

The Crunchiest Salad

A salad with robust, refreshing crunch is the best kind of spring tonic. To make it, slice a kaleidoscope of roots, stalks, and bulbs razor-thin and then just add (ice) water.

BY ANDREA GEARY

I've never been enamored with leafy, delicately dressed salads. Yes, they're pretty and refined, but dainty lettuces start to wilt soon after being tossed with vinaigrette, so eating them becomes a race against time. And because wispy greens lack substance, they don't really satisfy my appetite. I crave a bolder, sturdier salad, one that isn't shy about displaying powerful crunch, and that will hold up. In fact, I suspected that with a bit of strategy, such a salad could be prepared well in advance of serving.

For my dream salad, I'd skip the lettuce altogether and focus on vegetables with substance. And for a salad this hearty, the dressing would need to have real personality too.

Making the Cut

I rounded up an array of firm vegetables and cut them on a mandoline for maximum efficiency, quickly producing a pile of slices about the thickness of a dime. Beets contributed vibrant garnet tones and a bit of grounding earthiness; carrots, sunny pops of orange and a touch of sweetness. After combining these with hardy turnip and celery root slices and coating everything in a simple placeholder vinaigrette, I served myself a plateful. Even though the vegetables were shaved thin, eating this salad was too much of a workout for my jaw. I needed to include some lighter choices too.

I held fast against lettuce, though. Instead, crisp and juicy fennel, celery, and radishes complemented the denser beets and carrots. After transforming 1½ pounds of roots, stalks, and bulbs into svelte slices, I set out to take their crunch to the next level.

Cold Snap

Back when I worked in restaurant kitchens, I often prepped produce items hours before dinner service and held them in ice water, a practice that made them extraordinarily crisp and fresh-tasting by replacing water that was lost during slicing. The more water a vegetable contains in its cells, the crunchier it will be. (Compare the firmness of a juicy, farm-fresh carrot with the wizened flex of the one that's been languishing in the back of the produce drawer.) It's a trick that food writer Molly Baz also employed in her popular Ice Water Salad recipe. Inspired by her example, I loaded the slices into a salad spinner, submerged them in an icy bath, and refrigerated them overnight before spinning them dry.



Salad Gets the Make-Ahead Treatment

To achieve maximum crunch, the vegetables for this salad must be shaved thin, covered in ice water, and refrigerated at least 2 hours (or up to 16 hours) in advance. Prepare the blender dressing ahead, too, so when it's time to eat, the only thing left to do is plate the salad.



Pulling out my kitchen scale, I found that the vegetables had gained almost 3 ounces in water weight during their soak. I recognized this as a mixed blessing: The vegetables were indeed crisp, but I suspected that the salt in my dressing would start to draw out some of their moisture soon after it joined the salad, diluting the dressing. A thick, assertive mixture that could accommodate extra water would be key.

My go-to strategy for bulking up a dressing is to add fatty ingredients such as nuts or cheese, but this time I wanted a nut-free, vegan solution. That's how I ended up using one-third of a cup of deeply savory white miso and nutty tahini as a base. The fermented soybean and sesame pastes were so thick that I was able to whisk in an equal volume of bright apple cider vinegar without making the mixture too runny; neutral vegetable oil added richness. I thought

this simple blend would be a winner, but when I spooned it atop the shaved vegetables, the rich umami notes were pleasant but fleeting, disappearing the instant I swallowed. It needed more oomph.

SCAN FOR VIDEO

A Dressing That's Meant to Be Diluted

The savory blender dressing for this salad is free of nuts, dairy, and gluten, so it's sure to please just about everyone. Not only that, but the intensely flavorful, creamy mixture—which gets its bold flavor and body from white miso, tahini, honey, and a handful of other seasonings—is designed to loosen to just the right consistency and degree of potency when the water-rich vegetables inevitably shed some liquid on the platter. (The thick, concentrated mixture is also terrific as dip for crudités and for dressing chicken salad.)

Dressed to Impress

For my next try, I ran the same combination of vegetables across the blade of my mandoline and loaded the salad spinner as before, but this time I sprinkled three julienned scallion greens onto the ice water before placing the whole thing in the fridge. Then I worked on some dressing improvements.

I moved the operation to the blender so that I could incorporate solids: scallion whites, as well as a garlic clove. In addition to the miso, tahini, vinegar, and oil, I drizzled in honey for floral sweetness. I hoped that in addition to adding verve, these ingredients would give the dressing more cling so that it didn't dissipate as quickly on the palate. Lastly, I sprinkled in touches of black and cayenne peppers for a subtle, spicy glow, and whizzed it all into a luscious blend that would settle to just the right consistency on the platter.

When I pulled the spinner from the refrigerator, the scallions had been transformed into curlyques (another restaurant trick that never fails to delight). I transferred them to paper towels to drain while I spun the chilled vegetables dry. The soothing circular shapes with red, orange, cream, and pale green pigments were so attractive that I didn't want to hide them under the opaque dressing. Instead, I transferred most of the vegetables to a platter, drizzled on some dressing, and arranged the remainder on top before garnishing the salad with the gracefully curved scallion greens.

Step aside, lettuce: There's a new—incredibly crunchy, impeccably dressed—salad in town.

SCIENCE Why an Icy Soak Makes Vegetables Extra-Crunchy

Bite into a vegetable that's been cut up and submerged in cold water, and you'll enjoy remarkable juiciness and crunch. That's because the slices have gained water weight: When we put 1 1/2 pounds of shaved vegetables on a scale before and after a chilly soak, we found that after 2 hours, they had absorbed 1 ounce of water; after 16 hours, they had soaked up almost three times that amount. The extra liquid restores and increases turgor—the water pressure within the vegetables' cell walls—that is released when the produce is cut. Vegetables that are turgid with water are crispy, juicy, and rigid; ice-cold water further enhances the crunch because chilling causes their pectin to firm up.



SHAVED VEGETABLE SALAD WITH CREAMY MISO DRESSING

SERVES 6 TOTAL TIME: 35 MINUTES, PLUS 2 HOURS CHILLING

You'll need a salad spinner for this recipe. If small beets are unavailable, use one 6-ounce beet, cut into quarters. The vegetables in this recipe should be sliced to the thickness of a dime, which can be quickly achieved with a mandoline; alternatively, you can slice the vegetables with a knife. After trimming and slicing, you should have about 1 1/2 pounds of vegetables. If preferred, you can use an immersion blender to make the dressing, but it won't be quite as smooth.

- 1 (12-ounce) fennel bulb, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and sliced thin
- 3 (2-ounce) red beets, trimmed, peeled, and sliced thin
- 2 celery ribs, sliced thin
- 2 carrots, peeled and sliced thin
- 3 (1 1/2 to 2-inch) radishes, trimmed and sliced thin
- 2 cups ice
- 3 scallions, white parts chopped coarse, green parts cut into 2-inch lengths
- 1/3 cup white miso
- 1/3 cup cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons tahini
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 1/2 teaspoon table salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper

1. Place fennel, beets, celery, carrots, and radishes in salad spinner basket and place basket in salad spinner bowl. Spread ice over surface of vegetables. Add cold water until vegetables are submerged. Slice scallion greens lengthwise into very thin matchsticks. Sprinkle scallions over ice, and press lightly to submerge. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 16 hours. While vegetables chill, make dressing.

2. Process miso, vinegar, oil, scallion whites, tahini, honey, garlic, salt, pepper, and cayenne in blender until completely smooth, 1 to 2 minutes (mixture will be thick). Transfer to small bowl, cover, and refrigerate until needed.

3. Using tongs, pluck scallion greens from top of ice water (they will have curled up), and transfer to paper towel-lined plate to drain. If any ice remains on surface of water, skim off and discard. Drain vegetables and spin thoroughly. Lift basket from salad spinner and shake to rearrange vegetables; discard collected water. Repeat spinning and draining until less than 1 teaspoon water collects in bottom of salad spinner, 2 to 3 more times.

4. Transfer three-quarters of vegetables to serving platter. Drizzle three-quarters of dressing over vegetables. Arrange remaining vegetables over dressing, sprinkle scallion greens over salad and serve, passing remaining dressing separately.