



## Hail the Original Caesar!

KNPR's food critic defends the honor of a classic salad that, sadly, has lost its zest (if not its purpose) over the years.

BY JOHN CURTAS

Pity the poor Caesar salad. Like the martini, it has been maligned, misappropriated and misshapen into a mere shell of its former self. Just as you may now call any alcoholic drink served in a V-shaped, long-stemmed glass a “martini,” so may any salad made with romaine now be a “Caesar” without protest or complaint.

These two icons of culinaria have more in common than just the multiple unappealing ways in which they have been bastardized. In original form, both boast the clean, vivid flavors of the few ingredients that made them famous. Unlike a Caesar salad, the origins of the martini remain debatable. Most decidedly though, the drink that made the name famous consists of a good dry gin mixed with a splash or two of white vermouth and accented by the sharp acidic tang of a green olive—and is not to be confused with those vodka concoctions with blueberry or chocolate chips found at trendy bars.

Served bracingly cold, the classic martini is the perfect aperitif to that most

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## THE ORIGINAL CAESAR SALAD

Makes four generous servings.

### INGREDIENTS

- two heads romaine, crisp and well-dried
- salt
- lots of freshly ground pepper
- 5 cloves of garlic
- 1/2 cup good olive oil
- 16 homemade croutons (Yes, homemade. I make about 20-25 using 5-6 slices of day-old bread.)
- anchovy paste or chopped anchovies (Don't worry, they don't bite. And they are essential to the recipe.)
- 1 1/2 cup medium grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 3 eggs, coddled (Use fresh eggs and "salmonella surprise" will not be a problem.)
- 1-2 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 3 lemons or 4 limes, seeded and juiced. (Use more or less lemon juice to taste, but your salad should always have a distinct lemony edge to it—sadly, most restaurant versions don't.)

### DIRECTIONS

Crush garlic cloves and marinate in the olive oil for at least 30 minutes.

Toast 4-5 bread slices (day-old is better) and cut into squares. Dip them in garlic olive oil and top with a little anchovy paste or finely chopped anchovies.

Boil the eggs for one minute and cool under running water.

Tear romaine into (large) bite-size pieces. Put lettuce in a large wooden salad bowl.

Remove garlic from the 1/2 cup of oil and add another 1/2 cup of fresh oil to make approximately 1 cup. Toss the lettuce with the oil, most of the croutons, some salt and fresh cracked black pepper. Add the eggs and Worcestershire sauce. Lightly toss with all of the grated cheese.

Then squeeze on the lemon juice and lightly toss until all of the ingredients are just blended. Spread the remaining croutons over the top after salads are tossed. Serve.

Note: Alex Cardini always thought the over-use of garlic and the under-use of lemon juice were the most common mistakes made by his imitators.



manly of meals: a good steak dinner. What it should be followed by is a good Caesar salad. For just as this salad should always be denoted as belonging to Mexican restaurateur Caesar Cardini (even though his brother invented it) and not the famous Roman emperor, so should the quintessential steakhouse meal be possessive of both a martini and a Caesar's. The martini primes the palate for the mineral richness of prime beef, while the salad cleanses it.

Yet this holy trinity of American dining faces daily degradation at every franchised restaurant across the land—and at more than a few top-shelf places as well. And in no way is the assault on good taste more prominent than what's been done to the most sainted of salads.

Restaurant sacrileges are too numerous to mention, but here's a clue: Whenever you see salmon, shrimp or chicken next to the word "Caesar," either run away or accept a tasteless fate. A creamy dressing and lack of lemon tang are also evidence of a fraud, as is a paucity of Parmesan cheese or a surfeit of shameful ingredients—a list that ranges from cherry tomatoes to ... tortilla chips!

In its purest form, Caesar salad is about nothing more than rich romaine lettuce lightly coated with garlic-infused olive oil and some sticky egg albumen, and tossed with lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, grated Parmesan cheese and croutons that have been smeared with anchovy paste. The decades-long debate over anchovies in or on anything should be dealt with as diplomatically as one might handle the age-old question of whether to inform Aunt Edna about the sherry in the punch bowl. In other words, what folks don't know won't hurt them—especially when it adds immensely to their enjoyment of the dish.

For something so seemingly American, the world's most famous salad was "invented" at



Alex and Caesar's Steakhouse in Tijuana either in 1924 or 1927, depending on whether Alex or Caesar was doing the talking. Like the martini, many tales of its invention are apocryphal, and the Internet's Wikipedia gets some facts terribly wrong—such as the use of whole romaine leaves and the non-use of anchovies—because it relies too heavily on the recipe in a 1987 Julia Child cookbook. Tossing and eating a salad made with six-to-eight-inch-long lettuce leaves is nearly impossible, and the non-Julia recipes that were based on interviews with Alex and Caesar Cardini (such as the one accompanying this story) call for torn leaves and anchovies spread upon the croutons. We can forgive dear Julia, however, since she was, after all, an expert on French food, not salads born south of the border.

I long ago gave up hoping for the classic table-side-tossed version until I stumbled into the Golden Steer last year and saw that this old-school Vegas restaurant still makes them to order (albeit in a stainless-steel bowl, not a wooden one, in a concession to health-code regulations). Even prominent chefs who claim slavish devotion to recipe purity invariably get the balance of flavors wrong, probably because they leave the making of salads to the lowest person on the kitchen totem pole. And you can't make them in bulk, so you'll only get a good one if the restaurant makes them to order—or you make one at home.

One final piece of salad trivia: The Caesar salad was originally called the Aviators salad, named after the flyboys from the San Diego Naval Air Station who flocked to Tijuana during Prohibition for (presumably) a nice martini, a good steak and the world's greatest salad. DC

*John Curtas' "Food for Thought" commentaries air weekly on News 88.9 KNPR.*

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