Picnic Boxes

With so many beautiful places to visit, especially round the South Downs it's always good to have a picnic to hand. Our latest jaunt was just through the back gate to the cricket green. During the summer a Sussex based troup of actors 'The Rude Mechanicals' tour the local villages and their yearly performance in our village is getting to be a summer highlight.

We carried across boxes packed with Tomato and Parmesan Tart, Summer Garden Salad, made with the first crops, a few strawberries and generous slices of Chocolate Traybake. We still needed rugs and blankets when the sun went down but the weather very kind - we'll be booking next year!

The first garden crops make an excellent main course salad. We've had a really good crop of peas this year and these are the first of the beetroot and courgette.

Tomato and Parmesan Tart

500g / 18oz block puff pastry
1 large onion, peeled and finely sliced
2 Tbsp olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
2 tsps, chopped fresh thyme leaves
Salt and ground black pepper
600g / 1lb 5oz mixed cherry tomatoes, halved
50 1g / 2oz finely grated Parmesan

Method:

Cut the block of pastry in half and roll each piece to about 3mm / ⅛in thickness. Cut into three rectangles as large as possible but of a size suitable to fit in to your packaging. Mark a narrow border round the edge of the rectangle, but do not cut all the way through the pastry. Chill in the freezer for a few minutes.

Preheat the oven with 2 lined baking trays to 220°C / 200° Fan /430°F

Meanwhile heat the oil and gently fry the onion with the garlic, thyme and a little seasoning. The onions should be soft but not browned. Cool slightly.

Divide the onion between the pastry rectangles and top with the halved tomatoes making sure they stay within the marked border. Season, drizzle with oil and sprinkle generously with Parmesan.

Slide each topped rectangle on to the preheated baking sheets and bake for about 12-15 minutes or until the pastry is golden and the tomatoes slightly charred.

Serve at room temperature.

Summer Garden Salad

4 young beetroot
Olive oil to drizzle
Chilli flakes
Salt and black pepper
About 18 asparagus spears, trimmed
150g / 5oz podded peas
150g / 5oz podded baby broad beans
200g / 7oz pack Feta cheese, drained and crumbled
75g walnut halves, toasted and chopped
Handful of parsley, mint or chive leaves, or a mix, chopped
Salad leaves

For the dressing:
4Tbsps olive oil
2Tbsps lemon juice
1 tsp Dijon mustard
1 tsp clear honey
Salt and black pepper

Method:
Preheat the oven to 220°C / 200° Fan / 430°F. Trim and peel the beetroot and cut into even sized wedges. Place in a roasting tin, season with chilli and salt and pepper. Drizzle with olive oil and roast for 35-40 minutes until tender, turning over once or twice.

Arrange the asparagus spears on a separate baking sheet, season and drizzle with a little more oil. Roast for 10 - 20 minutes, depending on size.

Blanch the broad beans and peas in boiling water, refresh with cold water and drain well. Mix together with the feta and herbs.