

Great Toppers: Even Well-Dressed Salads Need A Little Bling

BY SHARON K. GHAG
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Turn an "oh" at salad into "Oh, wow" with a little imagination and not much effort.

Even the best-dressed leaves can benefit from a sprinkling of nuts or seeds. Just add them right before serving so they stay nice and crunchy.

Greens served naked or barely dressed in a splash of citrus and olive oil will gain greater appeal with a shake of dried fruit or a generous serving of fresh fruit.

Meat is a great salad topper, but don't overlook beans, wheat germ, granola and canned tuna. Then there's diced or shaved cheese and green or black olives, marinated or stuffed.

Dry ramen noodles sauteed in butter and sprinkled with the accompanying spice package are a nice change of pace from croutons.

Snipped herbs — chives, mint, parsley, dill come to mind — add bold notes. Leftover rice or lentils, meanwhile, can be added with abandon.

Need more ideas? Pile on fresh or grilled vegetables; onions are especially delicious. If going with fresh vegetables, shredding, chopping, slicing and shaving will all add to the texture of the finished salad.

And don't overlook sprouts and shoots.

Finally, remember that it's no crime to double up on salad. Top greens with a creamy macaroni or potato salad and forgo the dressing.

GREEN SALAD WITH CORN, PEPPERS AND SMOKY RED PEPPER DRESSING

Serves 4 to 8; dressing makes 1 cup

Half a grilled red pepper, with skin removed, and a small handful of basil produced an especially delicious dressing.

Dressing:
1/4 cup olive oil,
1/8 cup plus 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
2 ounces roasted red peppers (packed in water, drained)
2 tablespoons fresh cilantro leaves

Salad:
1 peeled garlic clove
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1/2 teaspoon salt
8 cups green lettuce, in bite-size pieces
1 cup fresh corn kernels
1 red bell pepper, small diced
1 yellow bell pepper, small diced

Directions:
In a blender, combine the olive oil, vinegar, roasted peppers, cilantro, garlic, paprika and salt. Puree until the dressing is smooth. Pour into airtight container and refrigerate for up to five days. In a large bowl, combine the lettuce, corn, red and yellow peppers and shallot and toss to combine. Add 1/2 cup dressing and gently toss everything to coat. Serve immediately.

This recipe is from "Heather Christo's Generous Table: Easy and Elegant Recipes Through the Seasons" (Kyle Books, \$29.95).

MARINATED CUCUMBER AND CHILI SALAD

Serves 2 to 3
Habaneros are plentiful at Latino markets, but can be difficult to find at some supermarkets. Substitute another spicy pepper. The salad will be just as tasty. The longer the cucumbers marinate, the more tart the salad.

1 cucumber, seeded, quartered lengthwise and finely chopped
1/2 habanero chili, seeded, finely chopped
1/4 cup finely chopped red onion
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

Squeeze of agave nectar
Juice of 1 lemon
Maldon or other flaky sea salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Directions:
Place the cucumber, chili and onion in a glass bowl. Toss with olive oil, agave nectar and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper. Refrigerate from 1 hour to up to a day before serving.

This recipe is from "Fresh, Happy, Tasty: An Adventure in 100 Recipes," by Jane Loxwell (William Morrow, \$35).

CARROT AND CITRUS SALAD

Serves 3 to 4
The recipe calls for grapefruits and pistachios, but an abundance of backyard oranges and raisins in the pantry also made a salad that was delicious. Fresh limes are another good option when making barely dressed salads. If peppery watercress isn't available, try spinach.

1/3 cup shelled pistachios
2 grapefruits, segmented
1 large handful watercress
2 carrots, shaved on mandoline, placed in ice water

1 handful fresh cilantro leaves, picked and roughly torn or chopped

Dressing:
2 tablespoons grapefruit juice
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

Small squeeze of agave nectar
Pinch Maldon or other flaky salt
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Directions:
In a small dry skillet over

medium low heat, toast the pistachios until evenly browned, 3 to 4 minutes, stirring frequently. Remove from heat and set aside.

Combine grapefruits, watercress, carrots and cilantro in a bowl and toss gently. Whisk the dressing ingredients in a small bowl. When ready to serve, add nuts and dressing to the salad.

This recipe is from "Fresh, Happy, Tasty: An Adventure in 100 Recipes," by Jane Loxwell (William Morrow, \$35).

MIXED GREENS AND STRAWBERRY SALAD

Serves 4
Dressing:

1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/2 cup frozen orange juice concentrate, thawed, and 1 tablespoon orange marmalade

1 small head butter lettuce, washed, chilled
3 to 4 ounces mixed baby lettuces, washed, chilled
2 cups strawberries, washed, hulled, sliced
1/4 cup slivered almonds
Sea salt, black pepper

Directions:
In bowl, whisk together mayonnaise and orange juice concentrate. Add the marmalade and whisk again until combined. Refrigerate.

Reserve 4 large leaves for plating. Tear remaining leaves into

bite-size pieces. Spoon 1 tablespoon of dressing into the center of each of 4 serving plates. Place a whole large leaf of butter lettuce off-center on the plate. Scatter a handful of torn lettuce and a handful of baby greens over the entire plate. Scatter 1/2 cup sliced strawberries and 1 tablespoon of sliced almonds over the greens.

Drizzle each salad with additional tablespoon dressing and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.

This recipe is from "The Artist, the Cook and the Gardener: Recipes Inspired by Painting and the Garden," by Maryjo Koch (Andrews McMeel, \$26.99).



SHARON K. GHAG/MODESTO BEE/MCT

A boring salad can be turned into a "wow" moment with a little creativity and not much more work. Lettuce cups hold cucumbers and red onions that are marinated in vinegar with the length of marinade time determining how pronounced the tartness will be.

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