



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Making Salads More Memorable

If we close our eyes and imagine eating our most recent salad, the flavor that comes to mind might be more about the dressing than the salad itself. I'm not knocking salad dressing, but many of them aren't very good for you. Instead, let's try to enliven the greens part of the salad. Maybe then we can get by with less dressing.

Arugula is on the menu at many restaurants these days. (Well, not right now, but in recent years.) Around 1980 it became trendy, but it now has well deserved popularity, and it's here to stay. Some describe the flavor as peppery, and some say tangy. This is partly determined by the variety you choose, the age of the leaf, and possibly other factors like the soil, air temperature, and maybe what else is on your plate. The flavor is pronounced, yet not overpowering. I mentioned in an earlier blog that I was served, earlier this year, a caprese salad that used only arugula. At first, I thought it might be too much of a good thing, but it was delicious, and memorable. The vinaigrette may have had something to do with it.



Left to Right: arugulas 'Surrey' and 'Wildfire', Swiss chard, and endive 'Tres Fine Maraichere'

Kale is another distinctive flavor that will enhance a salad. There are many good ones, with a wide variety of flavors, not to mention texture, color, and form. I can't think of one I don't like. Like many plants, it needs to be picked at the right time to get the best flavor. For most palates, that means it should be picked when young. The large leaves of dinosaur kale can reach more than 18" in length, but the flavor is ideal when the leaves are no more than 8" long, and some folks pick them when they are just a few inches long. The kale that have frilly leaves are beautiful and add an unexpected visual delight. I like to let a few kale plants get



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**Kevin Milaeger with
Dinosaur Kale (laciniato)**

really large because they make a bold architectural statement—I don't eat those, I just like looking at their impressive forms. Some are really huge. Dinosaur kale, for example, can get over three feet across, and equally tall.

Swiss chard is so beautiful it could hold its own as an ornamental plant. The

boldly colored stalks are exceptional when sunlight hits them just right. They absolutely glow. The green leaves are translucent, and with their heavy veining are just as stunning as the stalks. Unlike most kinds of lettuce, Swiss chard remains in top form the entire summer, so the greens season is greatly extended with this plant. Endive is another plant with a flavor that is all its own. We offer 'Tres Fine Maraichere.' It has a fine, slightly bitter flavor, and the leaf is decorative.



Left to Right: kales 'Dazzling Blue', 'Dinosaur', 'Scarlet', and 'Smooth German'

My favorite salad enhancer is mustard greens. A close relative is mizuna, so we lump mizuna and mustard in the mustard category, for simplicity's sake. (Both are in the cabbage family, but you'd never guess it.) Mizuna is the



Left to Right: mizunas 'Miz America', 'Red Kingdom' and 'Red Streaked', and mustard 'Frizzy Lizzy'

milder of the two, and more tolerant of hot weather. These can all get to be large plants with very large leaves, if you don't harvest them when young. They have a bold presence, and could be used as ornamental plants. Both can be eaten at any stage of growth but mustard, in particular, is less spicy when young. We have quite a few kinds, and they differ in their looks and taste. I like to add some of the red/burgundy colored types, as their color livens a salad,

even before you taste it. Some are much spicier than others, but the heat dissipates in seconds, so it doesn't disrupt the enjoyment of the salad, or the rest of the meal.

With any of these flavor enhancing greens, I think they are best limited to a small percentage of the greens in your salad. That is naturally subject to

individual taste, but for me it's no more than 10-20% non-lettuce in the salad. Keep in mind that once the greens are ready, you will likely add other ingredients to the salad to further enhance the flavor range.



All of these greens can be planted now. I planted a selection of them on April 3rd. They haven't grown a lot, because we had several cold nights around 26 degrees, but they are all healthy. I started harvesting some lettuce and spinach this week. There's nothing like tasting the first home-grown greens of the season.



Left to Right: mustards 'Green Wave' and 'Spicy Green'