

Mesclun

Ready-to-go salad mixes are all the rage these days, judging by the amount of shelf space devoted to them in supermarkets and greengrocers. One of these popular mixes is mesclun, also known as spring mix or mixed baby greens. Mesclun originated in Provence, France. The name comes from Provençal *mescla*, derived from the Latin word *misculare* 'to mix' and literally means 'mixture'. The traditional mix includes chervil, rocket, lettuces and endive in precise proportion. Purists and those from Provence might argue with the modern use of the word mesclun, as mesclun nowadays often goes beyond the traditional greens, it may include an undetermined mix of



Baby beet leaf, Spinach leaf, Tatsoy, Watercress, Rocket, French endive, Mibuna, Broadleaf endive, Mizuna, Chervil, Mâche, Curly endive, Radicchio, Sorrel

fresh lettuces, baby spinach leaves, rocket, baby beet leaves, cress, endive, mizuna, mibuna, mâche, radicchio, sorrel and/or other leafy vegetables. Some mixes also integrate edible flowers and/or their petals, such as violets, calendulas, chive blossoms, marigolds, nasturtiums, borage, etc. Although the ingredients are varied, all mescluns are noted for being a healthy dish with interesting combinations of flavors, colors and textures. The leaves include a rainbow of greens from light to deep, and bronzy red (radicchio). The taste of course will depend upon the mix of leaves, as it may include the mildest of lettuces as well

as the most peppery of cresses. Indeed, it is possible for each mouthful of mesclun to have a different taste. Apart from lettuce, the main ingredient, of which there are a few varieties (butter head, cos, crisphead, loose leaf, batavian etc.) of different shades from lime to dark green to russet, the followings are some of the greens you're likely to encounter in a bag of spring mix.

Rocket is a small, flat leaf with long stem, and a peppery taste. **Belgian or French endive** or **witlof** has tightly packed leaves and bullet-like shape, creamy yellow or white in color, slightly bitter in taste and crisp in texture. **Chicory or curly endive** is slightly bitter, with darker outer leaves and paler or yellow leaves towards the center. The leaves are ragged edged on long thin stems. **Escarole or broad-leaved endive** is another member of the chicory family, it has broad wavy leaves and a milder taste than chicory. **Mâche or lamb's lettuce** or field salad has a slightly serrated, spoon-shaped, velvety dark green leaves and mild taste, it is usually sold bunched together with its roots, at a high price due to its perishable nature. **Radicchio** is a mildly bitter leafy vegetable with shiny, smooth leaves and white ribs and vein. There are different varieties, some looks like a small head of red lettuce and some looks a bit like a red version of Belgium endive. The most common color of radicchio is deep red to burgundy. **Chervil** is related to and resembling parsley but tasting more like tarragon. **Cress** has a mustard hot and spicy bite. **Sorrel** has a lemon flavour, use them in small quantity. **Mizuna** is of Japanese origin; its green, feathery leaves are peppery reminiscent of rocket. **Mibuna** is the cousin; it has a smooth leaf and a subtle flavor described as a combination of coriander, celery and sorrel. **Tatsoy** or spoon cabbage is a dark leafed rosette of Chinese origin.

To complement the green mix, there are some edible flowers and/or flower petals:

Nasturtium: with their brilliant sunset color and distinct peppery flavor, nasturtiums are probably the better known and most popular. They have a similar taste to rocket and cress. **Borage**: borage blossoms are lovely little blue, star-shaped flowers with a cool, faintly cucumber taste. **Calendula** (pot marigold): ranging in colour from pale yellow to vibrant orange, calendulas offer a citrus flavour and a mild peppery taste. **Chive blossoms**: A chive blossom is rather big and fluffy; as much as we'd like to put a few in our salad, they would make too much of a mouthful. The best way is to divide the flower puffs into flowerets, which are scattered on a salad. Other edible flowers include rose petals, violets, chrysanthemum petals, cornflower (bachelor's button) etc.

The secret of a good mesclun is in its simplicity and freshness, as nothing can beat the taste and texture of young leaves freshly harvested, simply dressed and enjoyed minutes after they are prepared. A balance proportion between the 'mild' lettuces and the more spicy 'others', plus a well combined texture and shades of leaves, plus a touch of floral color will make your mesclun not only a culinary delight but also a feast to the eyes; and it goes without saying that the better your oil and vinegar the better your mesclun. Enjoy!