



Lettuce Be Basic

Iceberg returns as the season's coolest green
Written by Regan Hofmann Photographed by Eric Helgas

The most exciting thing to happen to salad bowls this year isn't exactly new—in fact, it's about as close to an American classic as roughage gets. But to a certain set of creative chefs, iceberg lettuce has opened up a world of possibilities that are freeing plates and palates from the last decade's obsession with ultra-intense supergreens.

Iceberg has a storied place in the American culinary psyche. It first rose to the top of the lettuce ranks in the 1920s thanks to its sturdiness, which allowed it to travel long miles (often packed under ice) without wilting, making it ubiquitous from coast to coast. The uninspired side salads it unfortunately spawned, however, are less distant a memory, and for those who lived through those dark, frozen-food decades, iceberg's return is understandably fraught. Alice Waters, the ardent Berkeley crusader for ultralocal eating, famously singled out iceberg as symbolic of everything wrong with the food-industrial complex.

But while iceberg may seem like an unlikely candidate for a comeback, there's more to the pale green leaves than meets the eye. Sure, it doesn't pack the superfood punch of its trendier colleagues. But iceberg is still a low-calorie source of vitamin A, omega-3s and antioxidants, and unlike its darker-hued contemporaries, it's low in vitamin K, making it suitable for people on certain medications.

More importantly, iceberg's return represents an embrace of the radical idea that good-for-you foods can also be tasty—and *actually* tasty, not raw cacao chia seed pudding-tasty. It's a less-is-more approach to health that comes as a welcome respite from the fanatical wellness crowd. Ever cringed at the idea of choking down powdered maca or sprouted-rice protein boosts? You may now relax. Not every salad needs to be, as New York City chef (Butter, The

Darby) Alex Guarnaschelli puts it, a “vitamin bomb.” Besides, says Guarnaschelli, iceberg has plenty of redeeming culinary qualities. “It's fibrous, it has no calories, it's hydrating, it's luscious, it has great texture,” she says. “You can get to really clean eating that breaks up the monotony of the protein shake.”

One might call the Ice Box crudités at Geoffrey Zakarian's brand-new Georgie, an all-day oasis in the Montage Beverly Hills, anything but monotonous. Served with a retro-chic green goddess dressing for dipping, the platter is a painter's palette of impeccably sourced garden-fresh vegetables, with refreshingly cool iceberg lettuce standing tall at center stage. A staple for midcentury hostesses, the dish proves crudités can appeal to modern, well-traveled appetites—in fact, Zakarian says he drew inspiration from his travels in St. Barts.

Another old-school iceberg application driving modern chefs wild is the wedge. Draped in creamy, tangy dressing and studded with rich bacon and juicy tomatoes, the wedge is the ultimate salad-for-dinner indulgence. At Butter, Guarnaschelli punctuates hers with piquant leeks instead of the traditional chive garnish, though she is adamant that the classic version needs no apologies. “The first time you eat a wedge, your whole life changes,” she says. “Then you have to pretend that you love arugula and mustard greens and mugwort and carrot-top pesto, but secretly you just want a giant ice-cold wedge with blue cheese and warm bacon on top.”

It's true that the wedge salad probably won't win any nutritional awards, but then, we've already redeemed butter, wine and red meat from their former reputations as nutritional villains. Today, happily, the watchword is balance. Which puts iceberg, with its fresh-from-the-garden green flavor and total versatility, right at home in the modern whole-foods pantry. And a little bacon won't hurt either. ■

AN ODE TO RANCH DRESSING

A little-known piece of trivia: Ranch dressing and Oprah Winfrey share a birthday. At least, 1954 is the year that Oprah was born, and also the year that a couple in California bought a ranch named Hidden Valley, where they would go on to trademark what has become the most popular salad dressing in American history. Is it a coincidence that Oprah also went on to become the most popular talk show host in American history? I think not.

You see, 1954 was the year that the fates of mass consumer appeal realized that our country needed some bold talkers. Oprah obviously carried the torch on television, but who forged the way on the salad plate?

Ranch dressing comes from humble origins—just buttermilk, mayonnaise and herbs—but essentially annihilates any and all other flavors that come into its path, and there have been some suspect flavors lurking around the American diet over the past half-century. We should never be allowed to forget the '60s, an era in which Jell-O and meat regularly merged in common household recipes. Bravely, ranch crashed onto the scene, pacifying our taste buds with its let's-all-be-friends



attitude to foods from all corners, from wings and pizza to celery and carrots. Only recently has America had something of a culinary awakening, but just as we must support Oprah in her new chapter of life behind the camera, we cannot renounce ranch dressing simply because our palates have evolved to grasp the values of health and nuance. Remember who brought us together when we needed it most, and stand with ranch. —FRANCES DODDS