

Caesar Salad

One of my favorite food stories tells of a Mexican restaurateur in Tijuana by the name of Caesar Cardini, who memorialized himself with a salad in 1924. The salad is named after its creator, a Chef, not Julius Caesar of the famed Roman Empire. This particular restaurant needed traffic the way Great Britain needs sunshine. Too much of a good thing spells disaster.

One busload of tourists gives a nice lift to the luncheon business; two busloads is better, even if the cooks, in their haste to serve so many, tended to under salt the chicken. But three busloads was catastrophe. The waiters couldn't possibly keep pace with the jabbering horde of hungry North Americanos. Worst of all, the food ran out.

Such was the position of the restaurateur, whose name, incidentally, was Caesar. The wild eyed chef grabbed the few ingredients left in the kitchen; a case of eggs, a few crates of romaine lettuce, anchovies that had not yet been put to use, and all garlic and stale bread scraps he could find. He instructed the waiters to tell the impatient diners that the restaurant was serving only one luncheon entrée, the special house salad (which he was inventing that very moment). We know today his creation as Caesar Salad.

I truly love this story, if only because it demonstrates where inventiveness and courage in the kitchen will take you. This recipe is very close to the original version created in 1924.

1 large head romaine lettuce
3 tablespoons olive oil
3 cups French bread cubes
2 large cloves garlic
12 anchovy fillets (salt packed soaked in milk for 5 minutes and dried with paper towels)
2 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
2 teaspoon dry mustard
2 tablespoon lemon juice (fresh is best)
1 teaspoon fresh ground black pepper
1 teaspoon coarse ground salt
3 egg yolks from large eggs - at room temperature
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
¼ cup Parmesan cheese - shredded or shaved

Trim romaine lettuce of bruised or browned leaves and cut into 1½ inch pieces. Wash and drain lettuce, pat dry and refrigerate for 30 minutes to crisp leaves. To make croutons, cut bread into cubes, heat the ½ cup olive oil in sauté pan over medium-high heat. Fry bread cubes in the oil, tossing frequently, until crisp and golden. Drain croutons on paper towel until ready to use.

Peel garlic cloves, put in large wooden salad bowl. Mash cloves against sides of bowl with back of wooden spoon. Rub the pieces against the bowl until they disintegrate.

Remove most of mashed garlic from the bowl and discard (oil from the garlic will remain in bowl and flavor the salad).

Add anchovies and repeat procedure used with the garlic, but leave anchovy pieces in bowl. Add dry mustard, Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice, black pepper, egg yolks and blend well. Slowly drizzle in remaining olive oil mixing with wire whisk until creamy mayonnaise type dressing forms.

Add lettuce, croutons, Parmesan cheese and salt. Toss everything together and serve directly from salad bowl!