

taste buds

chef Larry
JanesCoconut:
memories
are sweet

Waltzing through the grocery store last week, I stumbled (literally) over a runaway coconut. I probably never would have even noticed it had it not been a 72-degree day and I was wearing shorts and sandals, trying my damndest to rush spring. People have a tendency to notice large rock-like objects, especially while wearing sandals.

Something tells me that a higher power placed that coconut right where I would smash my baby toe against its hard shell. As I bent over in pain with instantaneous thoughts of personal-injury lawyers rushing through my mind, my first response would have been to pick the coconut up and chuck it into an egg-filled dairy case. But as fate had it, as I went to clutch it in my fist, I realized it fit like an old baseball glove.

My hands traversed the pod, noticing immediately the wiry skin. It was a cross between an oval and globe shape. The coconut was colored a morel-mushroom mahogany. There was nothing olfactory about it.

Picking up this sole coconut did queer another feeling, however. The last time I enjoyed a coconut, I was in school. I remember Mom bringing one home hidden in the bottom of a grocery bag. It was all we could do to wait for Dad to bring out an old board, a hammer and a nail. We sat in awe as this big hulk of a Dad gently pounded the fat nail into a coconut eye. We could hardly wait for the nail to be removed. The coconut hoisted to our lips, we couldn't understand why we could hear the milk inside but not taste its sweetness.

"PATIENCE" was the only word Dad uttered. Again grabbing the coconut and placing it carefully on the board, another nail was inserted, making yet another air passage. The second hole made for a spigot that would magically shut off the milk simply by covering with a finger.

Thank goodness it was just my twin sister and me. It was hard enough fighting among two, let alone a gaggle of friends.

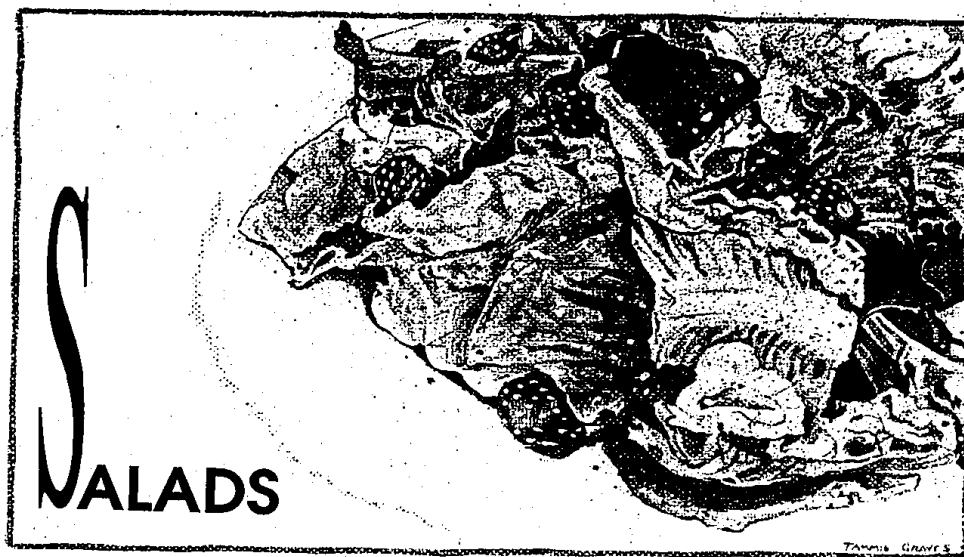
After the coconut was drained of every drop of sweet liquid, I remember Mom getting down on all fours to light the gas oven. As kids, we could never understand why a coconut had to be baked at 375 degrees for 10 minutes before eating. Supposedly, this makes the coconut easier to crack and remove from the shell. This we were never taught in culinary arts school.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent measuring chunks of fresh coconut, interrupted occasionally by asking Mamma to give us a little more of what she had set aside to make Dad's favorite coconut cream pie with.

When was the last time you enjoyed a coconut? You don't need kids to taste this fruit. If you are any kind of a baker, fresh coconut milk in place of milk or water imparts excellent flavor and texture into a cake, pastry or pie crust. Fresh grated coconut makes an intriguing batter for shrimp and chicken. Toasted coconut on cookies and cakes adds eye appeal. You can freeze it in chunks or grated, for later use in recipes.

Or you can do what I'm going to do with mine right after this story is finished. Make my 74-years-young dad a coconut cream pie.

We sat in awe as this big hulk of a Dad gently pounded the fat nail into a coconut eye.



Be daring with salads, homemade dressings

By Phyllis Krøger Stillman
special writer

WITH HEALTH a major concern for so many these days, salads have become an everyday item in most people's diets. Rich in vitamins, minerals and fiber, salads are a low-fat, low-calorie health bonanza (unless, of course, they're drowned in high-fat, high-calorie dressings).

If you're not careful, though, you can get in a rut, serving the same salad day after day. After a while, even diehard salad lovers can become bored. Fortunately, with some imagination and a little experimentation, the daily salad (or two) can become a treat to look forward to.

The first thing to consider is your choice of greens — there should be more to salad than iceberg lettuce. Some other good choices: red or green leaf lettuce, spinach leaves, romaine or Boston bibb lettuce.

You also can bring a tired salad back to life with the addition of new and different ingredients. Along with the usual salad vegetables like carrots, tomatoes, cucumber and celery, try tossing in a few of these extras:

Sliced pickled beets
Slices of apple
Sliced olives (green or ripe)
Grated mozzarella
Sliced fresh zucchini
A handful of raisins

Cubes of cheddar or swiss cheese
Alfalfa sprouts
Frozen peas, thawed and drained
Nuts (pine nuts, walnuts, pecans, toasted almonds)
Crumbed bacon
Slices of pickled hot peppers
Crumbed blue cheese
Sliced fresh zucchini
Sunflower seeds

By varying just a few ingredients, you can have a completely different salad. If you take salad greens and add crumbled feta cheese, sliced beets, red onion, pickled hot peppers, Greek olives and a Greek oil and vinegar dressing, you have a Greek Salad. Take away the feta cheese and beets and add grated mozzarella, sliced pepperoni and croutons with Italian dressing, and you have an Italian antipasto salad.

Fruit salads can be substituted for the usual vegetable salad. One great, simple salad is sectioned oranges and grapefruit with their juice, with maraschino cherries and sliced banana added just before serving. There's also the classic Waldorf salad — apples, celery and walnuts in a whipped cream/mayonnaise dressing — which can be varied by adding ingredients such as green or red seedless grapes, raisins, or even cubed chicken for a heartier, main dish salad.

One of the best things you can do for any salad, though,

is to make your own dressing. A lot of bottled dressings taste good, but if you look at what's in them, you will find a long list of hard-to-pronounce ingredients.

Calories and fat also can be a problem with bottled dressings. Although there are a wide variety of low-calorie and low-fat dressings you can buy, some don't taste very good, and most contain the same types of ingredients as the regular dressings.

HOMEMADE SALAD dressings are very easy to make, using ingredients you already have on hand. Fresh, homemade dressings don't require preservatives. You can control what goes into them and adapt recipes to fit your needs (eliminate or reduce salt or MSG, adjust spice and herb levels, use reduced-calorie or cholesterol-free mayonnaise and use the salad oil of your choice).

You can make just the amount you want so the dressing will stay fresh. If you don't use a lot of salad dressing, you can cut the recipe to make a smaller quantity. Best of all, of course, is the taste. Bottled dressings, however good, just can't compare with the fresh taste of a homemade dressing.

Variety is, we're told, the spice of life. Variety in the salads and salad dressings you serve will indeed spice up your life and keep you eating healthy instead of reverting back to the bad habits of yesterday.

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Olive Garden is unique 'chain' restaurant

Diana
Landskrooner
serves Chicken
Marsala, with
spaghetti,
garlic bread-
sticks and
salad.
Photograph
by Jim
Jagdfeld



The image of the "chain" doesn't fit here, in part because the parent corporation, General Mills, moves in where other restaurants have moved out. As a result, there's no set cookie-cutter image for the Olive Garden as you will find with places like the Red Lobster, Bob Evans and Big Boy.

Such is the case in Livonia where the Olive Garden moved into a lovely octagonal building two-and-a-half years ago that once housed a higher-priced seafood restaurant. The panorama of glass windows are perfect for the Olive Garden's abundance of plants and friendly atmosphere. The prime location has to be one of the factors giving rise to the restaurant's popularity.

Another factor — oddly — is the breadsticks. Most people we queried mentioned the warm, fresh breadsticks, sautéed with garlic as a prime attraction at this restaurant. It's not that they downplayed the entrees, it was just the thought of the breadsticks was enough to make them point their cars in that direction.

THE BREADSTICKS, we agree, are excellent. And it doesn't hurt that you can have an unlimited supply of them as well as the soup and dinner salad. Who needs a meal after that? Served family style, the "house" salad includes purple onions, tomatoes, black olives, croutons and peppers tossed in the restaurant's vinaigrette dressing. It's a respectable salad that is dressed a little heavily with dressing.

Pastas are the restaurant's forte. The crab al-

fredo (\$10.95) is quite good, with a delicious cream sauce that isn't too heavy coating the fettuccini and a generous helping of snow crab. The restaurant serves a respectable tomato sauce with its spaghetti, ravioli and mostaccioli entrees and its tortellini stuffed with cheese and herbs is very good. All these entrees are priced \$5.95 to \$9.50 including the salad and breadsticks.

Both chicken and veal dishes are popular here, with the chicken marsala a favorite. We found the chicken to be moist, tender and generally well prepared. Choices include veal or chicken parmigiana, veal piccata and Venetian grilled chicken which is served with a marinara sauce. With these entrees came a choice of spaghetti or fresh vegetable, in this case a steamed broccoli that was done just right.

The combination platters give diners a chance to sample a couple entrees at a reasonable price (\$10.75-\$11.75). Among the interesting combinations are a Mediterranean entree with cannellini, tortellini and cheese ravioli with meat sauce or the "Southern Italian" selection with veal parmigiana, lasagna and baked manicotti.

THE OLIVE GARDEN ***
14000 Middlebelt, just north of I-96
458-5100.

Hours: Sunday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.,
Friday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Prices: Lunch \$4-\$6, Dinner \$5.95-\$11.75. All
major credit cards. Carryout and catering avail-
able.

Value: Respectable food at respectable prices.

RATING GUIDE

★ Average (lots of places with similar quality)
★★ Good
★★★ Very good
★★★★ Excellent
★★★★★ Consistently superb — a rare bonor