

In a barbie-world

What are the pitfalls of eating *alfresco*? asks **Stephen Hancocks**.

Rather like the period immediately following an illness when you wake up one morning feeling great and realising that you have been under the weather without consciously acknowledging it, so too do we emerge chrysalis-like from the dullness of winter into the vibrant spring light and the sunshine (hopefully) of summer. There is something alluring in the quality and intensity of the light which makes us want to rush out and not just embrace it but eat in it too.

Quite what that urge is, it is difficult to define. Anthropologists would doubtless refer us back to the moment when we fled our caves, archaeologists to us braving the elements to start cooking on outdoor fires. Definition or not there is an undeniable urge to pick up your tuna and cucumber sandwich and peach and mango yoghurt and head for the nearest lunchtime park bench, garden wall or mown grass verge.

It clearly affects patients too. They tend to come in with more bits of food dropped down their tops than at other times of the year, and there is a tendency towards the odd broken molar cusp as some unexpectedly hard and unseen ingredient gets crunched in the twilight in someone's garden as the sun fades and the midges rise. There is no doubt that *alfresco* dining adds a certain *savoir faire* to the menu. Nothing else is quite like the smell of grass scrunched freshly underfoot, mingled with the hint of slightly musty canvas and accompanied by ever-so-slightly lukewarm champagne to let you know that you are in a British summer marquee celebrating a relative's christening or a team member's wedding.

garage or greenhouse and wire-brushed down to remove last August's soot, flaked paint and odd spatters of over-wintered chicken-fat.

Choosing the date has to be the most difficult element. One day out and your event can be at best rained off or at worst a soggy, deluged mess of muddy lawn, drowned guests and that horrible combined smell of half-cooked sausages and wet woollen jumpers. Ugh! Conversely, pick the right date and everyone sings your praises and wonders at your powers of prediction. A warm summer's evening as the dusk settles, the stars start to twinkle and the lush simmering comfort of the charcoal embers enveloping the patio is a memorable treat indeed.

Not that such soirées are devoid of challenges for the host or hostess. In an increasingly vegetarian-inclined world the barbecue stands out as a bastion of meat-eating political incorrectness. How many vegetables can you cook over hot coals and what do you offer as alternatives? Gardens can spring the most amazing traps, especially to those not green-fingered enough to be familiar with the height of glass-topped cold-

frames in an otherwise unlit area as they skulk off for a crafty fag or an apparently unnoticed snog. The smash of breaking glass, yell of explosive-led surprise and nasty ankle lacerations can quite ruin the ambience.

Damage to the garden is another aspect to consider. The two missing table forks turn up in January when all the foliage has died back with a harsh frost, a wine glass, green with algae and filled with pungently stagnant water resides nonchalantly behind the shed door, while completely unexplained is the plimsoll found buried deep in the compost heap.

There can also be that sense of foreboding as you get back to the practice on the Monday morning following the barbie. Will anyone report tummy upsets or mosquito bites? Does the absence of return invitations tell you that it wasn't such a good idea after all? Or maybe everyone is just waiting until September when the shorter evenings, chillier winds and reversal of all things summer means that, at last, thank goodness, you can eat indoors again without seeming unsociably old fashioned.

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It has to be the barbecue though that represents the supreme outdoor eating event in British summer life. Much planning is necessarily involved. Plates and glasses have to be moved into the garden, or at least under the car-port, knives and forks counted and piled up, napkins folded, stacked and weighted down with a stone or large jar of mayonnaise to stop them blowing away. The barbecue apparatus itself is re-commissioned from the depths of the shed,

