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food

When is a salad not a salad?

When it's a 'chef' salad | Exotic ingredients and imaginative combinations transform the ordinary into colorful, enticing centerpieces.

By Ruth Tobias
Special to The Denver Post

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(Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

Salad's own salad days are finally over — and so much the better. As the ancients ended their feasts with oil-drizzled lettuce to aid digestion and induce sleep, so we moderns have tended to dismiss salad as an all-too-good-for-you snooze.

But now that the token mound of bland iceberg lettuce has given way to a veritable smorgasbord of innovations, we're seeing the salad anew — not as a mindless starter or measly side but as a hearty centerpiece.

Ingredients are legion — though greens are optional — and come hot as often as not, composed as well as tossed, in bowls and on plates and even in the occasional cocktail glass. Here are a few of the far-from-garden-variety concoctions local chefs would have you



Chester Wright of Mosaic restaurant in Parker composes salads like artworks.
(Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

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take a stab at (presumably with a fork, but these days, who knows?).

When is a salad not a salad?

Salads that challenge your definition of salad:

Nutty Cheese Salad at Racines \$8.99

Lee Goodfriend and David Racine didn't invent the most popular salad on their menu (also available at sibling ventures Goodfriends and Dixons), "We stole it," laughs Racine.

"We worked together back in the mid-'70s at a restaurant called Zach's — one of the first fern bars in Denver — and that's where the recipe came from. We changed it up a little; in the old days it was probably done with iceberg, but we use an organic salad mix. But the banana, the cashews and almonds, and the honey-mustard dressing were already there."

And they're just the beginning: What with its crunchy-smooth assortment of avocado and tomato chunks, shredded white cheddar and fontina, and popped wheat kernels — that's right, bits of breakfast cereal — the dish comes by its name honestly.

"It sounds weird," Racine admits, "but it's quite refreshing and summery." To be sure, its tropical slant makes it a sort of edible vacation — even as its protein-richness lends a comforting homeyness. *650 Sherman St., 303-595-0418; racinesrestaurant.com*

The Dickens at WaterCourse Foods \$8.25 large | \$6.95 small

What the dickens, indeed. Though Dan Landes (who owns WaterCourse with his wife, Michelle) named his wacky creation for the equally inventive Victorian novelist, the echo of the apt pun couldn't have been lost on him.

Atop romaine and green leaf lettuce, a bright scattering of cannellini beans and cubes of cold boiled butternut squash is striking enough; but the icing on this particular cake consists in hunks of fried seitan (a gluten-based meat substitute) and — get this — several fat, golden-brown onion rings.

"I just thought it would be fun to do homemade rings instead of using the cheesy dried- up onion strings you find on salad bars," says Landes. The contrast between fried and fresh ingredients meets its match in the one between saltiness and earthy sweetness, furthered by maple-Dijon dressing. "We use maple instead of honey, which vegans don't eat because it's an animal byproduct," Landes explains.

Vegan or not, ordering the Dickens means having your fast food and eating healthy too. *837 E. 17th Ave., 303-832-7313; watercoursefoods.com*

Grilled Panzanella with Crab, Goat Cheese, and Pistachio-Plum Vinaigrette at Izakaya Den \$12.50

"I don't try to reinvent the wheel," muses Toshi

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and Yasu Kizaki's executive chef Gabe Stallone, "but I do try to do things you don't see every day."

Hence his twist — heck, 180-degree rotation — on the classic Italian bread salad. Being, in his words, "all about textures and colors," he starts with cubed focaccia from neighboring Pajama Baking Co. and then goes wild with jumbo lump crabmeat, dollops of goat cheese, slices of Asian pear, watercress, pistachios, and a vinaigrette that blends plum wine with pineapple juice ("that's the secret to its creamy, light foaminess," Stallone notes).

By turns sweet and tart, mild and bitter, the result is a revelation of complements and contrasts. 1518 S. Pearl St., 303-777-0691; izakayaden.net

Tabule de Cereals Andinos at Limon \$7

While Italian panzanella gets an Asian gloss at Izakaya Den, Middle Eastern tabbouleh hits Andean heights at Limon.

Common in Peru but obscure stateside, this colorful take trades bulgur for nutty quinoa, parsley and mint for mesclun, and, well, just about everything else for sliced avocado, tomato, black olives, a healthy sprinkling of super-salty cotija cheese and — the kicker — split, blistered kernels of fried corn. 1618 E. 17th Ave., 303-322-0898; limondenver.com.

Mosaic Salad at Mosaic \$11

True to its name, Mosaic's signature salad fairly

glitters with the tesserae of its diverse, painstakingly placed ingredients.

The vivid juxtaposition of finely diced, marinated tomato and arugula chiffonade with pearls of perfectly cooked couscous, dried corn kernels, pumpkin seed and currant "trail mix," and tiny squares of both smoked salmon and smoked trout is as startling as it is satisfying; pretty as the composition is, though, you've simply got to mix it all together with the creamy pesto dressing in order to get the full effect of its sheer array of textures. 11957 Lioness Way, Parker, 720-305-0994; dinemosaic.com.

Customized "Crushed" Salad at The Crushery \$7.50

You know it's a whole different sub shop when the guys behind the counter are wearing chef's whites.

The Crushery's gimmick is that it presses all of its relatively gourmet goodies on the grill panino-style, including the house-baked bread that forms seven kinds of made-to-order "croutons," actually a bit of a misnomer for what often amounts to a chopped sandwich in your salad.

On a recent visit when I aimed to stretch my own, already wide-open salad horizons, I opted for the horseradish-cheddar croutons and wound up with, essentially, grilled-cheese squares atop a virtual serving platter of mesclun, sliced roast beef, grilled eggplant spears, schmears of brie, caramelized onions and sun-dried tomatoes — a

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bold combo if I do say so myself — all drizzled in a kicky, creamy wasabi dressing, likewise made in-house.

While other listed flavors include truffle-provolone and lemon-thyme, chef-owner John Davidson is happy to oblige special requests: "If you really wanted to get crazy you could have shredded pork and sauerkraut croutons," perhaps on a salad of lox, gorgonzola, green chiles, and pickles? (OK, there's crazy and then there's crazy.) 1579 S. Pearl St., 303-733-4117; crushery.com.

Ruth Tobias is a Denver-based freelance food writer.

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