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FOOD & DRINK

Tiny Touches That Make a Summer Salad Sing

By: Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan

Summer, with its plethora of fresh ingredients, is the perfect time for entertaining with salads as the star of the dinner party. "When it's hot out, I don't want to eat hot food," says Sarabeth Levine, owner of six Sarabeth's restaurants in New York City and Key West, Fla. "I don't want to eat heavy food."

Ms. Levine calls herself "a real salad person" who likes making a meal of it year-round. But she finds herself particularly inspired to make them the backbone of a dinner party when she is entertaining in warm weather. "It's the ease of it, the ability to make your guests feel not overly fed. And it's very, very healthy."

When planning an entree salad, Ms. Levine starts with the greens. She typically enjoys using a mix of lettuces (usually romaine and Boston), sometimes with spinach, a little frisée or steamed asparagus mixed in. As a rule of thumb, if serving a salad as a main course, she likes having at least "two nice handfuls" of greens per guest.

"I like having different textures and flavors in the greens," Ms. Levine says. One that she doesn't typically mix is arugula, because that flavor "is very specific" and works best when standing alone. "When I have arugula in a salad, I'll maybe add some dried fruit, nothing too crazy."

Once Ms. Levine has her basic greens selected, she'll toss them with fresh herbs—sometimes snipped from her own garden—such as cilantro, Italian parsley and chives. Then she'll round it all out with artichokes (either in half-inch slices or cubed hearts), cucumbers, roasted peppers and cherry tomatoes. (She prefers cherry tomatoes to chopped tomatoes, as the juice from a cut-up tomato tends to make the greens soggy.)

Next, Ms. Levine likes to add ingredients that offer oomph. "I love when a salad has some form of a bean or grain. It's more complete," she says. "The last thing you want your guests to feel is that you're putting them on a diet. This is not about being on a diet. It's about offering them something that tastes good."

Ms. Levine often adds couscous, wheat berry or barley. It's important to "really wash the starchiness out of the barley" after cooking by rinsing it in cold water so the grains don't stick together.

Ms. Levine believes in scouring local markets for the freshest seasonal fruit to add to salads. She favors apples, cherries, mangoes, peaches or pears. "You want fleshy fruit," she says. "It gives the salad a little sweetness, tanginess and a little chew."

A recent discovery she made was tiny gold-nugget mandarin oranges, which she likes because they're seedless and sweet. "I took the orange segments and sliced them horizontally and placed them on top of the salad. It was so delicious and juicy," she says.

Nuts are a good way of jazzing up a salad. Ms. Levine favors toasted hazelnuts, mild candied walnuts or smoked almonds, which add flavor and a nice crunch to greens. "Peanuts are too strong, and cashews are pretty heavy in a salad," she notes.

Croutons are an excellent topper. Ms. Levine likes cutting a mild, light bread such as country white or *pain de mie*—nothing too hard, she says—into half-inch cubes, tossing them in melted butter mixed with thyme and garlic, and baking them lightly.

For an entree salad, Ms. Levine always adds a protein. Poached salmon and roast chicken (sometimes a purchased rotisserie chicken, chopped up) work well.

Often she will turn to fried calamari or scallops. "Lobster is always well received," she notes.

Then comes the important part—the dressing. "The dressing has to hold up to the ingredients of the salad," Ms. Levine says. "You don't want your salad to be weighted down by the dressing, but you want to be able to taste it."



Ms. Levine favors dressings that are a little lighter in the summer, although she notes that "hearty leaves with strong cellular structure hold up very nicely to thicker dressing."

For a basic arugula salad, she tends to keep the dressing simple, mixing lemon juice with olive oil blended with some canola oil. Canola is lighter than olive oil and lightens up a dressing. The citrus note will help cut the strong flavor of the arugula, she says.

Sometimes she blends mustard, vinegar, olive oil and canola or corn oil in a food processor with herbs such as basil, parsley or oregano. With salmon, she likes to add a touch of dill to the dressing; with chicken, she typically adds some tarragon.

A recent go-to for Ms. Levine is a buttermilk dressing featuring Italian parsley, celery seed and tarragon or dill. Toward the end, she'll whisk in a French sheep feta—a cheese she says she has "fallen madly in love with."

"It doesn't taste like feta in the way that you think of feta," she says. "It has a nice tanginess, and it's not salty. It's not dry." Although she'll sometimes whisk in a blue cheese instead, she's careful to use a "very mild" blue. Many blue cheeses can "overpower the dressing," she says.

Once all the ingredients have been prepped, Ms. Levine is careful to "keep the greens in the refrigerator until the very last minute, so when I make the salad, everything is very cold."

Then, she'll set out the greens in a large bowl, artfully arranging the cherry tomatoes in a mound in the center—"like an eyeball," she says, noting that they add color to the presentation.

Because she likes to avoid having guests dig through the salad for ingredients they like, she'll place heftier items, like artichokes, peppers and olives, in small mounds circling the tomatoes, so they can be seen immediately. "Olives always get lost in the salad and wind up at the bottom of the bowl," she notes.

She'll place the protein and nuts in a dish on the side, so guests can add them as they wish.

Finally, it's essential to leave the dressing on the side. She usually serves it in a large jar. "If you dress the salad, after 20 minutes, it's soggy," she says.

But more important, "dressing on a salad is a very personal thing," she adds. "No two people like the same amount of dressing."



Sarabeth's Summer Chicken Salad

1/2 pound asparagus, steamed, cooled and cut diagonally into 2-inch pieces
1 1/2 cups tricolor couscous, cooked, rinsed and at room temperature
1 large rotisserie chicken, cooked and sliced (or 6 lightly seasoned chicken cutlets, sautéed or grilled and sliced)
1 pound mixed greens (romaine and Boston lettuces, mixed baby greens)
1 large seedless cucumber, peeled and sliced
3 medium seedless oranges, peeled and cut into segments
1 small jicama, peeled, sliced and cut into matchsticks
1 pint grape tomatoes, cut in half
4 ounces sweet pea shoots
1/2 cup whole almonds, toasted
2 cups Tarragon-French Sheep Feta Dressing (recipe follows)

In a large salad bowl, lightly toss the greens, cucumber, orange segments and jicama. Add the couscous. Place the tomatoes on top. Add the pea shoots. Sprinkle on the almonds. Plate each serving and top with the asparagus and chicken slices. Serve with dressing drizzled on top, or on the side. Serves six.

Tarragon-French Sheep Feta Dressing

1/2 cup sour cream
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/2 cup buttermilk
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon maple syrup
3/4 teaspoon celery seeds
1/4 cup chopped Italian parsley
1 tablespoon fresh tarragon, coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
4 ounces French Sheep Feta or buttermilk blue cheese, crumbled

In a bowl, whisk together ingredients through salt and pepper. Add the cheese and whisk lightly, leaving small chunks of cheese visible. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours. Yield: 2 cups