



Spinach 'Bordeaux'



Foliar feeding

In the fourth part of her series on taste, **Christine McFadden** samples a mouthwatering medley of salad leaves, from subtle to spicy.

Photography by
Tim Sandall



WE TEND TO TAKE salad for granted, throwing a few lettuce leaves into a bowl or, if feeling more adventurous, buying some exotic leaves at the shop. Satisfying though these may be, their convenience lulls many of us into forgetting the fresh, bright flavours of home-grown leaves.

The enormous variety of seeds now available can provide us with a year-round supply of leaves. They can be grown in small quantities in a limited space, ready for picking as needed. Most are trouble-free and can be harvested gratifyingly soon after sowing. Their flavour will be far better than store-bought equivalents.

Unlike strawberries and tomatoes (see *The Garden*, July, pp482–485 and August, pp542–545), salad leaves do not divulge many clues as to how they will taste; they lack the seductive aromas that get the mouth watering for other produce. They

do, however, have qualities that give them their own particular allure – sprightly crispness, refreshing colours and a range of complex and appetising flavours.

I investigated these qualities last September when I joined the third in a series of tastings led by Raymond Blanc, Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Oxfordshire. This time we sampled an impressive selection of leaves grown by panel member Charles Dowding (see box, p607) in his Somerset garden, and were intent on exploring the qualities that make a salad leaf outstanding.

The tasting trial

Charles had brought a wide range of cultivars that we divided into groups according to type – lettuce; endive and chicory; spinach and chard; Oriental leaves; and rocket. We started gently with

*Diplotaxis tenuifolia* (wild rocket)

A FRESH LEAF In their search for the perfect salad, the tasting panel sampled a wide range of tender, crisp young leaves, including several lettuce cultivars (main picture, opposite). Chef Raymond Blanc (left), who led the panel, discusses what makes a perfect salad with grower Charles Dowding, who provided a selection of leaves including spinach (far left) and wild rocket (above)

the mild-flavoured lettuces and finished with peppery Oriental leaves and rocket. All were sampled whole, raw and without any dressing, the better to let us assess their essential flavours and their texture, an important quality. Depending on cultivar, we were looking for crisp, tender leaves that were also juicy.

As we cannot detect tastes unless they are in solution, succulence has a special role to play in salads. The taste of juicy fruit is immediately apparent from the first bite; leaves have to be chewed to release the natural juices. The juicier the leaf, the less chewing is required, giving a more pleasant sensation in the mouth.

As with all fresh produce, a balanced flavour is desirable. Too much pungency, bitterness or acidity can be off-putting, particularly to children whose young palates are learning to cope with new flavours. In this trial we were seeking well-rounded flavours, in which any naturally predominating pungency or bitterness (more widely appreciated in the Far East than in the West, and most evident in the Oriental salads) was offset by sweetness, earthiness and acidity. ►

WHICH SALADS FARED THE BEST?

The panel's order of preference for each group (boxed numbers denote seed supplier; see p607)

LETTUCE

EQUAL BEST: 'Canasta' (syn. 'Maravilla de Verano Canasta') 4 Excellent fresh, sweet flavour. Well-balanced. Juicy and crisp.

'Little Gem' 1 2 3 5 6 7 8 Superb sweet flavour. Well-balanced. Juicy, crisp and tender.

RUNNERS UP: 'Rouge Grenobloise' (syn. 'Grenoble Red') 3 4 7 8 Well-balanced. Slightly acid, tender, crisp and juicy. **'Bergamo'** 2 3 8 Complex flavour. Bitter, pungent, acidic, mildly sweet. Crunchy.

ENDIVE AND CHICORY

BEST: 'Pain de Sucre' (syn. 'Sugar Loaf') 1 3 4 5 7 8 Superb depth of flavour. Excellent bitter/sweet balance. Crisp, tender.

RUNNERS UP: 'Nummer Vijf 2' (syn. 'Bubikopf 2') 3 Mild grassy flavour. Good balance. Slightly acidic. Juicy and crisp. **'Palla Rossa'** 1 4 5 7 8 Pleasantly sweet, mildly bitter and pungent. Good balance. Crisp.

SPINACH AND CHARD

BEST: 'Bordeaux' 7 Powerful complex flavour. Strongly earthy/acid. Good bitter/sweet balance. Juicy and tender.

RUNNERS UP: 'Medania' 1 2 3 7

Superb flavour. Predominantly earthy/acid. Mildly sweet/grassy. Juicy and tender.

'Scenic' 7 Pleasant, rounded flavour. Good acid/sweet balance. Mildly bitter/earthy. Soft, tender leaves.

ORIENTAL LEAVES

BEST: Leaf radish 'Saisai' 2 Great punchy flavour. Excellent sweet/pungent balance. Mildly earthy/acid. Juicy and tender.

RUNNERS UP: Mustard 'Golden Streaks' 1 7 Powerful peppery flavour. Good sweet/pungent/earthy balance. Mildly acid/bitter. Tender texture.

Mizuna 1 2 4 7 8 Complex peppery flavour. A good pungent/sweet balance. Mildly earthy/grassy. Slightly acidic. Juicy, tender.

ROCKET

BEST: Wild rocket (*Diplotaxis tenuifolia*) 2 3 5 6 7 8 Strongly peppery, complex flavour. Extremely tender.

RUNNER UP: Salad rocket 1 2 3 (*Eruca vesicaria* subsp. *sativa*) Overwhelmingly pungent. Tender but fibrous.

'RAYMOND SUGGESTS USING FIVE OR SIX KINDS OF LEAF, AT MOST, FOR A LIVELY STARTER'

Lettuce

All four of the lettuces met the criteria for succulence and crunch. Favourites were 'Little Gem', a compact cos, and 'Canasta' (syn. 'Maravilla de Verano Canasta') a loose-leaved lettuce. Predominantly sweet but perfectly balanced by a touch of bitterness, their flavour was superb. 'Excellent experience, excellent mouth-feel,' was Raymond's opinion.

Another open-headed lettuce, 'Rouge Grenobloise', was milder in flavour but nevertheless simultaneously bitter, sweet and earthy with just the right amount of acidity. Raymond thought this one a good all-rounder that would keep well.

Frisly-leaved 'Bergamo' was the least tender and had a slightly stringy texture. Neil Wingfield, Head Vegetable Gardener at Le Manoir, liked its 'nice punchy bitterness'. The rest of us noted its acidity and pungency, though its balance of flavour was considered reasonable overall.

Endive and chicory

With taste buds braced for the characteristic bitterness of endive and chicory, we were pleasantly surprised by 'Palla Rossa', a handsome, deep-red leaf chicory (radicchio). Its flavour was surprisingly sweet and only mildly bitter. 'Excellent,' said Raymond, 'I was expecting more bitterness, not sweetness.'

GIVE IT A KICK Adding just a few sprigs of a stronger-tasting ingredient such as piquant mustard 'Golden Streaks' (below) to a mix of blander but more succulent leaves will bring a salad vibrantly to life



Mustard 'Golden Streaks'

All the cultivars had the right amount of crunch, particularly the top-rated 'Pain de Sucre' (syn. 'Sugar Loaf'), a white chicory with large, folded leaves. Its full-bodied flavour combined some underlying pungency and acidity with a perfect balance of bitter and sweet.

We also liked a broad-leaved endive, 'Nummer Vijf 2' (syn. 'Bubikopf 2'). Susie Dowding, Charles' wife, thought it mild enough to eat on its own, rather than mixed with blander leaves, but 'Fijne Krul Groen' (syn. 'Moss Curled') did less well. A deeply toothed, loose-leaved endive, bitter and acidic, it lacked sweetness, but was pleasantly crunchy, if a touch dry.

Spinach and chard

Top of this group, by the merest whisker, was 'Bordeaux', a striking red-stemmed spinach with unusual star-shaped leaves. 'Great spinach flavour, great colour; succulent and light,' said Raymond. It was indeed the spinach *par excellence* with the sought-after balance of acidity, bitterness and sweetness, rounded out by mellow earthiness.

Almost as impressive was 'Medania', a good-looking, green-stemmed spinach. Neil and Raymond loved its 'astringent aftertaste', while others noted its earthiness; most of us found it juicy and tender.

Close behind it, 'Scenic' impressed us with its tenderness. The vibrant green leaves were soft and downy with a melt-in-the-mouth quality. Its flavour was well balanced, backed by mild bitterness and the earthiness characteristic of spinach.

We sampled two chards with ruby and yellow stems, their flavour an assertive mix of bitter, acid and earthy, but with a balancing sweetness. Raymond said a few young leaves would be 'great in a salad'.

Oriental leaves

Things began to hot up as we moved on to the Oriental leaves. All were pungent, but balanced by sweetness and earthiness. Leaf radish 'Saisai' was excellent: pungent yet sweet, its pretty, pale green leaves had a bitter note. Though slightly hairy, it scored well for succulence.

We found mustard 'Golden Streaks' to be piquant, earthy and sweet, with mild background bitterness and acidity. Its attractively serrated green leaves, tender

but not particularly juicy, can add bite to a salad or stir-fry, 'but only use small quantities', warned Susie. Neil liked its 'peppery, cabbage-like flavour and mild heat', but Anne Marie Owens, the Head Gardener at Le Manoir, found it too hot.

We finished by comparing two crops of mizuna, a narrow leaf with serrated edges. One batch had been grown under fleece, but the unprotected ones were noticeably more tender and juicy, with well-balanced pungency and sweetness.

Rocket

By now our palates were primed for the rockets. Our favourite, wild rocket, had been grown in a polytunnel, which, as Charles suggested, may have tamed its heat a little. That said, the flavour was spectacularly peppery, slightly cabbagey, with a not-unpleasant earthy bitterness, rounded out with acidity and sweetness. Wonderfully tender, it typically lacked the crunch and succulence of lettuce.

Salad rocket, with its complex blend of strong flavours, was strikingly pungent. Raymond thought its tender, slightly chewy leaves too powerful alone, but suggested adding a small amount to milder salads for their lingering heat.

We finished with rocket 'Apollo', a strong mix of pepper, acidity and bitterness, and too hot for some of the panel.

Tasteful tips

A good salad should be a well-balanced mix of colour, texture and flavour, with a hint of pungency to pep up the milder-flavoured ingredients. Raymond suggests using five or six kinds of leaf, at most, for a lively starter, but just one or two subtly flavoured ones to finish a meal, perhaps with cheese. Home-grown leaves offer a wonderfully varied choice of nutritious, appetising salads. If you think outside the bag, the possibilities are inspiring. ■

Christine McFadden is a food writer and a fruit and vegetable enthusiast

? How do you get the best taste from home-grown salad? Do you use unusual leaves to add flavour and interest? Write to: The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT. Email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address



Lettuce 'Rouge Grenobloise'



Chicory 'Pain de Sucre'



Endive 'Nummer Vijf 2' (syn. 'Bubikopf 2')



Leaf chicory (radicchio) 'Palla Rossa'

THE TASTING PANEL

- Raymond Blanc Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons
- Charles and Susie Dowding Commercial producers of salads and vegetables
- Anne Marie Owens Head Gardener at Le Manoir
- Neil Wingfield Head Vegetable Gardener at Le Manoir
- Christine McFadden Food writer, fruit and vegetable enthusiast

FURTHER INGREDIENTS

Many other young leaves can be used in salads – kale, perilla, pea shoots, young dandelions (which can be blanched under a plant pot for a milder flavour), or culinary herbs. The panel also sampled some of Charles Dowding's unusual basil, including peppery, purple-leaved *Ocimum basilicum* 'Violetto', *O. x citriodorum* (lemon basil), curiously redolent of anise, and refreshing *O. x citriodorum* 'Lime'. Charles likes to include a few of these leaves in his mixed salad bags. The aroma is superb.

SEED SUPPLIERS

(of cultivars listed on p605)

- 1 Kings Seeds, 01376 570000, www.kingsseeds.com
- 2 Nicky's Seeds, 01843 600972, www.nickys-nursery.co.uk
- 3 Seeds by Size, 01442 251458, www.seeds-by-size.co.uk
- 4 Seeds of Italy, 0208 427 5020, www.seedsofitaly.com
- 5 Tamar Organics, 01579 371087, www.tamarorganics.co.uk
- 6 Thompson & Morgan, 01473 688821, www.thompson-morgan.com
- 7 Tuckers Seeds, 01364 652233, www.tuckers-seeds.co.uk
- 8 The Organic Gardening Catalogue, 0845 130 1304, www.organiccatalog.com

GROWING SALADS FOR FLAVOUR

Salad leaves can be grown under glass or outdoors, in pots, troughs, growing bags or open ground. Growing under glass extends the season and can provide a year-round supply of leaves. The best flavour depends on healthy leaves, which, in turn, depend on healthy soil, judicious sowing time and regular watering.

Soil preparation

Charles Dowding believes that the healthier the soil, the tastier the leaves. He follows the 'no-dig' principle, spreading 5cm of home-made compost or horse manure on the soil in late autumn, allowing the worms to incorporate it.

Timing of sowings

Instead of following the unrealistically long growing seasons often quoted on seed packets, Charles advises choosing a specific time that will provide the greatest potential for healthy growth, taking into account the soil temperature, changing weather, day length and pest activity. Lettuce, for example, does well in spring or early summer, whereas plants such as rocket and mizuna are liable to

produce flowers and go to seed when sown at those times of year. If sown later in summer, when the days are shorter, they put their energy into leaf production – and will also escape the attention of flea beetles.

- More information about how Charles times sowings can be found in *The Garden*, April, pp248–253, in his latest book (see below) and on his website, www.charlesdowding.co.uk.

Watering

Since salad leaves are 90 percent water, they need a regular and thorough supply if they are to be sprightly and succulent. Adequate irrigation will also slow down bolting (running to seed) and can help to moderate the powerful flavour of mature leaves.

i Further reading

- *Organic Gardening – The natural no-dig way*, by Charles Dowding, Green Books, March 2007, ISBN 9781903998915
- *Cool Green Leaves and Red Hot Peppers: Growing and cooking for taste*, by Christine McFadden and Michael Michaud, Frances Lincoln, 2000, ISBN 9780711216150