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SALAD.

I live in constant fear of the night that my wife wakes up in an empty bed and pads slowly out to the kitchen to catch me with a squeeze bottle of vinaigrette in one hand and a bowl of arugula in the other. I try to suppress my need for greens by forcing myself to cook more vegetables, but just as sometimes I don't feel like emptying the dishwasher and some days I just don't feel like talking to my wife during that long seventeen-floor elevator ride, there are days when laziness overwhelms me and I just can't get myself to cook *real* vegetables. Why should I, when that head of lettuce is just sitting there in the vegetable crisper, taunting me, whispering to me, "*I'm eeeeeeasy. Dress me, Kenji. Just reach out and dress me.*"

And then I give in. Who could resist salad's temptations? Who could deny that it's the unchallenged champion of easy, well-balanced meals, able to swoop in at moment's notice to add color, flavor, vibrancy, and all-important fiber to your dinner table? All it takes is some fresh greens and a good dressing (and no, it doesn't have to be store-bought).

But what exactly is a salad? It's these sorts of metaphysical questions that can really keep you preoccupied in the bath, so I'll make it easy. Whether they

are mixed greens, vegetables, or meats, whether they are served cold, warm, or hot, there are two things that all salads have in common: they don't require any cutting or knife work at the table and they come with dressing—a sharply flavored mixture that is designed to coat the main ingredients, adding moisture and acidity. At its simplest, a salad can be tossed fresh greens, and from there, salad can go on to become as complex as you'd like, but don't worry—it's really not all that hard.

For those of you who are afraid of dipping your feet into the crazy world of salads, I've designed a six-step program that'll have you developing your *own* salad recipes in no time. The rules are basic and, as with all rules, are meant to be broken. And several of them are optional:

- 1. Find the best, freshest greens you can get and treat them with care.** Nothing can ruin a salad like greens that are past their prime. Decide what type of greens you'd like (see “Picking Salad Greens,” [here](#)), trim, wash, and store them carefully, and serve them before they even begin to expire.
- 2. Pick a dressing style appropriate to your greens.** Salad dressings can be creamy or thin, mild and delicate, or sharp and pungent. Make sure that the dressing you're using enhances instead of competes with or overwhelms your greens.
- 3. Add strongly flavored or aromatic**

garnishes (optional). These are ingredients that give interest to the salad by releasing a burst of flavor in your mouth as you eat. My favorites are:

- *Thin shavings of pungent cheeses like Parmigiano-Reggiano, Pecorino Romano, or aged Gouda, or crumbled blue, feta, or goat cheese*
- *Tender herbs like parsley, basil, cilantro, dill, or chives*
- *Dried fruit such as raisins, currants, or cranberries*
- *Pungent vegetables such as raw onions or shallots*
- *Cured meats, like matchsticks of salami, Spanish chorizo, ham, or cooked bacon*
- *Pickled or cured things like olives, capers, or anchovies*

4. **Add “crunchies” for textural**

contrast (optional). Well-seasoned croutons (see [here](#)) are great for this, as are toasted nuts or seeds, like almonds or sunflower seeds. To toast nuts or seeds, spread them on a rimmed baking sheet and pop them into the oven (or toaster oven) for about 10 minutes at 350°F, until they’ve taken on a bit of color and have an awesome, well, nutty aroma.

5. **Add supporting ingredients like raw or cooked fruits and vegetables or meat and seafood (optional).**

Raw vegetables, such as thinly sliced peppers, grape tomatoes split in half, radish wedges, or grated carrots, make great

accents for green salads, as do sliced chilled meats (like leftover steak or chicken) or bite-sized pieces of cold seafood (like shrimp, lobster, or squid). Roasted apples or pears are easy additions that can turn a simple salad into a full-on lunch entrée. Vegetables can, of course, completely supplant the greens in a salad, as in some chopped salads, salads of roasted vegetables (see the beet salads [here](#) and [here](#)), salads of blanched and chilled vegetables (see Asparagus Salad, [here](#)), or salads made with cooked white or other dried beans (see [here](#)).

- 6. Dress your salad properly and serve it immediately.** Greens begin to wilt the instant they are dressed. Wait until the last possible second to dress and season them, then toss them as gently as possible to coat. That means using a bowl and tossing with your hands (see “Dressing Salads,” [here](#)).

As you go through these stages of salad development, it’s important to keep in mind that more often than not, less is more. Does your salad really need cheese, anchovies, salami, onions, tomatoes, toasted nuts, *and* herbs? Probably not. I’ve provided a number of recipes for salads in this chapter, but I prefer to think of them more as blueprints—as a means of learning how to design your own salads to suit your own tastes.