

# Off with their heads, bagged salad is in

BY EMILY GERSEMA  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP) — Heads are out, bags are in as consumers walk past the plastic-wrapped heads of lettuce and reach for ready-to-eat mixed salad pouches stacked on grocery store shelves.

The bulging bags of greens are convenient for people who want a serving of veggies but do not want to take the time to chop and toss a salad. Sales show demand is increasing rapidly.

Food companies predict bagged lettuce sales will top \$2 billion this year — a leap from the \$197 million in sales recorded in 1993 by Information Resources Inc., a market analysis company.

"People don't cook," said Robin Sprague, a spokeswoman for Fresh Express, a Salinas, Calif.-based salad company. "They don't really want to cook. They want to assemble and salads are perfect for that."

Consumers also seek variety. While demand for common iceberg head lettuce is falling, a wide range of leaf lettuce such

as lollo rosso and romaine varieties are becoming more popular, the Agriculture Department says.

People ate about 6.9 billion pounds of iceberg lettuce in 2000. Gary Lucier, a department researcher, said that amount is expected to fall this year to roughly 6.7 billion pounds. Since 1989, iceberg lettuce consumption has dropped 13 percent.

Sales of iceberg's leafy relatives, including romaine, have gone from about 2.3 billion pounds 2000 to about 2.4 billion pounds this year. Romaine "is almost a staple now. People like the iceberg blended with the romaine," Sprague said.

Though consumers maybe unaware of it, bagged lettuce has been around since the 1970s in restaurants and other eateries. Earthbound Farm Organic in San Juan Bautista, Calif., began making bagged lettuce in 1984, a few years before it appeared in major grocery stores.

Myra Goodman, who founded Earthbound with her hus-

band, Drew, said production started at home. They prepared mixes for themselves at their farm in Carmel Valley, Calif., filling their refrigerator with packages of mixed greens to save time and eat a variety of vegetables.

"We always just thought: Isn't this an incredible product?" Goodman said.

The Goodmans expanded, selling packages to restaurants. Other companies caught onto the notion in the late 1980s. Leading produce companies such as Fresh Express and Dole Food Company began selling bagged lettuce in major supermarkets. As popularity increased, so did variety. The nearly 50 companies that produced some 200 varieties of fresh-cut salads in 1993 now offer more than 455 different salad items. Most lettuce companies are based in California, where the climate and soil are ideal for the plants. They also grow it in Arizona and Mexico.

In North Dakota, a salad-making operation has been started in Medina, Dakota. Fresh was forced to stop pro-

duction last summer because the bag it was using for the salads was faulty, but officials have tested new bags and hope to be making salads again for the retail and food service markets by the end of November.

Lettuce comes in four general types: iceberg, butterhead, romaine and leaf. Iceberg is the most common. It is the firm, round type often used by restaurants. Butterhead is another head type but it is more sensitive to damage. Romaine is an upright plant, and leaf lettuce, such as Deep Red, does not form a head. Colors range from deep purple and red to light yellow and spring green.

The bagged salads made from these varieties appear simple, but companies invest heavily in special equipment to prepare them. At Fresh Express, lettuce is routed through custom-made washers and dryers before blades shred the leaves into chewable pieces. Each company has its own special equipment for preparing the bagged lettuce, down to the plastic pouches.



Use Mediterranean ingredients and seasonings like zucchini, portobello mushrooms, basil and oregano to create an Italian stir-fry.

## Create a stir with Italian stir-fry

BY DANA JACOBI  
CORRESPONDENT

Once again, a week after the New Year, it is time to reckon with broken resolutions. Eating more healthfully has always appeared on my annual list of well-intended commitments. Last year, I had reasonable success with two ways to accomplish this, so I want to share them.

My first resolution was to eat more fresh fruit. When I made it, I put a bowl of apples on a table near the front door.

Every day, on the way out, I took one and ate it on the way to where I was going. With this apple, plus the fruit I have at breakfast, in a smoothie or on cereal, and as a snack before bed, I was eating at least three servings of fruit a day. This lasted until sometime in February, a record for my keeping a New Year's resolution. You may do even better. To your bowl of apples, you can add other seasonal fruits easy to eat on the move, like grapes, cherries and berries, already packed in a bag and ready to go.

The second resolution, to eat more vegetables, has been more successful. I found quick ways to include them in meals, relying on one-dish cooking, particularly stir-frys. This strategy has produced a permanent increase in my vegetable consumption. So have a few creative discoveries.

I've found that stir-fry and soy sauce need not be synonymous. Sometimes I use Mediterranean ingredients and seasonings, as in this week's Italian stir-fry. Other times,

I toss bite-size pieces of boneless chicken, canned black beans, chopped onion and garlic, corn and jalapeños into the wok, with a dollop of salsa at the end. After cleaning what was becoming a permanent oil-slick on the stove, I tried using a skillet, especially for stir-frys with non-Asian ingredients. As long as your stove can be turned up to super-hot, this produces a perfect stir-fry, with less mess than cooking in a wok.

### ITALIAN STIR-FRY

- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
  - 1/2 pound skinless, boneless chicken breast, cut in 1/2-inch pieces
  - 1 large red bell pepper, seeded and cut in 1/2-inch pieces
  - 1 large zucchini, halved lengthwise, cut in 1/2-inch slices
  - 2 garlic cloves, finely minced
  - 2 large (about 1/2-pound) portobello mushrooms, stemmed, cut in 1/2-inch pieces
  - 1 teaspoon dried basil
  - 1 teaspoon dried oregano
  - 1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes, or to taste
  - 1/2 cup fat-free, reduced-sodium chicken broth
  - 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
  - Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
  - 2 cups cooked brown rice
- Place a large skillet over high heat.
- Add oil, swirl to coat the pan and heat oil until very hot. Add chicken and stir-fry until it loses its pink color. With a slotted spoon, remove chicken from pan and set aside.
- Add red peppers, zucchini and garlic to the pan. Stir-fry until the garlic is fragrant, about 2 minutes.
- Add the mushrooms. Stir-fry until they release their liquid, about 2 minutes.
- Return chicken to the pan. Add basil, oregano, red pepper and chicken broth.
- Stir-fry until chicken is opaque all the way through, about 4 minutes.
- Add cheese and toss. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
- Serve immediately over brown rice, including juices from the pan.

Makes 4 servings.

Per serving: 272 calories, 6 g. total fat (1 g. saturated fat), 28 g. carbohydrate, 25 g. protein, 3 g. dietary fiber, 179 mg. sodium.

Dana Jacobi is author of "The Joy of Soy" and recipe creator for the American Institute for Cancer Research's "Stopping Cancer Before It Starts."

## Muffin meat loaves are ready in a hurry

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Muffin-sized individual meat loaves have a winning profile. They are a cute version of a tasty favorite — and also, because of their size, they cook in just 20 minutes, a much shorter time than a traditional meatloaf.

All the preparer has to do is combine ground beef with shredded zucchini and the other ingredients, and spoon the mixture into muffin tins. Remember to mix your ingredients with a light hand to ensure moist juicy meat loaves; don't overmix or the meat loaves will be compact and dry.

While the little loaves bake, prepare the Parmesan mashed potatoes, a fine accompaniment and equally easy. Unpeeled potatoes and garlic are

microwaved, mashed and mixed with milk and cheese. Add a favorite green vegetable, and dinner's ready.

### MUFFIN TIN MEAT LOAVES

(Total preparation and cooking time 30 minutes)

- 1/2 pounds lean ground beef
- 1/2 cups shredded zucchini
- 1 cup soft bread crumbs
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup ketchup

Heat oven to 400° F.

In a large bowl, combine all ingredients except ketchup, mixing lightly but thoroughly. Place approximately 1/2 cup beef mixture into each of 12 medium muffin cups, press lightly; spread ketchup over top.

Bake in 400° F oven 20 minutes or until no longer pink and juices run clear.

Meanwhile, prepare quick Parmesan mashed potatoes. Remove meat loaves from pan; serve with potatoes.

### QUICK PARMESAN MASHED POTATOES

- 1 1/2 cups all purpose potatoes, scrubbed, quartered
- 3 tablespoons water
- 3 large cloves garlic, crushed
- 1/2 cup low-fat milk
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

In 2-quart microwave-safe container, combine potatoes, water and garlic.

Cover and microwave at high 12 to 14 minutes or

until potatoes are tender.

Mash potatoes until smooth. Add milk, cheese and salt, beating until light and fluffy. (If mixture becomes too thick, add additional milk, 1 tablespoon at a time.)

Makes 6 servings (serving size: 2 mini-meat loaves and 1 cup potatoes).

Nutritional information per serving: 330 cal., 28 g. protein, 29 g. carbohydrate, 109 mg. sodium, 109 mg. chole.

Cook's Tip: To make soft bread crumbs, place torn bread slices in food processor fitted with steel blade, or blender container. Cover; process 30 seconds, pulsing on and off until fine crumbs. One-and-a-half slices will yield 1 cup soft bread crumbs.

Recipe from National Cattlemen's Beef Association

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