club; Chinese chicken salad; salmon cakes; and a slew of composed salads such as shrimp and corn or Tuscan bean. An entire case of pastries is replenished daily, and there's a good selection of fun alcoholic quaffs such as 2 Brothers Big Tattoo (a Chilean red), or Pyramid Curve Ball beer. "Seasonal signatures" are a highlight, with monthly featured ingredients from local farms and orchards such as blueberries.

Dish

8977 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale

480-584-6190

This iconic soul food restaurant has been serving smothered fried chicken. This gourmet marketplace and bistro is framed by literal walls of food ready for you to walk in, then walk out well-laden with handcrafted salads, soups, and an enormous sandwich bar with carved prime rib and rotisserie chicken on fresh-baked artisan breads. Shoppers will also find homemade gelato and chocolate, fresh produce and flowers, from-scratch pastries, fine cheeses, boutique wines and beer, and upscale groceries (great housemade dips, salsas and spreads). Sushi is a tasty cool weather snack, and the meatloaf or sweet and sour shrimp cake makes a great cold plate.

The Herb Box

6990 E. Shea Blvd., Scottsdale

480-998-8355

The lengthy menu brims with fresh, artisan salads, gourmet wraps, market sandwiches and assorted entrees, all packaged to go and perfect to be paired with boutique wines and interesting beers. Often inventive recipes include the Urban Market salad, stocked with turkey, watercress, red pepper, avocado, pecans, bacon, sweet corn and gorgonzola, or the seductively thick crab dip, goosed with cilantro-lime and then given an unexpected punch from cracker-thin plantain chips dusted in chile-lime salt. For upscale groceries, browse among the white chocolate bark studded with cherries, bottled salad dressings, preserves, butters, exotic salsas, dried fruits and nuts, housemade granola, confections, fresh herbs and produce, and gourmet cheeses.

Duck & Decanter

3111 N. Central Ave., Phoenix

602-234-3656

A Valley favorite for made-to-order stacked sandwiches and salads for more than 35 years, The Duck has made a legend of its "Nooners" packed in brown paper sacks. There are three types of chicken salad alone (creamy garlic with herbs, curry with raisins, Sonoran with spicy oil and vinegar). In a nod to contemporary tastes, creative takes include smoked duck breast with smoked turkey, cream cheese, cranberry walnut relish and watercress on walnut raisin bread. The fresh fruit salad is sweet enough for dessert, dipped in poppy seed dressing and partnered with crusty dark rye and cheddar spread, while an array of global wines, beers and retail cheeses are an excellent accent.

Better than Sex Cake

238 S. Wall St., Chandler

480-722-1220

It's hard to find, tucked into the secret artist gardens at Olde Towne Market Square in downtown Chandler. And yes, it has incredible cake, like the classic (chocolate cake, caramel ribbons, pillowy whipped cream topped with Heath Bar crunch), the blonde (yellow cake, juicy pineapple, creamy custard, whipped cream and peanut brittle), and red (carrot cake, cream cheese frosting, crunchy toffee covered nuts). There are also sensuous salads, quiches and sandwiches, like "a romp in the garden," layering marinated grilled eggplant, squash, mushrooms, red pepper, carrots, alfalfa sprouts, tomato and jalapeno jack on focaccia.

Mack Daddy's

3243 E. Indian School Road, Phoenix

602-957-8646

This shrine to good-food-that's-good-for-you is owned by physical fitness guru Mack Newton (former conditioning coach of the Chicago Cubs and the Oakland A's). Healthy is still delicious: Seasonings are ample and excellent, boosting the taste value of dishes like grilled salmon (jazzy under spicy Creole rub and a delightful mango sesame salsa spiked with lots of cilantro and hot chile peppers), or French country chicken salad, bringing a full pound of savory, skin-on thigh meat cut into bite-size chunks, cherry tomatoes and asparagus in a citrus-thyme dressing. Healthy is sturdy, too: Take-

out is packed in sturdy plastic trays that travel very well.

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