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I'm ready for warm sunshine and cool salads. I want to pull out one of my big, oversized planters and scatter a handful of seeds for baby greens. I love salads. I always have, even when I was a kid. Even when I was a kid in the winter and salads were made from pale tasteless iceberg lettuce and pale tasteless tomatoes. Of course with those salads, it is quite possible that all I really liked were the salad dressings. They were all out of a bottle, the saltier and garlic-ier the better.

I've grown up a little since then, not a lot but a little. My salads are now a lively mix of colorful greens and yummy vegetables. As for salad dressings, I steer clear of bottles and brands and make my own. Instead of salad dressing, I now call it vinaigrette. I'm not sure if I'm getting fancy or just pretentious.

I began making my own salad dressing or vinaigrette when I lived in Switzerland. A good bottled dressing was just one of the many things I had trouble finding when I first moved abroad. I tried a few but couldn't find one that I liked. Then my friend Nicole invited me for dinner and I fell in love with her salad.

She started with an incredibly easy vinaigrette which took only seconds to make. A classic, you will find it or something very similar in little cafés all over France. Nicole tossed this simple vinaigrette with a big bowl of salade de rampon. Also known as lamb's lettuce and mache, it is one of my absolute favorites. Unless you grow it yourself, rampons are difficult, maybe impossible to find here in rural New Hampshire. Not to worry, this classic vinaigrette pairs perfectly with crispy leaf lettuce, soft bib lettuce, mixed baby greens, even and especially endive. If this French classic had a middle name, it would be versatility.

Here is Nicole's fabulously simple salad:

Salad Greens with Classic Vinaigrette for 4-6

Put 1 tablespoon of red wine vinegar in a salad bowl, Whisk in a pinch of sea salt and a couple fresh grinds of pepper, Add 1/2 teaspoon of Dijon mustard and whisk to combine. Slowly whisk in 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil. Whisk until the vinaigrette is thick and creamy. Add 8 to 12 ounces of greens. When you are ready to serve, gently toss the greens until they are nicely coated with vinaigrette. Could it be any easier?

I usually plan on 1 to 2 ounces of greens and 1/2 to 1 tablespoon of vinaigrette per person. Depending on the size of your party and the size of your bowl, you can make more or less. Just remember the 1 to 3 ratio of vinegar to extra virgin olive oil and add mustard, salt and pepper to taste. If you like a sharper vinaigrette, add a touch more vinegar.

Since I don't have six people around my table every evening, I find it handy to make up a big jar to keep on hand. It usually lasts for a week or ten days, ready to toss with a big bowl of greens for twelve or a quick lunchtime salad for one.

Classic Vinaigrette by the Half-Pint

Pour about 1/4 cup red wine vinegar into a clean glass jar, Add 1/2-1 teaspoon sea salt and several fresh grinds of pepper, Give the jar a shake to help the salt dissolve. Add 1 tablespoon of Dijon mustard, shake to combine.



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Add 3/4 cup extra virgin olive oil and shake like crazy until the vinaigrette is thick and creamy. If you don't want to shake like crazy put everything in a blender and give it a whirl.

But my vinaigrette adventures didn't end with this French classic.

A few years later I discovered another amazing vinaigrette at a restaurant a few miles outside of Geneva. Although it does have a name, I always think of it as "the chicken place". It's called the Auberge de something or other. Yes, that's it, the Auberge de Dully. Surrounded by vineyards, this rustic little inn and restaurant sits on a hill high above the Lake of Geneva. It is famous for its chicken as you might have guessed from its nickname.

Dinner is relaxed and served family style. Big bowls of green salad, platters of perfectly roasted chicken and crispy potatoes are passed around the table. The salad is tossed in a fantastic vinaigrette. I've figured out that the secret or not so secret ingredient is shallots. I have tried to duplicate it but I've never managed to get the right balance of flavors. My numerous attempts have all turned out too strong, too bland, too tart or too dull, never just right.

Eventually I gave up and came up with my own:

Garlic-Shallot Vinaigrette

Pour about 1/4 cup red wine vinegar and 1-2 tablespoons of balsamic vinegar into a blender,

Add 1 tablespoon of Dijon mustard, 1 teaspoon anchovy paste or sea salt, several fresh grinds of pepper, 2-3 garlic cloves and a chunk of shallot or red onion (about 1 inch by 1 inch by 2 inches).

Process until everything is very smooth.

Next, with the blender on low, slowly add about 3/4 cup, or maybe a little more depending on your taste, extra virgin olive oil and process until the vinaigrette is thick and creamy.

And there you have it. Drizzle a little over a bowl of crispy leaf lettuce or arugula, spinach or a mix of baby greens. Add some crumbled blue cheese if you like and some toasted walnuts and give it a toss.

And now the ultimate in simplicity!

I have tried many wonderful vinaigrette recipes over the years. One in particular stands out. It is not only delicious; it is the simplest of them all. All you do is whisk balsamic vinegar, sea salt, freshly ground pepper and extra virgin olive oil together in the bottom of a salad bowl. Use the 1 to 3 ratio of vinegar to oil. Next throw in handfuls of beautiful fresh greens and toss to coat. That's it.

All three of these vinaigrettes are terrific. They taste better and are better for you than anything you'll find on the supermarket shelf. They come together in a flash and have no multisyllabic, incomprehensible or unpronounceable ingredients. Forget bottled dressings, quick and easy vinaigrettes are what all the best dressed salads will be wearing this spring and summer!

Bon appétit and enjoy!


