

LET IT ZING

Salad wines call for bright wines and inventive dressings

By Jessica Yadegaran
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Save for a Mexican Caesar or the annual dollop of buttermilk ranch, I can't remember the last time I bought salad dressing. I've made my own, and taken great pleasure in doing so, for years.

My inspiration is a honey-lime vinaigrette my mother used to make to dress her Salad Shirazi, a basic Persian chop of cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and parsley. Adults would go back for thirds and us kids would hold the bowl caveman-style to our lips, lapping up the dressing like soda pop.

Now, I understand the appeal of that vinaigrette. Its base is citrus, after all, not a harsh vinegar that can flatten or drown out a salad's co-stars, especially wine, with acetic acid. As a wine-drinking adult, I consume more salad than ever, and my dressing dossier calls for ingredients such as jams, alternative vinegars and fruit juices that won't make my precious wines taste flabby.

The most important thing to remember is that salads are no longer iceberg and tomato covered in an oil slick. They are sophisticated main courses brimming with meats, nuts, fruits and cheeses. Even the lettuce available today has expanded to include those with unique flavor profiles and textures that make great wine partners. So, use nutty mache, bitter frisee and peppery arugula to your advantage when pairing.

Before concerning yourself with salad ingredients, however, make sure your fridge is stocked with reliable salad wines. The best, in general, are high in acid, low in alcohol and well-balanced, with a light to medium body that won't coat your delicate leaves. Rose, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Noir and Beaujolais are great options, as are Albarino, Vinho Verde, and the Greek whites, from bone-dry Assyrtiko to aromatic Moschofilero. Also, California sparklings can do wonders for seafood or fruit-topped salad.

Ironically, the hardest thing to accept about making wine-friendly salads is that you must part with your red wine and white wine vinegars. They're too acidic. Instead, go with sherry or rice wine vinegar, which are softer, or use balsamic and add your favorite jam. This is a perfect match for even the most fruit-forward reds, including Cabernet Sauvignon. My favorite fill-in-the-jam vinaigrette was for a pairing I recently did with a Lost Canyon Pinot Noir.

The earthy wine had sky-high acidity — so I knew it could take some vinegar — and loads of bright cherry and strawberry flavors. So I paired the wine with a strawberry avocado spinach salad. Along with a fruity olive oil, the strawberry preserves mellowed the balsamic vinegar, while the avocado matched the wine's silky texture and crumbled goat cheese enhanced its earthy flavors. Who said you can't do red with salad?

Still, as my mom proved years ago, fruit juice makes the best wine-friendly salad dressings. I've substituted her lime-based dressing — honey, olive oil, sea salt and cracked black pepper — with lemon juice, orange juice and even apple juice. All fare beautifully with a zesty New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or a Gewurztraminer, especially if the salad has sweet or spicy elements to it, like fresh or dried fruits or chiles and peppers. Salad with toasted or caramelized nuts pairs beautifully with a well-balanced Chardonnay.

After I'd milked the fruit juice option, manager Matthew Uhlenberg of Berkeley's Liaison wowed me with his favorite alternative to vinegar: reduced stocks. Emulsified in a little oil and sherry

vinegar, you get more flavor and body without fat, he explained. When he was sous chef at Liaison, he'd do a bacon and duck confit stock over a warm frisee and crouton salad. Pair that with a toasty wine that's seen a little oak and you'll understand why salad works with wine. It's about flavor, not acid wars.

Moreover, it's about creating links, or what author, chef and vintner John Ash calls "bridge" ingredients. Like all pairings, the purpose is to either match or complement the flavors in food and wine. So, when I serve a grilled vegetable salad, I go with Primitivo, a super-fruity red and good match to the sweetness that results from grilling. Fruit? Its flavors and aromas are another natural match for wines with hints of stone fruit, like Riesling.

Perhaps the best bridge ingredients, however, are meats, poultry and cheeses. Why? Because their proteins bond to the tannins in wine and tame the acids in dressings. Strong or salty cheeses, such as Gorgonzola, work well with off-dry whites, while salads topped with rare beef, ahi or grilled chicken can take bigger reds to match their texture and mouth-feel.

Either way, my devotion remains to that honey-lime vinaigrette. During the recent heat wave, I tossed it for my boyfriend with artichoke hearts, tuna, hearts of palm and Persian cucumbers. When he thought I wasn't looking, I watched with glee as he gripped the ceramic bowl in his big hands and drank the salad dressing down.