

# Great Greens

Familiar or exotic, these leafy vegetables aren't just for salads

BY STEVEN PETUSEVSKY



*Escarole*



*Greens aren't just for side dishes. Savoy spinach makes a flavorful foundation for these seared scallops.*

When you hear the phrase “cooked greens,” do you think “cooked to death”? Do you envision a big pot of greens boiled with bacon, fat-back, or ham hocks until the texture is mushy and the nutritional value long-gone? Not if I've ever cooked for you. Prepared the way I like them—briefly steamed or sautéed with fresh seasonings—cooked greens are perfect for people who want quick, delicious, and healthy dishes.

As executive chef of the largest natural-foods restaurant in the country, I serve 500 to 600 pounds of greens each week. I've learned that their earthy yet adaptable flavors make them one of the most versatile groups of vegetables around.

**SELECT FIRM LEAVES AND WATCH FOR BUGS**  
When buying greens, look for whole, fully formed leaves that are crisp and shiny. Beware of small holes and dark blemishes that usually indicate that insects have been at work. Because greens are delicate and perishable, it will be obvious when they're past their peak of freshness. Leaves should never be limp, discolored, or brown. Always check the cut stem for rusty, brown, or slimy ends that mean the greens have been sitting too long. I find produce departments that regularly mist their greens with water offer the best products. But watch for greens that have become waterlogged from overmisting: they should be dried with paper towels before you store them in your refrigerator.

## USE 'EM OR LOSE 'EM

I recommend using fresh greens within three days of purchase. Refrigerate the greens in perforated plastic bags, which you can make by punching small holes in ordinary produce bags with a large fork.

Before you cook greens, trim away tough stem ends, discard tough or discolored leaves, and wash them well. Although the package may say they don't need washing, I still give them a good rinse, but they must be handled gently. Fill a large bowl or a clean sink with cold water. Submerge the greens briefly, shake them gently to release any clinging dirt, and drain them in a colander. If they're particularly gritty, I repeat this process several times. It's tempting to soak the greens, but resist the urge: they'll lose valuable vitamins that way. It isn't necessary to dry the greens before sautéing, steaming, or braising them. In fact, the water left on the leaves aids their cooking: the water and oil combine to steam and sauté simultaneously.

Cut tougher greens (chard, escarole, kale, collards, and broccoli raab) into bite-size pieces with a sharp knife. Smaller, more delicate leaves are best left whole.

## GIVE GREENS THE LIGHT TOUCH

Because greens have their own unique flavors, I think it's best to use them in simple recipes. In fact, greens are delicious when merely “water sautéed,” or cooked in the water left clinging to their leaves after washing. To do this, heat oil in a nonstick pan over moderate heat. Look for a light haze over the oil and then put in



the washed greens. Add seasonings (such as salt, pepper, or lemon juice) and stir the greens constantly until they begin to wilt. If you're trying to avoid added fat in your diet, this is a quick, easy cooking method.

The distinctive taste of greens pairs well with ethnic flavors. Add a sprinkling of chile powder, chopped cilantro, and a squeeze of lime juice for a southwestern flavor. Basil, mint leaves, and a little *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) provide an Asian accent. Sautéed in olive oil with some garlic, toasted pine nuts, lemon juice, and sun-dried tomatoes, your greens will take on a Tuscan character.

### THE COMMON GREENS

While new varieties of greens are appearing all the time, don't overlook the more common varieties:

**Kale**—Also called Scotch kale or Savoy salad, kale is often used as a garnish. It resembles broccoli in flavor, but with a spicy, somewhat bitter finish.

**Escarole**—Often used raw in salads, escarole has loose green outer leaves and yellow leaves towards the center. Escarole has a slightly bitter taste and is a regular addition to Italian stews and soups.

**Dandelion greens**—Also called cow-parsnip, bright green dandelion leaves have a long, narrow shape with a toothed edge. They should be harvested before the plant flowers and can be eaten raw in salads or made into wine. They're wonderful in soups.

**Broccoli raab**—Also known as rabe and rapini, broccoli raab is a member of the turnip family and is

used in many Italian dishes. Its leafy green stalks are crunchy and its small florets are soft, almost creamy.

**Collards**—Another member of the kale family, collards are associated with traditional southern cooking. These large, flat, dark green leaves help ring in the New Year in many southern homes.

### THE EXOTIC GREENS

Many of the new, interesting greens coming to market are of Asian pedigree, while others are contemporary varieties developed from long-favored domestic types.

**Tat-soi**—An Asian member of the kale family, tat-soi is worth seeking out, as only the young, tender leaves are harvested. The tiny rounded leaves are emerald green with very thin, white ribbing. It tastes like a delicate spinach with a lemony kick.

**Mizuna**—Relatively new to American markets, mizuna is also called Japanese mustard green and has a mild mustard flavor. The narrow, pointed leaves, pale to yellow green, are often incorporated into mesclun, a mix of baby salad greens.

**Savoy spinach**—The small, ruffled leaves of Savoy spinach appear to be a cross between spinach and Savoy cabbage, but the flavor is unlike any spinach I've had because of its spicy aftertaste. The leaves are dark green with almost no visible veins. It can be eaten raw in salads, but it's excellent lightly cooked.

**Chard**—Also called Swiss chard or beet greens, chard is actually a type of beet that's grown for its leaves rather than its roots. The broad, fan-shaped



Tat-soi



Mizuna

*Mizuna is an equal partner with chicken in this quick and delicious wok-cooked dish.*



leaves have a white rib running down the center. They vary from light to dark green. Red chard varieties have a bright red rib like rhubarb. Chard is an excellent substitute for spinach in sautés, soups, and stir-fries.

### **WOK-SAUTÉED MIZUNA & MINCED CHICKEN**

I prefer serving the minced chicken with a bowl of steaming jasmine or basmati rice, but many of my customers enjoy it over angel hair pasta. Let your guests add a dash of hot chile oil if they like extra heat. *Serves four to six.*

- 1 egg white, lightly beaten**
- 1 tsp. minced fresh ginger**
- 1 tsp. minced garlic**
- 1½ tsp. tamari or soy sauce**
- 1 lb. boneless, skinless chicken breasts, minced**
- 2 tsp. peanut or canola oil**
- ⅓ cup minced carrots**
- ⅓ cup minced onions**
- ¼ cup minced water chestnuts**
- ½ tsp. chile paste with garlic, such as Taste of Thai**
- Juice of 1 lime**
- 1 lb. mizuna, ends trimmed**
- 4 chopped scallions for decoration**

Combine the egg white, ginger, garlic, and ½ tsp. tamari. Add the chicken and marinate for 1 hour in the refrigerator.

Heat 1 tsp. of the oil in a wok or sauté pan over high heat. Add the chicken and the marinade; cook 4 to 6 min., stirring constantly, until the chicken is cooked through. Remove the chicken from the pan and set aside.

Heat the remaining oil in the pan. Add the carrots, onions, and water chestnuts; sauté 2 to 3 min. Add the remaining tamari, chile paste, lime juice, and mizuna and stir frequently until the mizuna wilts slightly, about 1 min. Add the chicken and toss to combine. Decorate with the scallions and serve.

### **SCALLOPS WITH LIME & SAVOY SPINACH**

This dish makes a wonderful appetizer and is nicely complemented with crisp, dry white wine, such as a Sauvignon Blanc or an Amontillado Sherry. If you prefer, you can use shrimp instead of scallops. *Serves four to six.*

#### **FOR THE CARAMELIZED WALNUTS:**

- ¼ cup shelled walnut pieces**
- 1 tsp. sugar**

#### **FOR THE SEARED SCALLOPS:**

- Juice of 1 lime**
- 1 tsp. chopped lime zest**
- 2 tsp. olive or canola oil; more for the pan**
- 2 tsp. minced garlic**
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard**
- 1 tsp. minced shallots**
- Freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 lb. sea scallops**

#### **FOR THE SAVOY SPINACH:**

- ½ Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 tsp. minced garlic**
- 1½ lb. Savoy spinach leaves**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**

**To make the caramelized walnuts**—In a nonstick pan over medium heat, combine the nuts and sugar. Stir until the sugar melts, forms a syrup, and coats the nuts, about 2 min. Quickly transfer the nuts to a plate.

**To make the seared scallops**—In a nonreactive container, combine half the lime juice, the zest, oil, garlic, mustard, shallots, and pepper. Add the scallops and toss to coat; marinate for 1 hour in the refrigerator.

Heat a cast-iron pan over medium heat and brush it with a little oil. Remove the scallops from the marinade. Sear the scallops on one side, trying not to crowd them and without moving them, about 2 min.; this may have to be done in



Savoy spinach



Chard



A spicy tomato broth unites greens with pasta. Broccoli raab has long been a staple ingredient of Italian cooking and is a natural partner for white beans, onions, and fresh tomatoes.

batches. Turn and sear until browned on the other side, about 2 min.

When all the scallops are cooked, transfer them to a clean bowl. Return the pan to the stove and add the remaining lime juice to the pan to deglaze. With a wooden spoon, scrape the pan to remove any browned bits. Pour the pan juices over the scallops; set aside and keep warm.

**To make the Savoy spinach**—Rinse the pan and heat the olive oil in it over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and cook until lightly browned. Add the Savoy spinach and cook briefly, stirring, until the leaves wilt. Season with salt and pepper.

**To assemble**—Make a nest of the Savoy spinach on each serving plate. Arrange a portion of the scallops with accumulated juices on the spinach; top with the walnuts.

### **GARLICKY GREENS WITH PENNE PASTA & SPICY TOMATO BROTH**

This dish is a great meal by itself. Serve it with a softer red wine, like a California Merlot or Zinfandel. *Serves four to six.*

#### **FOR THE TOMATO BROTH:**

**1 cup chopped onions**  
**1 cup chopped tomatoes**  
**½ cup chopped celery**  
**½ cup chopped carrots**  
**Vegetable trimmings (not cabbage, broccoli, or cauliflower), optional**  
**2 cups tomato juice**  
**Sprigs of fresh thyme, rosemary, basil, and oregano (or a pinch each of dried)**  
**2 fresh chile peppers, halved, or 1 tsp. hot red pepper flakes**  
**Salt (or miso paste) and freshly ground black pepper to taste**

#### **FOR THE GARLIC GREENS AND PASTA:**

**1½ lb. broccoli raab, trimmed and chopped coarse**  
**1 medium red onion, cut into slivers**  
**2 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil**  
**1 (19-oz.) can white cannellini beans, drained**  
**1 large tomato, seeded and chopped coarse**  
**2 tsp. minced garlic**  
**12 oz. penne pasta, cooked**  
**½ bunch basil (1 oz.), washed and chopped**  
**Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**  
**½ Tbs. black olive paste (optional)**  
**Tabasco (optional)**

**To make the tomato broth**—Put all the vegetables and vegetable trimmings in a large saucepan. Add the tomato juice and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower the heat and maintain a slow simmer for about 1 hour, adding the herbs and chiles during the last 20 min. of cooking. Season with salt or miso and pepper, if desired, and strain.

**To make the greens and pasta**—If you're using a microwave oven, put the broccoli raab in a microwave-safe dish with an inch of water. Cover loosely and microwave on high for 3 min. Alternatively, bring a pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the raab and cook until tender, 2 to 3 min. Either way, immediately dip the raab in ice water to "shock" it and stop the cooking. Drain and set aside.

In a large nonstick skillet over medium heat, sauté the onion in the oil until translucent. Add the raab and cook briefly. Add the beans, tomato, garlic, and penne; stir to combine well. Add the basil, salt, pepper, olive paste, and about ¾ cup tomato broth; toss to combine. Serve in large bowls topped with more tomato broth and Tabasco on the side.

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