

## Food Flash: To Dress a Salad

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Here's the first flash--all you really need for salad dressing is salt. That's why they call it "salad" which means "salted.." Yes, expensive bottled concoctions can be replaced with a sprinkle of salt.

Try this with salad greens or a slice of tomato. Taste them plain. Then sprinkle on a pinch of salt. Let sit a few minutes for the magic to work. Taste again and the flavors spark. When I serve this salad dressing to friends they always ask for the recipe. Salt is the heart of all salad dressings.

Salt is the primordial condiment. I like the feel of it between thumb and fingers as I pinch it out of a bowl and then sift it over my cooking pots. Lately we encounter a whole world of exotic salts, but basically it all comes from the ocean. Rock salt precipitated from ancient seas and was then buried in the earth. A local source of rock salt can be found on Salt Mine Road in the Verde Valley. Gray French salt, red Hawaiian salt, speckled Idaho salt (sold as "RealSalt") have natural impurities that give them a fascinating flavor and trace elements for nutrition. Kosher and crystalline salts are evaporated from sea water to form pure sodium chloride and have a clean, clear taste. Basic table salt undergoes several bleaching and extracting processes and additions of iodine and anti-caking agents which leaves it tasting bitter. Interesting to compare.

Flash #2-- Oil, acid and salt equal salad dressing. Salad dressing is a balance of these three ingredients in these proportions-- 3 parts oil, 1 part acid, salt to taste. Sounds simple but oils can be neutral, like canola, or flavorful, like toasted sesame. Oils can be cheeses or cream or nut butter. Some of the oil can be replaced with pureed vegetables like roasted mushrooms or sweet onions. And any of these ingredients can be blended together.

Sour is the taste of acid. Acids can be lemon juice strong or rice vinegar mild or balsamic sweet and dense. And they can be sour fruit or vegetable juice. Sour milk products like yogurt or sour cream are both acid and oil. And again, anything can be blended for yet another flavor profile.

Oh my gosh, the possibilities are exhilarating or terrifying. I think I can make anything into salad dressing. Let us simplify with a recipe.

## BASIC VINAIGRETTE

Makes 8 cups which lasts for months refrigerated.

2 cups vinegar

6 cups oil

2 tablespoons salt

Mix everything in a blender or shake vigorously in a covered jar. Please taste and get the salt right because without it your dressing is going to taste too oily or too acid. Salt is the balancing agent.

Of course, I might add fresh garlic, a lot because I love it, maybe roasted. And I might add some dried tarragon, maybe some crumbled gorgonzola, some toasted walnuts, a good grind of pepper and definitely 1 tablespoon of dry mustard powder.

What's the mustard for? Mustard is an emulsifier, it helps the oil mix with the vinegar/water. Oil versus water makes salad dressings separate and is the reason for the gums and goos added to the bottled stuff. Add mustard powder and mix like crazy in a blender or shake very vigorously in a bottle. This will cause the oil to hang suspended in the water/vinegar. That's an emulsion. Good trick.

Flash #3-- Wait to dress the salad until ready to serve. That magic ingredient, salt, pulls the water out of vegetable cells. Therefore, salads that sit in dressing get limp.

## ROASTED RED PEPPER DRESSING

**from the Crossroads Cafe at Prescott College**

Makes 4 cups.

4 fat garlic cloves, peeled

3 red peppers

1 teaspoon kosher salt, to taste

1 teaspoon paprika

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1/4 teaspoon dried marjoram

7 tablespoons white wine vinegar

1/2 cup olive oil

1 cup canola oil

1 teaspoon dry mustard powder

Toss garlic with a little oil, place in a small pan and put in a hot 400 degree oven. Check in 5 minutes. Remove when golden brown and soft. Watch it. Roast peppers in the hot oven until brown all over. Remove and cool. Then remove seeds and stems but do not peel. Measure. You need 2 cups, more or less.

Blend everything together until very smooth. Taste and don't forget to adjust the salt.