



BABY GREENS,
 STRAWBERRIES AND
 EDIBLE FLOWERS

A walk on the wild side

NORTH AMERICAN IMPORT AND Export, a distributor out of Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, buys wild greens and other produce directly from foragers to deliver to chefs. The pickers follow the season, trekking from Northern California to Washington State in their search for edible salad ingredients.

Miner's lettuce is tender, sweet lettuce named for 19th century gold rush miners who ate it to ward off scurvy. **Wild watercress** has a peppery, tangy flavor with a nutty aroma. Both can be served raw on their own or incorporated into a base for mixed greens. "We introduced these products last year and were blown away by the demand," reports Justin Marx, VP of North American. He believes wild greens are poised to be the next big thing, following in the footsteps of micro-greens.



MINER'S LETTUCE



WILD WATERCRESS

Green day

WITH AMERICANS SCOUTING WAYS TO EAT HEALTHIER, RESTAURANTS IN EVERY SEGMENT ARE offering a sizeable selection of side and entree salads. And make no mistake, salad-bored consumers need more than a Chicken Caesar or a house salad to tempt their taste buds. As the competition heats up, maybe it's time to take a fresh look at the salad ingredients you're sourcing; greens, produce, dressings and condiments are available in plenty of varieties and convenient forms.

It's a toss-up

WHAT'S THE SMARTEST PURCHASE FOR your operation: fresh-cut greens and produce, packaged salad mixes or whole heads of lettuce that you break down in house? The answer depends on food cost targets, salad volume and labor allocation.

Many of the salad bars in QSR and casual operations are now using pre-cut produce, such as washed, chopped iceberg and romaine lettuces, stemmed spinach leaves, peeled baby carrots and sliced apples, says Tonya Antle, vice president of organic sales for Earthbound Farm, a major salad supplier. Salad blends, like the company's Spring Mix or American Blend (iceberg, romaine, cabbage and carrots) are also big. "But fine dining is still engaged in the baby greens category," she reports. "Wild arugula, mache and baby heirloom lettuces like lollo rosa are popular."

FreshPoint, a fresh produce division of Sysco, offers a wide assortment of what it calls "FreshCuts." Included are several types of leafy greens as well as fruits and vegetables that have been chopped, shredded, diced, sliced, julienned or otherwise prepped. Proprietary mixes and custom salads are also available.

Fresh-cut fruits and vegetables have been a boon to

many operations in reducing waste by as much as 60 percent, transferring labor costs to service areas, conserving cold storage space and stabilizing food costs,

FreshPoint claims. That was enough to convince Arkansas-based MarketPlace Concepts, in business since 1995, to switch over.

"We sell a lot of salads," says purchasing manager Andy Caron, "and as we

expanded to seven stores and our volume went up, we stopped cutting ingredients and began buying pre-cut salad mixes." Caron feels that it no longer makes sense to hand-cut greens—the quality of fresh-cut products has improved and labor is such an issue. But for presentation purposes, the kitchen turns to hand slicing for moister items like tomatoes and onions.

The 92-unit Saladworks, a create-your-own chain based in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, investigated the fresh-cut alternative when it experienced a growth spurt, but decided to stick with bulk



SALADWORKS' AVOCABOLICIOUS



A CUSTOM-CREATED SALAD AT TOSSED

purchases for its 50-50 romaine-iceberg mix. "Our customers noticed the difference," notes Joe Giannotti, VP of franchise services. "Plus, the added cost of convenience was more than our labor costs." Saladworks will re-evaluate its purchasing decisions as the franchise grows. It has started bringing in more adventurous toppings for an ongoing Signature Series Salad promotion. The current Avocado-licious salad uses frozen avocado slices. "We're also getting requests for organic, but pricing and availability are big challenges," Giannotti says.

Tossed, another make-a-salad concept with 12 locations, has a similar sourcing style. "We purchase cases of lettuce, whole tomatoes and cucumbers and other fresh produce from FreshPoint and break it down ourselves," says a company spokesperson. Seasonal and innovative ingredients such as sugar snaps and jicama join the lineup when available. Tossed minimizes waste through efficient ordering—it buys just what it needs and has it delivered five times a week. As for safe food handling, FreshPoint can pull an item immediately if there is any question about contamination, tracing any crate of produce back to the field. Plus, employees are trained to be just as fussy, washing produce in a sanitizing solution and storing and cooking proteins at proper temperatures.

Designer greens

SALADS CAN OFFER A POINT OF DIFFERENTIATION at upscale restaurants so it pays to be strategic about sourcing. At FARMbloomington, chef-owner Daniel Orr relies on a combination plan to achieve "sustainability with affordability" in his salad program. Despite his location in Indiana, he's able to source year-round from local farmers who grow greens and other salad ingredients in greenhouses and fields. "Right now [early spring], farmers have local watercress and mustard greens—some of it foraged—that I'm mixing with salad greens from a large supplier," Orr says. "It allows me to turn something famil-

Q & A with Tonya Antle

VP, Organic Sales, Earthbound Farm



What trends are you seeing in salads?

Upscale customers are buying frisee and frisee blends as well as Asian-style greens, like mizuna. Heirloom varieties are also strong, including red and green oak lettuce and baby lettuces. Casual operations are ordering a lot of chopped romaine and iceberg. And we're getting more requests for salad kits and custom packs that might include romaine hearts, radicchio and baby spinach, for example.



What's happening with organic?

Both casual and fine dining expect organic items to represent a larger portion of their sales. Operators often find that incorporating organic ingredients into a salad can be a smart move—it won't increase the cost that much and customers perceive a greater value.

Are there new safety controls in the supply chain?

To reduce the risk of contaminated raw materials entering the processing area, we implemented a "firewall"—a Test & Hold program. All salad greens are tested and held until results return negative for pathogens. The tests come back in 12 to 15 hours to keep perishable products from losing their freshness. The salad greens are not released to shipping until they have been cleared.

How can operators ensure a safe supply?

Spec based on source. Understand where your salad greens are grown and develop a relationship with the shipper and distributor—whether it's a specialty wholesaler, small organic supplier or broadliner. And don't break the cold chain.

What storage tips can you share?

In the walk-in, store salad greens in rigid containers away from meats, dairy and liquids. It's a challenge to protect greens from spills and other damage. Earthbound Farm just launched a self-shipping, 2-pound plastic clamshell container to protect greens during handling and storage. This packaging seems to extend shelf life, too.

iar into something unexpected." Currently, the farmers are also selling fresh herbs, day lily shoots, Easter egg radishes and young mache at both the local farmers' market and direct to his restaurant.

"These are all highly perishable so you have to use them quickly. To avoid waste, I menu several well-priced daily

salad specials," says Orr.

The chef has also developed an ingenious method for prolonging shelf life. He purchased small plastic storage units on casters from an office supply store and placed them in the walk-in. Delicate fresh greens and herbs are rinsed in ice water then stored in the paper towel-lined drawers.



BLOOMINGTON'S
FARMERS' MARKET