

Tailgating Party with the Healthy Eating Gourmet

Bill Bradley, Registered Dietitian and Cookbook Author

There's nothing like the excitement of waiting to see a great concert or football game while enjoying your favorite foods and drinks from the comfort of the back of your own car. That's right, tailgating season is upon us.

Tailgating is a mix between a picnic, a barbecue, and a college frat party. Tailgating can be a way to save lots of money you might otherwise spend on expensive hot dogs and beer in the stadium and it also gives you more control over what you are eating. Because you are celebrating, you don't want to have bland, tasteless diet foods either. The trick to a delicious and healthy tailgating party is to just make healthier versions of those favorite party foods.

One of the most popular cold weather tailgating foods is chili. It really doesn't take much effort to make a healthy chili. The easiest fix is to just add more vegetables. In addition to meat, beans, onions and tomatoes you can also add red peppers, spinach, and summer squash. Personally, I enjoy a veggie-filled chili more than just a meat and sauce filled chili anyway. Add enough veggies and you will cut your calories in half.

You can also stuff baked sweet potatoes with chili and top with Greek yogurt.

If you are bringing a grill, grill the veggies and then add them to tortillas folded over with cheese. Grill these quesadillas on each side and you have mini Mexican sandwiches to hand out to friends or passers-by.

You can also try our Moroccan kefta burgers, a spicy take on the American hamburger topped with a yogurt sauce and served in a pita with veggies.

Sometimes I bring a large bowl of pre-cooked pasta and then add grilled chicken and veggies and top with balsamic vinegar, olive oil, and dried oregano.

A successful tailgating party is mostly about planning ahead. You want to do a minimum of cooking or grilling car side. Mostly, you want to have containers of pre-made food that you mix together right before serving. I like to use Ziploc bags for much of my tailgating preparation. I will marinate chicken with olive oil, garlic, lemon juice, and herbs in one bag while I keep my salad ingredients separated in their own bags until we arrive at the event. You will also want to have some dried herbs with you such as basil, oregano, and thyme. These, along with salt and pepper, extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar will turn any so-so dish into a flavorful winner. These few extras will assure that you are the envy of any tailgating community.

If you are grilling, make a checklist ahead of time of everything you might need (charcoal or propane tank, spatulas, fire starter, etc.). Another hit of a tailgating party is the drinks you bring. I make a maple lemonade that might or might not be spiked with vodka. People love a drink made with freshly squeezed lemon or orange juice and these are often much healthier than sugary soda or high calorie box juices.

Besides great food and drink, creativity is the other ingredient that makes for an awesome tailgating party. Bring games such as Twister or volleyball for maximum fun. Hang sports banners or concert t-shirts to decorate your area. Colorful tablecloths and napkins will also call attention to your tailgating space. One last thing, tailgating doesn't have to be limited to sporting events and concerts. We have tailgated at 2 am as we watched shooting stars or had a surprise tailgating birthday party on the side of the road, sitting by cows munching on grass in Vermont.

Adventure plus gourmet healthy food equals a party worth remembering!

