

How About a Chef Salad?

Have you watched the commercials on television for the “fresh” salads now being offered by many of the fast food restaurants out there? Vibrantly colored fresh greens still glistening from the morning dew when they were whisked straight from a picture perfect garden patch are tumbling through the air in slow motion and landing in a breathtaking heap right there in the kitchen of your local XYZ Burger Joint. I know my heart begins to race just thinking about it and I’m pretty sure that my cholesterol level drops by maybe 10 points just from the act of watching the commercial.

Then there is the reality check. I walked into an unnamed nationally famous chain this past Saturday while out on dad duty with my boys for one of their band contests. I peaked over the shoulder of the young whippersnapper running the cash register and never was able to locate the fresh salad waterfall I was promised on national television. O.K. I was still game. I ordered the “fresh” chicken Caesar Salad as a statement to my children that “yes” I was strong enough to avoid a cardboard container of their famous French fries next to the American dream, a triple decker 2 pound steak burger with the works.

Let me describe what I got. Nestled in a space age plastic clam container was limp, brown tinged lettuce topped with 4 slivers of cold hard chicken like substance that did, in fact, have what appeared to be grill marks on them. Included was a foil packet of Deluxe Restaurant Quality Caesar Dressing. “Excuse me young man,” I inquired, “but where are the croutons? There are croutons in the picture.” He gave me a nervous smile. “I think we’re out of croutons.”

Today I want to talk about homemade chef salad and share a recipe that will leave you satisfied and may give you a little break around the middle. Remember that your salad is only as good as your ingredients and fresh is the key to a wonderful salad experience. Don’t compromise and you’re better off leaving something out of the salad than using something that is wimpy and old. Feel, smell and look during your time in the produce section. You may be better off driving a bit further to a market that offers better produce.

Scratch Chef Salad

(serves 4 to 6)



Assemble in a large salad bowl:
1 large head Romaine lettuce

1 head of Boston Bib lettuce
1 head curly leaf lettuce
All should be washed, dried and torn by hand into pieces no larger than 2-inch square.
(There are also prewashed lettuce combinations called “Spring Mix” that are really good and available in some markets.)
1 red bell pepper, julienned
1 yellow bell pepper, julienned
1 medium cucumber, peeled and thinly sliced
6 thin slices honey baked ham, julienned
6 thin slices over roasted turkey breast, julienned
4 thin slices Colby cheese, julienned
4 thin slices Swiss cheese, julienned
1 bunch green onions, chopped
1 cup cherry tomatoes
2 hardboiled eggs, sliced
2 cups croutons

The best salads are assembled right before being served with dressings served on the side so you can make your own selection and use them in quantities to your taste. Hot fresh rolls or slices of a good, crusty bread are wonderful on the side to complete your meal.

Another suggestion is to invest in a real, to die for salad bowl for these occasions. My wonderful wife, Ida Jo, bought me a beautiful beechwood bowl that will handle enough salad to feed ten comfortably for Father’s Day over ten years ago. The wood is prettier now than when I got it and everyone who sees it loves it. I originally got it for my Caesar Salads but it works great for them all.

One of the greatest salad dressings I’ve come across over the years is a homemade Blue Cheese dressing that my partner, Ralph Taylor, was able to recreate from one served by his favorite restaurant years ago. His background in chemistry serves us well today and he advises that this dressing needs to be made at least a day in advance to allow the flavors to combine properly. This recipe was a huge success at our restaurant.

Ralph’s Blue Cheese Dressing

½ cup mayonnaise
¼ cup light sour cream
¼ cup aged blue cheese, crumbled
½ teaspoon minced garlic
¼ teaspoon lemon juice
¼ teaspoon Tabasco
Thin to proper consistency with 2 tablespoons milk or to taste

Combine all ingredients and stir well until blue cheese is in small pieces but still visible. Store dressing in an airtight glass container under refrigeration for at least 24 hours.

I know it is convenient to pick up your favorite salad dressing at the store but I can't emphasize strongly enough how much better dressings you make from scratch are over those you buy. Simple olive oil and balsamic vinegar combinations with fresh herbs are amazing and you should keep on hand a good recipe for ranch and Italian dressings as well. Take a look at the ingredients in store purchased ranch dressing next time you have a chance. I'll bet you can't even pronounce most of the names.

The better wines to have with a salad tend to be white wines with higher levels of natural fruit acidity to work well with dressings. A great Riesling such as the *Gysler 2004 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett* is a terrific choice with its supple tropical fruit styling and great backbone. This is a wine that redefines Riesling for people who first try it and even though you may have always said you never drink a fruitier wine, this one may have you adding a new section to your wine cellar for German wines.

The *2002 Chateau L'Eglise Bordeaux Blanc* is made from 100% Sauvignon blanc grapes and its lean, grassy styling is perfect for salads. This wine always amazes me due to its high quality level compared to the really great price it sells for.

Let us know if we can be of further assistance at 888-288-0668 or visit us on the web at www.winedog.com. Have a great week. Cheers.