

## ODE TO SUMMER'S CATCH

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*When the sun shines on my face as I sit on warm sand,  
finishing the first of many relaxed courses of stone fruit or grilled fish,  
it feels like time is holding deliciously still.*

**B**inds loosen in summer. The firm start times of winter dinners are left behind, and gatherings transition from beginning to end as gently and slowly as the season's sky fades into twilight. It's during these unhurried months that I hold dear the days spent at the beach with friends, sharing unfussy food. When the sun shines on my face as I sit on warm sand, finishing the first of many relaxed courses of stone fruit or grilled fish, it feels like time is holding deliciously still.

A northern Californian, I grew up knowing that the Pacific will not be any more welcoming or the water any more inviting just because it's summer. So I plan for a day when it will be. I wait until the air feels its absolute driest and the sun threatens to turn my green tomatoes red. Then, when it's hot enough to fool even a San Franciscan native into thinking they can leave their nighttime layers at home, I gather my

friends and pile them in the car—along with a few cooking utensils and enough food to last an entire day—and drive to the beach. My rules: we leave before noon and go on a weekday, when the beach can seem as quiet as a church on Friday night.

One of my favorite things about dining outdoors in a warmer season is that it frees hands and bares skin. Winter's gloves and mittens have been packed into boxes and spring coats are traded for even lighters jackets, sweaters, or even better, nothing at all. This comes in handy for a beach picnic. When we don't need to wear or carry heavy clothing, our bodies feel lighter and our hands are freed for other things—better, important things. Like carrying bottles of rosé; bags of stone fruit, fish, and clams; and a simple kettle and tiny grill for a quiet, all-day beach excursion. Then we can eat well.

*There's no rush. When time is ample and the sky is clear, cooking can—and should—take all day, with many requisite breaks.*

Some embrace summer for the very reason that it liberates them from cooking. Sometimes I do, too. At home, green beans only need a quick steam before getting tossed in vinaigrette and topped with walnuts and *queso blanco*. Heirloom tomatoes only need to be sliced and drizzled with olive oil before being wedged between crusty bread with a leftover grilled piece of flank steak from yesterday's dinner. But other times, like when I'm at the beach with loved ones, I embrace summer for the very cooking and eating style that it brings to food affairs. There's no rush. When time is ample and the sky is clear, cooking can—and should—take all day, with many requisite breaks.

It's during these snail-paced hours that I gain a greater understanding of the role of both cooking and food in our social life. Summer lets us reconsider our intentions for eating with others: to pass time and bond by sharing comfortable,

nourishing space, food, and conversation.

When dusk seems to last for hours at the ocean, I'm never hurried to finish cooking. There's no sauce on the stove or dessert in the oven to mind. I never need to halt conversations with someone I care about to prepare another dish, for I can take my toes from the sand and walk over to the table to slice the next apricot course to share anytime I want. It can wait. Summer's catches, even fish, are happily eaten warm or cool when we're on the beach.

Although there's something blissful about walking along the beach in winter, bundled up, with a warm cup of coffee in your hand, the pace is always quicker. When it's warm, there's time for contemplation and slow walks. With its simple food, easy attire, and extended hours, summer allows us a different sort of peace and deliberation, one I want to last as long as possible. ○○○





