

MR
WILKINSON'S

SIMPLY DRESSED
SALADS

A COOKBOOK TO CELEBRATE THE SEASONS

MATT WILKINSON

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SALADS



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D E D I C A T I O N

I close my eyes and I think of you all,
my heart beats faster and is full of love.

Thank you Sharlee, our two little hooligans Finn
Thomas & Jay Thomas, and yes even you Quincy.

x x x

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THANK YOU

Before you read on, I would like to say thank you for picking my book up. In a time when there are so many cookbooks out there, it's amazing that you have taken the time to read, buy or just even flick through this one.

I hope you enjoy my thoughts on all things salads, and a love of food I share with my family.

The most joyous part of dining is not the food itself – food is what we need to survive – but the table and the SHARING of the food.

SALADS ARE FOR CATERPILLARS

So where do we start? Simple, really. Let's look at this book's title: *Mr Wilkinson's Simply Dressed Salads*. It's all in the name, they say. I can't tell you how many different thoughts have gone through my head in order to get to this title, but as time passed it was the first title that sat well with me.

My first book, *Mr Wilkinson's Favourite Vegetables*, was – like most things in life – about timing. It was my reflection, through recipes, of growing up, being in a kitchen and around food, and my philosophy (if we can use that word) about eating local and in-season food, from a belief that these are the most flavourful and tastiest. It really is so simple: buy the best tasty raw ingredients and foods from good producers, and the cook is already winning... then cook it properly and hey, you have delicious food! The same philosophy goes for this book – seasonal produce cooked well – but this time it's me looking at what I eat the most: salads!

So, why salads? Let me digress. I think of most food groups as a salad. Really I do. Why?

Well, the salad is one of the most diverse food groups ever, in some way or form. A burger is a burger and a curry is a curry... but salads are so wonderfully variable and can be hot or cold. Any ingredient can be made into a salad – any vegetable, fruit, grain, pulse, seafood or meat – not just salad leaves. A salad to me is simply a marriage of flavours and textures that you bring together; dress it with the right vinaigrette or dressing, and there you have it. For me, a salad primarily is designed to share, but on occasion can be brilliant on its own for breakfast, lunch or dinner, or any of the meals in between.

Which leads me to the question, do we all really think salads are just leaves or lettuce with other bits added? My little Hooligan number 1, Finn Thomas, after asking him how he enjoyed the little pumpkin salad I made for our family dinner, replied, 'No Dad, salad's for caterpillars!' This resonated so strongly with me – that we all think salads are simply just salad leaves. Which really is crazy! The category for salad leaves is just that: a category. I don't know any salad leaf called salad leaf. Rocket (arugula), witlof, mizuna, yes – but not salad leaf. It's not rocket science, it's rocket leaves.

MY SALAD DAYS, AND A REVELATION

For those of you who don't know, I grew up in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, in that country called England. My father lived in a pub for some time, where my hospitality and culinary career really started. I worked for Rob Jane (my father's best mate Alan's son); he was my start-of-life mentor, who taught me to think for myself, work hard and have fun while doing it.

The Crown & Cushion was the pub I grew up in, and was my first look at adult life and what work was. The food on offer was very similar to most other pub food – the plate generally consisted of a form of meat or fish taking pride of place on the whole plate, some form of potato (generally hot chips, we all love them) to cover the rest of the plate, and then you got asked by the wait staff, 'Veggie or salad?' These really just being a plate filler.

It was this 'salad' that offered my first insight as to what a salad was. We must have all seen it: iceberg lettuce cup filled with slices of onion, cucumber, tomato, radish, grated carrot and some baby mustard cress on top, served with a side of salad cream. It was the staple salad for the masses in pubs

clubs and I guess any food place that served a main meal. This was my first thought of a salad – boring but refreshing, something ‘healthy’ on the side of the meat and chips. When clearing tables in the pub, it fascinated me just how many people would leave the salad. ‘Not eating that rabbit food crap!’ they would say. Back then, I would’ve had to agree.

My first insight into the workings of a professional kitchen was in Kingston upon Thames, on the outskirts of London, in a place called Warren House, under the guidance of mentor, friend and head chef Michael Taylor. It was here at Warren House, in my first job as a chef at seventeen, that I really saw what a salad could be. There were dishes named Waldorf, Niçoise, Caesar, Caprese, Panzanella and Cobb, all foreign to me back then; saying that, you couldn’t get the old potato salad or coleslaw past me. In those two years of my life I learnt so much about cooking and being a chef, but the lunch salad section was my first real insight into a proper salad, how to make a dressing and the many different types, how to get the right ratio of dressing to the leaves or produce used, learning flavour combinations and textures that make for a better salad, and getting them all out on time.

However, it wasn’t until I was the head chef of Circa in Melbourne that I realised how good a salad could be, and how often I was making them and putting them on the menu, and not just as a side. Salad of this, or blah blah salad and so on... until I stopped to think how deeply entwined the salad is within all cuisines and cultures. It makes sense to me to make and eat a lot of salads, so if you have to define me as a chef, I guess I’m really good at doing seasonal salads, leaning on the vegetable side.

I really do think the concept of ‘salad’ is changing in everybody’s mind to be something other than just a leaf salad, and hopefully the recipes that follow will help you think about salads a little differently too.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I have divided the salads into four seasons, with a little introduction to each chapter as to what grows in each season and how I feel at that particular time of the year.

There are thirteen recipes per chapter, as a guide to what to make during that season. Ideally I would love it if you made one salad a week, but see how you go. Please note that produce also often flows into the following season. Take tomatoes and basil, for example. These are a highlight of summer, but I was still picking stunning tomatoes in mid autumn, and I made my last batch of pesto for the Mrs and Hooligans in late autumn.

At the end of each season is a dressings ‘family tree’. Why? Well it annoys me that in many a cookbook there are some great recipes that can be used in so many other ways, but they don’t tell you about it! I love Stephanie Alexander’s *Cook’s Companion* for this – how she notes what a certain item also goes well with – so I have included here, without recipes, a few other little things I would do with the dressings.

At the end of each season there is also a recipe for a fruit salad – simple fruits of the season that make for a delightful change to just a plain old fruit number. I love cordials, so I have also shared with you some different ones I make throughout the year, so you can capture the bounty of each season to enjoy at a later time.


A COUPLE OF TIPS TO FINISH

Sometimes it can feel like we're all starting to take cooking a little too seriously, making it a lot harder work than it should be. Whenever this happens I close my eyes and think of my Nanna Rita pottering around the kitchen, not a stress in the world. If you do stress in the kitchen, or at times don't enjoy the labourers' chore of cooking, try the following tips for size; it's what we do at home...

Cooking starts with organisation, so what we do at the start of each week (although you could do this on any day that best suits you) is to simply write a list of what we are going to eat, or would like to eat, for the week. It brings us together, makes us talk – the old art of conversation! – but then we also know what to buy throughout the week. We are all generally busy, and there isn't anything worse than getting home, tired after work or from the kids, and figuring out what to bloody well cook.

And please, please, you don't have to cook every night. Go out, get some take away – but if you do, just make it a good ethical choice.

Here is an example of what a week in the Wilkinson–Gibb Clan household sometimes looks like



M E A L P L A N

- MONDAY: Spaghetti bolognese
- TUESDAY: Dinner at Pope Joan
- WEDNESDAY: Free-range chicken schnitzel
+ zucchini salad (page 92)
- THURSDAY: The Mrs' Silverbeet & Feta Pie
(book=1) + egg salad (page 178)
- FRIDAY: Takeaway meal from one of
our favourite spots
- SATURDAY: Vegetable & chickpea curry
+ brown rice salad (page 142)
- SUNDAY: Corned beef with white sauce
+ carrots cooked in their
own juice (page 215)

And lastly, please eat at the table and share food in the middle of the table. The most joyous part of dining is not the food itself – food is what we need to survive – but the table and the *sharing* of the food. To keep in contact and gather information, to spend some time with family or friends, to talk, laugh and even cry – the table is where we get the chance to stop, catch up with our loved ones, then enjoy the food. The food is a tool: the more delicious it is, the easier it is to talk about it, but it's just a tool in our life to talk to one another and enjoy each other's company.

I truly hope you enjoy *Mr Wilkinson's Simply Dressed Salads...* and, like me, start to think of the salad as a truly unique and wonderful thing.

GROWING & USING SALAD LEAVES

Now that I've explained what a salad is to me, it would seem weird not to tell you a little bit of the history of the salad, give a little guide on how I grow salad leaves, and offer some basic salad dressings that go with different leaves and other tasty things.

MY POTTED HISTORY OF THE SALAD

There is surely a little history out there stating where the salad originated, but I will tell you my version and if I'm wrong, well, never mind.

Documentation tells us that the Egyptians and Greeks all had a version of a salad, but I'm going to stick with the Romans – they did build great roads after all. Salad derives from the word 'salt', and it was believed Romans used to salt their vegetables and take them on their voyages of discovery, later rinsing off the salt and adding what are now known as edible weeds – basically they foraged for green leaves to add to their vegies. These leaves were believed to be anything in the cabbage, knotweed, goosefoot, grass, legume, amaranth and sunflower families, and many of these are what we use as salad leaves today.

In more recent times, and still in common practice today, the salad is seen as a cleanser of sorts, taken after a meal to freshen the palate and help the digestive system relax a little before the next course – or, as seen on many a menu in the United States, it is enjoyed at the start of a meal as an hors d'oeuvre.

In many a household or restaurant, the salad has become a name for a side, or something to accompany your main meal – or the salad part is put at the end or beginning of a dish, when basically the chef hasn't got a clue what to call the little devil of a dish. No matter where it came from, the salad is thankfully with us.

THE LEAVES OF THE SALAD

So I'm at the back door step – it truly doesn't matter what season it is – bowl and scissors in hand, off to snip me some leaves.

We really do take salad leaves for granted. Just think, we all generally just grab a head of lettuce or place in a plastic bag some leaves from the supermarket or greengrocer, not really thinking about the taste – the most important factor in the food we prepare – or their texture. These are the two main features of a salad leaf.

Salad-leaf growing has changed a lot in the past decade or two, just as all of agriculture has changed, really – trying to grow for the mass population so we can have what we want, when we want it.

But take a minute, please... if we have the ability, or more importantly the space, I think we all should grow salad leaves and herbs in our garden, balcony, or yes, even our windowsills. The salad leaves we now see on the supermarket shelves are more often than not grown hydroponically, with quick production as the foremost principle, with little thought to their flavour and texture.

We've all done it: bought some leaves, placed them in our 'crisper' in the fridge, then come back to them at a later stage, only to throw the limp leaves away.

When making a leaf salad, its freshness is surely more important than with any other vegetable or fruit we grow. Most other fresh produce can survive a bit, but in my opinion not the salad leaf.

Here is something else to ponder: a single cos (romaine) lettuce costs around \$3 in Australia. A tray of cos seedlings costs around \$3, and gives you 6–8 seedlings. A packet of seeds costs about \$3.50 and yields about 30–40 lettuces. I'm okay at maths, but that adds up nicely to me (I am originally from Yorkshire, you know!). So basically I'm saying, grow your own...

GROW, YOU GOOD THINGS...

So how to grow these little beauties? Well, all my information here is just a guide. If you really want to learn more, there are many great books out there, or just head down to your local nursery and chat to the staff – they are full of information (more correct than I) as to the season and climate you are in. I always leave a nursery thinking damn, I should have known that!

Lettuces can generally be grown all year round, except in the really hot months. A few years back, I bit into a butter lettuce – my favourite of all lettuces – in the height of summer, and it was bitter as a buggery. It was simply trying to keep its very being alive, by going to seed of course. The structure and taste of all plants change once they go to seed, or are in the process of bolting or going to seed.

My rule of thumb for growing **lettuces** through summer and into early autumn is to pick a nice shade area, which gets a little sun for a part of the day (ideally the first sun or late sun). If the lettuces are in full sun, they will more likely bolt and become bitter... but one way around this is to cover them with a shade cloth. In late autumn through to spring, grow your lettuces in a nice sunny spot. And yes they do grow in winter, in cooler to mild climates, but not in areas where hard frost and snow occur, unless you have them covered (in a green house, for instance).

As a rule, for the **mustard leaves**, **soft leaves** and **herbs**, I sow seeds directly into the ground. I keep them well watered until I see their heads pop up (roughly 4–10 days), then lightly water them every day or so, depending on the season – more in summer. Make sure you don't directly water the leaves. In the past I have 'burnt' leaves by doing this, as they are fragile. I usually thin them (i.e. remove the excess seedlings, allowing the others to grow) at about 14 days, then most should be ready to harvest in another 14–40 days. Not bad, hey! Obviously the timing will depend on the particular climate you are in.

For the **hearty & crunchy** and **bitter leaves**, I like to prepare a seed tray, or an old polystyrene box filled with good seed-raising mix, which I keep watered until the seeds sprout. Then I generally transplant into the garden at 14–20 days, or until they look big enough to cope. Keep them tightly planted, I say – it gives them enough room to grow, but also keeps them from flopping over too far, and I like a smaller lettuce. When harvesting these, I like to take the outside leaves off, rather than cutting off the whole head – and as a general rule I quickly run out the back and collect the leaves just before serving the meal, give them a quick wash under cold water, spin, or dry lightly in a towel, then add my dressing and serve.

SALAD FRIENDS AND FOES

There are a few good tips when growing salad leaves. I like to put them in with marigolds, as these are a great companion plant – as are radishes, carrots and onions. And my rocket (arugula) goes gangbusters near strawberries.

Remember slugs and snails love salad leaves. Scattering a few used coffee grounds around will help stop them, or go out late at night with a torch and collect them in a container, then place them on your bird table or on the lawn for the birds to enjoy the next morning.

In my head, I group salad leaves into the following categories; this is simply my thought process into them, rather than conventional wisdom. I've also given some examples as to what kind of leaves are in each category. My perfect salad would be a mixture of one or two or all of them.

I also love herbs in a leaf salad, especially mint, sorrel and tarragon. They add such a delicate and interesting layer to the flavour.

HEARTY & CRUNCHY

- Cos (romaine) lettuce
- Little gem lettuce
- Speckled cos (romaine) lettuce
- Iceberg lettuce
- Cos berg lettuce
- Butter head lettuce (a favourite of mine)
- Mignonette lettuce (the bronze and green varieties)

BITTER LEAVES

- Witlof (Belgian endive/chicory)
- Radicchio (little Italian delis often sell a range of interesting radicchio seeds)
- Endive
- Dandelions (which I always thought were best for rabbits!)

MUSTARD LEAVES

- Nasturtium leaves
- Watercress
- Upland cress
- Rocket (arugula)
- Baby green and red mustard leaves

SOFT LEAVES

- Lollo bianco and rosso lettuce
- Green and red oak lettuce

- Baby English spinach leaves
 - Mâche (lamb's lettuce/corn salad)
 - Mizuna
 - Purslane
 - Salad bowl lettuce (red and green varieties)
-

SALAD HERBS

- Parsley
- Mint (I love its freshness in a salad!)
- Chives
- Basil
- Tarragon
- Sorrel

OTHER

- Broad (fava) bean tops
- Pea tendrils
- Micro shoots, such as radish, beetroot (beet), alfalfa, fenugreek and kale

It really is so simple: buy the best tasty raw ingredients and foods from good producers, and the cook is already winning...

MY ESSENTIAL DRESSINGS

It's funny how many salads I have eaten where the ratio of dressing to salad ingredients is all wrong.

This is the fundamental trick to getting the perfect harmony and balance in the salad as a dish. Too much dressing and your salad is sodden and claggy; too little and it can be dry and plain.

Less is sometimes more, so dress gently. You wouldn't go out wearing hat, scarf and coat in summer now would you, or shorts and singlet in winter... It's about simply dressing an item well, whether it's you or your food!

A dressing is not always essential either. Many times I just add a simple splash of beautiful extra-virgin olive oil, or great-quality vinegar, whether it's cherry, balsamic, vincotto or apple cider vinegar. Sometimes it's a tablespoon of yoghurt or some crushed berries such as blueberries or raspberries.

Also don't forget about any cooking juices from the tray or pan you might've cooked one of the ingredients in. Add a dash of something acidic (lemon juice or vinegar), check the seasoning, then kapow, you have a new dressing!

That said, these next recipes are the go-to dressings I use at Pope Joan and at home.

SIMPLE LEMON

This is a salad dressing basic we have on hand for so many dishes. **Makes about 375 ml (12½ fl oz/1½ cups)**

60 ml (2 fl oz/¼ cup) lemon juice (juice of 2–3 lemons)

1 teaspoon dijon mustard

1 teaspoon caster (superfine) sugar

1 teaspoon sea salt

250 ml (8½ fl oz/1 cup) sunflower oil or canola oil (non GM)

50 ml (1¾ fl oz) hot water

In a bowl, whisk together the lemon juice, mustard, sugar and salt. Slowly whisk in the oil until fully incorporated, then whisk in the water. The dressing will keep for 6 weeks in an airtight jar in the fridge.

USES: A good all-rounder for all types of salad leaves, and great for salads containing radish or fruit. Also nice with smoked fish or crabmeat.

A FRENCHMAN'S MAYO

This is from an old friend of mine, a chef called Manu from my time at Warren House. It is my base mayo for all sorts of things. **Makes about 420 g (15 oz)**

2 egg yolks

2 teaspoons dijon mustard

375 ml (12½ fl oz/1½ cups) sunflower oil or mild-flavoured vegetable oil

20 ml (¾ fl oz) good-quality white wine vinegar

In a bowl, whisk together the egg yolks and mustard until the yolks turn pale. Slowly whisk in the oil until fully combined, then add the vinegar and season to your liking — I prefer to just add salt.

The mayo will keep for 1 week in an airtight jar in the fridge.

USES: Well, what would a potato salad be without mayo?

SALAD CREAM

A Frenchman's mayo, given a bit of English. Let's be honest, salad cream kicks the bejeebers out of the Frenchies' mayo. What would the English do without it? **Makes about 540 g (1 lb 3 oz)**

1 tablespoon caster (superfine) sugar

100 ml (3½ fl oz) hot water

2 egg yolks

2 teaspoons dijon mustard

375 ml (12½ fl oz/1½ cups) sunflower oil or

mild-flavoured vegetable oil

40 ml (1¼ fl oz) good-quality white wine vinegar

100 ml (3½ fl oz) pouring (single/light) cream

Dissolve the sugar in the hot water. In a bowl, whisk together the egg yolks and mustard until the yolks turn pale, then slowly whisk in the oil until fully combined. Now whisk in the vinegar, cream and the hot water, then season to your liking. Again, I prefer to just add salt.

The salad cream will keep for 1 week in an airtight jar in the fridge.

USES: No salad sandwich is the same without salad cream. Also use it with any 'hearty & crunchy' salad leaf.

ENGLISH MUSTARD CREAM

I love this dressing. It's a staple dressing in my world – a quick, easy one for all sorts of dishes.

Makes about 350 ml (12 fl oz)

60 g (2 oz/¼ cup) hot English mustard

50 ml (1¾ fl oz) chardonnay vinegar

225 ml (7½ fl oz) pouring (single/light) cream

2 pinches of sea salt

2 pinches of sugar

In a bowl, whisk everything together. The dressing will keep for 2 months in an airtight jar in the fridge.

USES: Another 'hearty & crunchy' salad leaf dressing, but also great with steamed potato salad, raw cauliflower salad and green beans. You can add chopped anchovies for a cheat's Caesar salad, but don't tell anyone I said that...

CLASSIC BUT A LITTLE POSH

Similar to an Italian dressing, this is a vinegar– and oil–based dressing from my time at Martin Wishart’s in Scotland. It keeps well in the fridge. **Makes about 275 ml (9½ fl oz)**

125 ml (4 fl oz/½ cup) extra-virgin olive oil

90 ml (3 fl oz) walnut oil

40 ml (1¼ fl oz) good-quality red wine vinegar

1 small French shallot, finely chopped

1 garlic clove, finely chopped

1 teaspoon sea salt

6 tarragon leaves

In a bowl, whisk together the olive oil, walnut oil and vinegar. In another bowl, mix together the shallot, garlic, salt and tarragon leaves. Let sit for a few minutes to infuse, then stir into the oil mixture.

The dressing will keep in a jar in the fridge for months, but remember to bring it back to room temperature a good 20 minutes before using.

USES: Generally I keep this dressing away from the ‘hearty & crunchy’ salad leaves, but it’s fine if you’re using a mixture of all leaf varieties. This is my favourite on the bitter, mustard and soft leaves. It’s also great with roasted vegetable salads and grains.



BASICS

DUKKAH

I add a little sugar to my dukkah, as I think it helps bring out the flavour of all the other spices. It's a great way to add taste and texture to dishes, and I love it. **Makes about 1 cup**

INGREDIENTS

100 g (3½ oz/⅔ cup) hazelnuts

2 teaspoons white peppercorns

1 tablespoon coriander seeds

1 tablespoon sesame seeds

2 teaspoons ground cumin seeds

1½ tablespoons salt flakes

1 tablespoon unrefined soft brown sugar

METHOD

Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F). Put the hazelnuts on a baking tray and roast for 5–10 minutes. While they're still warm, place them in a tea towel (dish towel) and rub off the skins. Set aside.

Put a frying pan over a low heat. Add the peppercorns and coriander seeds and allow to toast gently, shaking the pan all the time, until you see some smoke or steam rising from the spices. Quickly tip them into a bowl to cool them, so they don't get a chance to burn.

Now lightly toast the sesame seeds and cumin seeds separately, shaking the pan constantly, and tipping them into a separate bowl to the peppercorn mixture.

Using a mortar and pestle, grind the hazelnuts to break them up. Add the peppercorn mixture and grind to a milled pepper consistency. Now add the toasted sesame seeds, cumin seeds, salt and sugar, mixing well.

The dukkah will keep in an airtight container in a cool dark spot for several months.

PICKLED SHALLOTS

I find myself using a lot of pickles, and why not... Their acidity brings new life to so many dishes, and also helps clean the palate up a little.

INGREDIENTS

75 ml (2½ fl oz) rice wine vinegar

75 ml (2½ fl oz) apple cider vinegar

150 g (5½ oz) caster (superfine) sugar

1 teaspoon fine salt flakes

4 French shallots, thinly sliced into rings, then separated

METHOD

Put the vinegars, sugar and salt in a saucepan with 150 ml (5 fl oz) water. Bring to the boil, then take off the heat. Cool to room temperature, then chill.

Place the shallot rings in a container and pour the pickling liquid over. Leave to pickle for 30 minutes and the shallots are ready to use. They are best enjoyed fresh, but will keep for a few days in the fridge.

CHEAT'S TIP: Adding a nip of grenadine to the pickling liquid will dye the shallots an amazing pink colour.

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