

Dandelions At Dinner? A Weed By Any Other Name...

BY NOELLE CARTER

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"But they're weeds." My much better half is not, shall we say, "adventurous" when it comes to greens: A "real" salad is built around a wedge of iceberg or chopped romaine. Stewed collards are fine for New Year's Eve, and sauteed spinach can make an occasional appearance at the dinner table. But that's where the love ends. Forget arugula and radicchio, and don't even think about frisee.

So when I pitched dandelion greens for dinner the other night, well, you can probably understand the breathless shock.

Dandelions are an assertive green—just ask any gardener who's had to battle them on the front lawn or in cracks on the driveway. Unwanted, any greens are "weeds."

But have you ever bitten into a dandelion leaf? The flavor is tangy, even borderline bitter, with a definite texture. It's an assertiveness that can work wonders in the kitchen, provided you know how to handle it and pair the greens with complementary flavors.

That night for dinner, I served dandelion greens with bacon, a natural combination. I rendered a few strips of chopped bacon, tossing in freshly chopped garlic — another natural dandelion pairing — just before the bacon crisped. In went a bunch of chopped dandelions, as I stirred to wilt them in hot bacon fat. I finished the dish with a drizzle of sherry vinegar and a touch of maple syrup, the vinegar cutting through the heaviness of the bacon and the syrup helping to tame the bitterness of the greens.

Later at the table, I looked over and saw both of our plates were clean. Now it was my turn to be shocked. Success.

Pushing the envelope, I decided to try dandelions in pesto. Using a mortar and pestle (really the only way to make pesto; the grinding releases so much more flavor than the blades of a blender or food processor), I ground garlic with a little coarse salt, then added pine nuts, working the mixture to a paste. In place of traditional basil, I slowly added chopped dandelion greens, layering the flavors with grated cheese, fruity olive oil and a touch of lemon juice as the bright green pesto came together.

I tossed the pesto with linguine and casually placed it on the table. With each bite, the ground raw garlic and dandelion was balanced with buttery pine nuts and creamy cheese. A pesto with a bit more of a "bite," perhaps, but it worked well with pasta and could easily work as a dip for crostini or vegetables. The verdict? Another winner.

Finally, I decided to go all in with a dandelion salad. Because the greens would be more prominent in this dish, I used tender, new leaves for a gentler flavor. I tossed the leaves with sliced onion, toasted pecans and crumbled goat cheese, sweetening the salad with raisins and blood orange segments, and dressing the salad lightly with sherry vinegar and oil.

I could feel the quiet skepticism as I placed the salad on the table. One bite. Then another. Several slow, thoughtful bites before the silence was broken and the verdict came down:

"You know? I still think they're weeds, but dandelions aren't that bad."

DANDELION PESTO

40 minutes. Makes about 1/2 cup pesto.
1 to 2 cloves garlic
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
3 tablespoons pine nuts
3/4 bunch (12 ounces) dandelion greens, trimmed and chopped
2 tablespoons finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
2 tablespoons finely grated pecorino Romano cheese
2 to 4 tablespoons fruity olive oil

Lemon juice, if desired, to taste
Using a mortar and pestle, grind the garlic and 1/2 teaspoon salt to a smooth paste. Add the pine nuts and grind until smooth. Add a handful of dandelion greens and a sprinkling of salt, grinding to break the leaves down to a pulp, until all the dandelion greens and salt are incorporated (this can take up to 30 minutes). Add the cheeses and olive oil, grinding and stirring to combine. Taste, adjusting the cheese and seasoning if desired. Add a touch of lemon juice to brighten the flavors if you like. (The pesto can also be made in a food processor or blender, though the recipe will require an additional clove or more of garlic).

EACH SERVING

Calories 98
Protein 2 grams
Carbohydrates 5 grams
Fiber 2 grams
Fat 8 grams
Saturated fat 2 grams
Cholesterol 3 milligrams
Sugar 0 grams
Sodium 142 milligrams

SALAD OF DANDELION GREENS, BLOOD ORANGES, GOAT CHEESE

20 minutes. Serves 4 to 6
2 blood oranges
1 (1-pound) bunch dandelion greens, trimmed and torn
1 cup toasted pecan halves
1/2 red onion, thinly sliced
2/3 cup raisins
1/4 cup sherry vinegar
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons fruity olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper
4 ounces fresh goat cheese, crumbled
1. Supreme the oranges: Slice off the top and bottom of the whole fruit, then cut off the rest of the peel, carefully following the

line of the flesh. Slice free each segment over a bowl to collect the juices, separating it from the central membrane. Set the segments and juice aside.
2. In a large bowl, toss the dandelion greens with the pecan halves, onion and raisins.
3. Make the dressing: In the bowl with the orange juice, whisk in the sherry vinegar and olive oil, along with 1/2 teaspoon salt and several grinds of pepper. Taste and adjust the seasoning as desired.
4. Add half the dressing to the salad, tossing to coat. Add additional dressing to taste. Gently toss in the orange segments.
5. Plate the salad, dotting the

top with crumbled goat cheese. EACH SERVING

Calories 413
Protein 9 grams
Carbohydrates 29 grams
Fiber 6 grams
Fat 32 grams
Saturated fat 7 grams
Cholesterol 15 milligrams
Sugar 16 grams
Sodium 352 milligrams

WILTED DANDELION GREENS WITH BACON

20 minutes. Serves 2 to 4.
1 tablespoon olive oil
3 slices applewood-smoked bacon, cut crosswise into 1/2-inch

strips
3 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
1 (1-pound) bunch dandelion greens, trimmed and torn into 3- to 4-inch strips
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 teaspoons sherry vinegar
1 1/2 to 2 tablespoons maple syrup
In a large saute pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the bacon and cook, stirring occasionally, until the bacon is crisp and the fat is rendered. The last minute or so before the bacon is ready, stir in the garlic. Add the

dandelion greens and remove from heat, stirring until the greens are wilted. Season with salt and several grinds of pepper, and stir in the vinegar and maple syrup. Taste and adjust the seasonings and flavorings if desired.

EACH SERVING

Calories 209
Protein 6 grams
Carbohydrates 17 grams
Fiber 4 grams
Fat 14 grams
Saturated fat 4 grams
Cholesterol 15 milligrams
Sugar 6 grams
Sodium 270 milligrams

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