

SALADS FOR ALL SEASONS

by Linda Fiverson

SIMPLY SALAD

As I ate out recently, I was watching the waiters and waitresses parade by with mega bowls of salad. They were colorful, they were enormous and they were topped with different combinations of cheese, noodles and bacon. Some of them had dressing mixed in already and some had side servings. The word salad once meant a bowl of lettuce with lots of cut-up fresh vegetables and nothing more. They were simply salads and not concoctions of dried fruits, candied nuts, cheeses and fat-laden dressing...

ANY WAY YOU TOSS IT, IT'S A SALAD, ISN'T IT?

Well it might be... but then again, it might depend on how you define the word salad. Do you have any idea how many people actually think that salad means "a healthy meal option"? They're usually the same ones who start out saying, "I want to eat healthy" or "I'm watching my weight" as they contemplate the menu. You know the words that come next, don't you? "I'm *just* going to have a salad..." What you don't know is which salad they'll pick because there's no such thing as "just a salad" anymore. As you look at the long list of menu options it's easy to come to the conclusion that not all salads are created equal. But then again, definitions of salad aren't all the same either.

LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

So.....what is a salad? It can range from anything as simple as "a cold dish of raw vegetables" to a more complex version that "consists of chopped vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, eggs, seafood, pasta, cheese or other food, usually prepared with a dressing, such as mayonnaise and served rather cold, hot or at room temperature."

Inasmuch as the ingredients of a salad vary, so does the portion size and time it will be eaten. I grew up in the days of the boring lettuce and tomato salads. They were usually small and eaten right before dinner. Nowadays, we still eat salads as appetizers but they tend to be a bit larger and more elaborate than they once were. We also eat them with the entrée when they're served as dinner or side salads. Let's not forget about entrée salads like the ones I saw being served. They are usually quite large and chock full of vegetables, protein and any number of other items. As their name suggests, entrée salads are considered to be a meal.

SALAD STARTERS

When salads are made with the "right" ingredients they really can be one of the healthiest meal choices you make. But what are the "right" ingredients? Let's start with vegetables. We sometimes assume that they're all are high in vitamins and minerals but some contain more sugar and starch than others. These are the ones we want to eat less of.

The first thing many of us think of when we hear "salad" is lettuce. (not synonymous with Iceberg of course!) Many of us were raised on those pale, virtually tasteless Iceberg leaves. I can vouch for the fact that boring salads taste as boring as they look. So, how we can make them more attractive, nutritious and tasteful?

GOING GREEN...AND MULTICOLOR TOO

There's a lot of talk about "going green" and making responsible choices for the environment these days. It's important to make responsible choices for ourselves too.

Lettuce and other green leaved vegetables really are the best known and most widely used salad starters. With so many kinds of lettuce and lettuce substitutes available, how do we know which to choose?

A good place to start is with the knowledge that dark leaves have more vitamins than light colored ones. Some wonderful salad starters include romaine, arugula, chicory, watercress, spinach, kale, chard, Boston or Bibb lettuce, mesclun and chard. There are countless other types too!

I'm sure you know the expression "Variety is the spice of life." It applies to vegetables too and not just lettuce. Eating a variety of different colored veggies gives us maximum health benefits because it guarantees we get a variety of essential vitamins and minerals.

Some veggies actually come in different colors. For example, most tomatoes we buy and use are red but there are yellow and orange ones too. And what about peppers? Red and yellow ones are usually quite a bit more expensive than green ones but did you know they also have twice the amount of Vitamin C? Not only do different colored veggies have different nutritional values, they have somewhat different tastes. Let's not forget that a rainbow of colors also makes salads look more appealing and attractive!

TASTY TEXTURES

Texture can be important too. Lots of us like to "crunch and munch" but there are times we prefer a smoother more mushy, squishy feeling. These are great times to texturize our salads!

Try adding some "crunchies" to your salad to add a little pizzazz! Forget about those not so nutritious croutons and bacon bits and try some healthy toppers. Radishes, cucumbers and carrots are great choices but so are pieces of fresh cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, celery and onion. Alfalfa sprouts and bean sprouts add lots of nutrients as well as crispy crunching. Another great choice is the South American root vegetable known as jicama (pronounced hik-uh-ma). Fresh fruits like apples, pears and pineapples are great additions to salads also and they add taste and texture too! Don't use dried fruits like raisins, cranberries or cherries -- they just make the salad a candy bowl!

If you prefer less of a "crunch" and more of a "mush" try adding mushrooms, avocado and hearts of palm or artichoke to your salad. Fruits like strawberries and mangoes are often smooth and appealing too.

SINFUL SALADS

I'm sure you've noticed that chain restaurants and fast food establishments have been catching on to the salad frenzy for awhile. They entice people into thinking that these salads are healthy additions to their "less healthy sandwiches" but that's not always the case. While it's true that these salads are fast, relatively inexpensive and often tasty, that may be the only thing they are. Whether they are Mexican salads loaded with spiced meat and cheese, Oriental salads topped with oodles of fried noodles or ordinary salads slathered in bacon and cheddar it's important to question what we're eating and not take the word "salad" for granted. These salads are higher in fat and calories than their presumed to be "less healthy sandwiches." Why not take the bread off and eat what's inside the sandwich? That may be a better choice if you are stuck in a fast food or chain restaurant. Of course it's best to order it "dry" (without sauce)!

On that note, have you ever thought about all the "non-salads" that masquerade as salads? Rice salad – potato salad – pasta salad – tuna salad - chicken salad – shrimp

and seafood salad - carrot and raisin salad... How did they “earn the right” to even be called salads?

BUILD-A-SALAD

Now what happens at the salad bar when you can build your own? I know it seems like salad heaven but can you trust yourself? What is in those foods that we are putting on our plates? Are there any added ingredients? Perhaps sugar, oil, mayo, salt or preservatives have been stirred in? How do we know? Many times we don't – but our instincts and taste buds can usually be trusted. So once again, if there is doubt, you should probably do without...or if it tastes too good, it's probably not so good for you!

IS YOUR SALAD WELL DRESSED?

How you dress your salad is of utmost importance. I kept this for the end because dressing is usually the very last thing we put on our salads. And...it can make or break a well put together plate of salad. Sometimes the dressing alone contains more fat, sugar and calories than all of the salad items. There are two issues that come into play here. One is which dressing you'll use. The other is how much.

Creamy dressing is one of the worst culprits. Vinaigrette would be a better choice and plain oil and vinegar, even better. There are people who drown their salads in dressing and you might be one of them. If so, try to make this one of the first habits you change.

It's always best to order dressing on the side when you are out but that doesn't mean it's okay to pour it on. A little dressing goes a long way. You might find that hard to believe but try my “dip tip” – it really works! Dip your fork tines into the dressing before you take a forkful of salad. You get the whole dressing taste for just a smidgen!

Another good idea is to dilute dressing with water. This decreases the calories but increases the volume: (quantity) You can use this method at home too with homemade or store bought dressing. If you're buying dressing in the supermarket please shop carefully. Dressings that are low in fat or fat-free have a lot of added sugar and food starch. Read labels and choose wisely. If you want to try making your own healthy style dressing you can do it rather easily. You can make delicious creamy dressings simply by substituting non fat yogurt or sour cream for higher fat versions which are the key ingredients in some recipes. You can also experiment with different flavored oils and vinegars or try adding mustard, light soy sauce or hot sauce. You can make a great vinaigrette by combining balsamic vinegar, Dijon mustard and a little artificial sweetener. Or, try making a “spicy mayo” with Japanese Chili Sauce and light mayonnaise. For a new variety why not use spices and seasonings you enjoy and even sprinkle in a few sesame seeds? The options are limitless and so are the flavors you will get!

SALAD SAFETY

Now that we're “salad smart” we don't want to get “salad sick”. What can we do about E. Coli and Salmonella? As wonderful as salads can be for us we should be aware that the ingredients are breeding grounds for bacteria and leafy greens are amongst the most vulnerable. As I'm writing this article I'm aware that there's a multistate outbreak which is linked to tainted lettuce. Luckily, it's not local this time but it has been and unfortunately, it will be again. When we're the one making the salad we can certainly take a more active role than when we're eating out. All produce should be washed well (and scrubbed when possible) including “salads in cellophane” which might be labeled “pre-washed and ready to eat.” It can't hurt to try to remove any hidden dirt or bacteria that you might not see. It's also recommended that all fruits and vegetables be dried. Getting rid of moisture helps prevent bacteria from growing. When we eat salad out we have less control and have to trust that restaurants take proper precautions. Let's face it

-- we've been eating salad for years and we'll continue. It's a good idea to have a more watchful eye anyway!

WRAPPING IT UP

I think I've covered all the ins and outs of salad so let's wrap it up. By the way, you can also wrap your food in large lettuce leaves to make "salad wraps"! Boston lettuce works particularly well for this. You can make them yourself but many restaurants also offer them these days with grilled chicken or shrimp and other healthy choices. As always, the fact remains that healthy food grows and has a life!

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