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A Composed Salad Is a Meal Unto Itself

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What's the difference between a salad and a composed salad? From the French "salade composée," a composed salad is simply salad arranged on a plate rather than tossed in a bowl.

But for the American cook in summer, it is much more than that: a back-pocket lunch or dinner that can be endlessly reinvented and served to many people at any time. It shows off the intense, irresistible vegetables, herbs and fruits of the season — but can also have rich components like cheese, eggs, toasted nuts and smoked fish or meat. With a loaf of (preferably grilled) bread, it is a meal in itself.

Like the V.I.P. pass at a music festival that gets you a folding chair and access to a charging station, a composed salad provides a little extra organization and luxury, but still holds the wild spirit of summer.

That's because it can contain almost anything the cook wants to arrange, roll, roast, poach, bake or grill, from thin shavings of fennel and whole kernels of local corn to dollops of ricotta and shards of country ham. Tossed together, the result would be sloppy and monotonous. A bit of order makes it satisfying and elegant.

A controlled riot is the goal, which can be achieved by choosing one or two elements from each category below. Lay them out on one vast platter (the prettier choice) or on individual plates (faster). Ingredients can be arranged in loose stripes or wedges, or be artfully distributed around the platter.

(Sprinkling everything with fresh herbs at the end is a good way to cover up any gaps in artfulness.) A composed salad is not tossed with its dressing; it lies down flat, and gets drizzled. Or you may toss just the vegetables with dressing, then bring on the other ingredients, swirling olive oil over all to make the dish shiny and golden. It is almost impossible to use too much olive oil for this purpose.

Resist any temptation to dice everything into bite-size pieces; you want to see clearly that right here is a pile of roasted baby zucchini, there a ball of milky fresh mozzarella, and just within reach, the wrinkled black olives and heirloom cherry tomatoes that are delicious with both. To serve, place the

platter on the table with several sets of implements (wide spatulas are especially useful) so guests can lift out ingredients as desired.

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