

BEAT THE HEAT

Summer has arrived with a vengeance. It seems we were just enjoying spring after that cold snap a few weeks ago, when suddenly the mercury was up into the triple digits. At this temperature no one really wants to eat, let alone cook. It is a food columnist's nightmare. However, in the spirit of making lemonade when confronted with lemons, I thought I'd give you some ideas for hot weather eating.

First of all, spend the weekend on the coast in the fog. Failing that, think salad. Not just greens, but delicious main dish salads. And you don't have to make them yourself. Supermarket deli counters sell delicious main dish salads, like curried chicken, or turkey salad. A scoop of that make the basis of a delicious hot weather supper.

And there are other excellent deli salads available, including one with peas and bacon, a Chinese-style chicken salad, a bean salad called Texas caviar, pasta salads, a Greek salad, a salad with cherry tomatoes and little balls of mozzarella cheese, and even more. As nothing seems really appetizing when it's terribly hot, I like to get a selection of the salads, and make a sort of sampler plate for supper. The deli seafood salad tends to be a little bland, in my view. But you can easily fix it up by adding some more little salad shrimp, a chopped green onion, and a dollop or two of chilli sauce—that slightly spicy and sweet catsup-based bottled sauce.

One of my favorite hot weather dinners is a selection of cold cuts. I'll get some thinly sliced cold roast beef, some ham, maybe some prosciutto, some turkey, some mortadella and several sliced salamis. Then I'll serve these with some deli potato salad—which is usually better than the deli macaroni salad for some reason—and two or three different types of mustard and a selection of pickles. Making expansive gestures towards the cold meats can get a little expensive, but it's a quick, easy and cool way to put together a nice hot-weather meal.

Another very useful thing to have in the refrigerator during these scorching days is a supermarket-roasted chicken. I can roast a better chicken than the supermarket, but when it's 95 or higher outside, the last thing I want to do is get my oven going full blast. And the supermarket chicken isn't half bad. There are lots of things you can do with it. First of all, adding some chunks of roast chicken to a large tossed salad, made with some baby greens, some cherry tomatoes, some cucumber, some sliced sweet red pepper, some avocado and some croutons, makes a delicious dinner. Check out the salad bar section of your supermarket for other tasty additions, such as marinated mushrooms, artichoke hearts, pickled onions and a variety of olives.

Nowadays you can get jars of very tasty pre-made curry sauce at Trader Joe's. In fact, these are now becoming available at your local supermarket. All you need to do is cook some rice—an electric rice cooker makes this a snap—and heat up the pre-made sauce in a frying pan, then add some cut up cooked chicken, and you've got yourself an excellent dinner. If you want to add a jazzy little salad, peel (or not) a hot-house cucumber, cut it in quarters lengthwise, and scoop out the seeds. Cut the strips into fairly fine dice and put them in a mixing bowl with a couple of pinches of salt. Add an 8-ounce container of plain yogurt and a pinch of ground cumin and mix well. Add just a little cayenne pepper for some extra zip if you want. This, by the way, is called *raita* and is a traditional accompaniment to Indian meals.

For dessert when it's really hot, think sherbet or sorbet rather than ice cream—it's more cooling. Chilled watermelon works really well also. And cut down on the alcohol when the temperature hits the stratosphere.

Iced tea is actually more refreshing in the long run than a cold beer or a glass of chilled white wine, though perhaps not as much fun. So stay cool and out of the kitchen. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.