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COVER STORY

Banish boring from your midday meal

Make an upscale sandwich, accessorize soup or try a riff on South American favorite

By Amy Scattergood

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Just because the expense-account lunch is largely a thing of the past doesn't mean that you can't still enjoy the meal, even celebrate it. Instead of depending on the kindness of menus, use a little homespun imagination.

Thinking outside the lunch box is probably the best way of getting anything good inside it.

In the comfort of your own kitchen, you can compose a lunch that's tasty, well-constructed — off the PB&J track — and, most important, portable.

Imagine you're packing a picnic

- > Don't pack items that might pose a health risk.
- > Avoid fragile things like delicate cookies and, yes, potato chips.
- > Don't dress salads in advance — carry a container of dressing separately — and don't pre-cut fruits or vegetables that will brown or dry out — pack them whole and include a paring knife. Even if you use a thermos, don't include items that need to be served very hot or very cold. And think about how the components of the meal work together over time: Very few dishes taste better when they're soggy.

Midday menu

- > Don't wait to make your lunch in the morning, when you are often strapped for time. Do it the night before, no matter how tired you might be.

- > Cook extra dinner the night before and take leftovers for lunch the next day. Or do some batch cooking on the weekend: Roast a turkey or chicken breast or beef to make your own lunch meat rather than buying pricey packaged meats that can be high in sodium and nitrites.
- > To fill out your noon repast, throw in a cut-up apple or an orange. Says nutritionist Janet Little: "If you cut it up, you will eat it. Unpeeled oranges don't get eaten." Same goes for vegetables.
- > Pay attention to which foods give you energy — or at least don't weigh you down — in the middle of the day and bring those to eat. Eat lightly if you have a sedentary job.
- > Keep food in your office that you can use any day — canned sardines, crackers, soup, peanut butter, etc.

Packing tips

- > Pack smart so that the contents of your lunch don't get squashed or leak.
- > Use recyclable containers or, better, containers that you take home and reuse.
- > Pick food that can withstand a few hours without refrigeration (or include an ice pack). And remember that aesthetics count: Both school kids and adults are more likely to eat and enjoy their lunch when it looks appealing, so packaging things well is worth a little extra time.
- > Finding a cool-looking lunchbox is worth it too. Score a retro lunchbox at a vintage shop, find an outdoorsy pack at a store like REI or L.L. Bean (they're often insulated and double as great camping gear), or surf the Web for something fun on eBay or www.lunchboxes.com.
- > Use an insulated Thermos to keep foods like soup or pasta piping hot. Fill the Thermos with boiling water and let stand for a few minutes while you heat the food to 140 degrees or above, then empty the Thermos and pour in the hot food.
- > Although paper bags have an old-fashioned panache, they tend to tear easily and can break under the weight of heavy contents.
- > Wash your lunchbox daily with hot soapy water to keep bacteria from growing, then air-dry.
- > To avoid food-poisoning bugs, wash your hands before, during and after preparing lunch. Also make sure all preparation areas are clean.

The latest in lunching

- > Nostalgia reigns with the retro black dome metal lunch box and Thermos. The capacious interior accommodates lunch for even the largest appetite. Available at www.lunchboxes.com. About \$29.95.
- > Modeled after the multitiered containers used in India for tiffin, a light meal or snack, the To-Go Ware 2-Tier Stainless Steel Food Carrier comes with its own plate. Available at www.to-goware.com or www.reusablebags.com. About \$18.50.
- > The 12-ounce Micro Lunch Bowl by Aladdin comes in pink and blue. Inside the lid, there's a hidden compartment for a spoon. Available now at Target and Wal-Mart and soon at www.aladdin-pmi.com. About \$8.
- > Tupperware, the mother of all plastic ware, makes this container for its Lunch'n Things line in chic colors (below). Available at www.tupperware.com or through a Tupperware distributor. About \$11.50.

Pan Bagnat

This recipe works best with a crusty French baguette.

8 servings

Hands on: 40 minutes

Total time: 2 hours, 40 minutes

6 servings

Hands on: 20 minutes

Total time: 20 minutes, plus overnight weighting time

1 baguette

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

1 tablespoon lemon juice

1/4 teaspoon sea salt

1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 cup good quality black olives, pitted

4 tablespoons capers

1 garlic clove, minced

1 (12-ounce) can Italian tuna in olive oil, drained and broken apart

2 small boiling potatoes, boiled, cooled and sliced thinly

2 hard-cooked eggs, peeled and thinly sliced

2 small vine-ripened tomatoes, thinly sliced

1/4 cup thinly sliced red onion

1 cup arugula

1. Halve the baguette lengthwise and scoop out a little of the interior of both sides with your fingers. In a small bowl, whisk the vinegar, lemon juice, salt and pepper until combined. Whisk in the olive oil until emulsified and set aside.

2. Coarsely chop the olives and capers, then combine in a small bowl with the minced garlic and set aside. Fill the bottom part of the baguette with the olive mixture, spreading it evenly across the hollowed-out baguette. Layer the tuna over the olives. Then, in even layers, add the potatoes, eggs and tomatoes. Drizzle the vinaigrette over the sandwich, then add the onions and the arugula, pressing down on the contents as you go. Top with the other baguette half and wrap the sandwich tightly with plastic. Refrigerate overnight, weighted with a cutting board or a plate topped with some cans or bottles.

3. The next day, take the sandwich out of the refrigerator in the morning and cut into sixths. Wrap individually

and pack for lunch: The sandwiches are best when they've been sitting at room temperature for a couple of hours.

Per serving: 451 calories (percent of calories from fat, 48), 24 grams protein, 35 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams fiber, 24 grams fat (4 grams saturated), 80 milligrams cholesterol, 1,020 milligrams sodium.

Black Bean and Chorizo Soup With Cumin Toasts and Salsa Verde

FOR THE SALSA VERDE:

2 packed cups cilantro

1 packed cup Italian parsley

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 jalapeno, minced (remove the seeds and center for a milder flavor)

Juice and zest of 1 lemon

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 cup olive oil

FOR THE CUMIN TOASTS:

2 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

8 slices country white bread

FOR THE BLACK BEAN SOUP AND ASSEMBLY:

1/2 cup olive oil

1 1/2 cups (about 6 ounces) chopped Spanish chorizo

1 1/2 cups (about 1) chopped onion

1 1/2 cups (about 2) chopped carrots

3 garlic cloves, minced

1 pound (about 2 1/2 cups) dried black beans

6 cups water

2 fresh bay leaves

1/2 teaspoon sea salt

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1. To prepare the salsa verde: In the bowl of a food processor, pulse together the cilantro, parsley, garlic, jalapeno, lemon juice and zest and salt until finely chopped. Remove to a small bowl; add the olive oil and mix until combined. Cover and refrigerate until needed. This makes 1 generous cup of salsa and will keep, refrigerated, for up to 5 days.
2. To prepare the toasts: Heat oven to 400 degrees. In a small bowl, whisk together the olive oil, salt and cumin. Brush the sliced bread with the oil and toast until golden brown on one side, about 5 minutes. Set aside.
3. To prepare the soup: In a large (3 1/2-quart) Dutch oven or soup pot over medium heat, add the olive oil. Cook the chorizo, onion and carrots until soft, 8 to 10 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until aromatic, about 1 minute. Stir in the beans, water and bay leaves and bring to a simmer over high heat. Reduce the soup to a bare simmer over low heat, cover and cook for 1 hour. Stir in the salt, cumin, cayenne and black pepper and cook until the beans are tender, about 1 more hour, stirring occasionally. When the beans are soft, puree 1 cup of the soup in a blender or food processor, then add back to the pot.
4. Serve the soup with a dollop of salsa verde and the cumin toasts. The soup will keep, refrigerated, for 5 days.


Per serving: 537 calories (percent of calories from fat, 50), 20 grams protein, 49 grams carbohydrates, 14 grams fiber, 30 grams fat (6 grams saturated), 19 milligrams cholesterol, 728 milligrams sodium.

Need more ideas?

Lunch and sandwich recipes await at www.eveningedge.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.ajc.com/services/content/printedition/2009/03/05/eelunch0305.html>

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