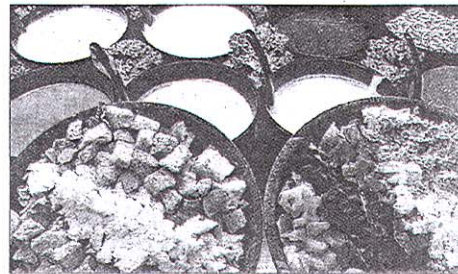


Going for the greens

In restaurants and at home, many are choosing salads instead of reaching for a burger and some fries



Staff photos by Danny Drake
John Galante of Gloucester County eats at Saladworks Cafe in Somers Point. Salads have captured the dining public's imagination, and restaurants are responding to the changing tastes.

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Fork in hand, Mike Nolan dives into lunch, a shallow bowl brimming with the contents of his buffalo chicken ... salad.

That's right, salad. Not a wrap. Not a sub. Not grinder, hoagie or hero.

A salad, a big salad, actually, piled high with tortilla chips, chicken, cheese and carrots. It is striking for what it is as much as for what it is not: fast food.

"I'm not a health nut," says Nolan, of Egg Harbor Township, between bites at Saladworks in Somers Point.

"But I think it's better to eat a salad than a processed hamburger."

In the long history of dining out, from foraging to four-star, the epic tale of the salad can be segmented thusly:

The Sidekick: In the beginning there was the complementary garden salad. Occasionally usurped by the Caesar, it is a species that remains to this day.

The Island: A user-friendly paean to choice, it represents the freedom of choice to build your own.

The Big Salad: Immortalized in an episode of "Seinfeld," it is the salad-as-entree, a trend that experienced a late-'90s boom before bowing to the pressure from a dozen turn-of-the-century diet fads.

But it looks like those salad days aren't over quite yet.

Main course salads have come roaring back, benefiting from the continued emphasis on healthy living and buoyed by a baby boomer

Did you know?

- May is National Salad Month.
- The U.S. produced 9.7 billion pounds of lettuce in 2004, most grown in California and Arizona.
- More than 60 million gallons of salad dressing are eaten every year.

generation about to enter its seventh decade.

"Salads make what we call a good food platform," says Hudson Riehle, National Restaurant Association senior vice president of research and information services. "(Diners) can control the portion size. It really allows them to tie it to their specific taste."

Association research points to an increasing segment of eaters opting for healthier restaurant fare when compared to just two years ago.

Not that Saladworks General Manager Alex Burckhardt necessarily agrees that the frenzy for salads ever went away, if it even existed at all.

"The craze? I don't really know if there really was a craze," he says.

"Every year we get a little closer to where we should be nutritionally."

Still, restaurants both fancy and fast are responding.

Fast food salad offerings have become more diverse, and so have stand alone outlets banking on the public's desire for greener meals.

The allure of the salad is that, for all its surface rigidity—lettuce, toppings, dressing—there is a tremendous amount of fluidity to the meal.

Additives range from the familiar (olive, tomato, cucumber) to the more exotic (mandarin orange, garbanzo beans, walnuts).

"It's like kids in a candy store," Saladworks franchise owner Jill Siracusano says of the choice between specialty salads building one from scratch using as many ingredients as there are toppings at an ice cream counter.

"You can pick all the fun things you want."

In March, Saladworks debuted.

Then, in September, Galloway resident Amy Massaro tossed her hat into the ring with The Salad Bowl.

Her effort was influenced by overnight shifts spent working at Shore Memorial Hospital in Somers Point and being unable to find a decent dinner.

"We would order out every single night because the cafeteria was closed and we could never get a decent salad," Massaro says.

"It was your basic pizza joint salads, and there's nothing wrong with that but when you order out night after night it got old."

Nolan and his wife noticed Saladworks when driving past Ocean Heights Plaza earlier this year.

After sampling its menu a few times, he has settled into the almost weekly routine of stopping in to eat. The buffalo chicken, slathered in a spicy sauce, has become his favorite.

For all his enthusiasm, though, Nolan wasn't always so enamored with salads.

"It was," he says, "something new. It's a better deal than McDonald's, that's for sure. It's better for you."

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