



Leaf by leaf

Story by Jolaine Collins • Photos by Richard Green

Spring mix proves its versatility

California-grown spring mix offers an ever-changing selection of colors, textures and flavors, providing inspiration for home cooks and chefs such as Chris Vacca. The Monterey County chef says he enjoys experimenting with spring mix in different dishes throughout the year.

When chef Chris Vacca considers ways to use spring mix on his menu, he thinks of it as something greater than the sum of its leafy parts. It's a kaleidoscope of complementary colors, textures and flavors with surprising versatility. Vacca, executive chef of California Market at Pacific's Edge, the restaurant at the Hyatt Carmel Highlands Inn, said the best way to appreciate spring mix is by deconstructing it, piece by piece.

You're likely to find familiar-looking red and green romaine, frilly frisée and scalloped red oak lettuce. Look closer, and you may spot tangy mustard greens, earthy chard and sweet baby lettuces. More unusual varieties include Asian mustard greens such as spoon-shaped tatsoi or serrated mizuna, or Italian lollo rosso, looking a bit like a ruffled red coral.

All of these components are grown in California and used in a variety of spring mix combinations. Despite the name, spring mix is available every season of the year.

Vacca features spring mix in several menu items, allowing it to take center stage with seasonal fruits and vegetables or play a supporting role with grilled foods.

"We have a different mix just about every day, depending on the season and what farmers bring me," Vacca said.

The versatility of spring mix allows chefs to be creative. Vacca said he enjoys experimenting with leafy varieties grown on farms near his Monterey County restaurant, looking for ways to balance the flavor of the greens with other ingredients.

Vacca explained that bitter greens such as mustard leaves or arugula are complemented by

the sweetness of a vinaigrette made with balsamic vinegar or honey. Sweeter lettuces are balanced by the acidic qualities of strawberries, citrus or tomatoes. And the creaminess of baby spinach calls for a dressing made with a delicate champagne vinegar, olive oil and perhaps mustard and honey. Fresh or dried fruit, or thinly sliced vegetables and herbs, add variety and seasonality to just about any mix. Spring mix salads can also be topped with soft-ripened goat cheese or crumbled feta, he said.

Vacca doesn't stop at featuring spring mix as a cold salad. He uses it as a colorful garnish on a sandwich of sautéed mushrooms, as a ruffled bed for seared tuna or slightly wilted and tossed into a warm vegetable salad.

"At our restaurant, we pride ourselves on showcasing the ag community of Monterey County—and spring mix is a great way to do that," he said. "It tastes fresh because it's grown in our backyard."

Salad bowl of the world

The Monterey County agricultural community also pays homage to its leafy green crops, calling its Salinas Valley the "Salad Bowl of the World." With its cool, consistent temperatures and fertile soils, the region produces a large majority of the lettuce and leafy greens consumed in the nation. Spring mix ranks among the valley's top crops grown in Monterey and San Benito counties.

Pacific International Marketing, one of California's largest grower/shippers of fresh vegetables, produces conventional and organic spring mix, primarily in Salinas.

With the hills that outline the Salinas Valley as a backdrop, colorful beds of Pacific's spring mix components create contrasting rows of chartreuse, deep green and ruby red. Harvesting takes place at night or early morning, when temperatures are coolest, at 30- to 45-day intervals between April and October. The harvesting machine operates like a giant lawn mower, with a blade that cuts the delicate leaves as close to the soil as possible without slicing them or disturbing the meticulously leveled ground.

The leaves are quickly cooled and sent to Pacific's processing operation in Gonzales, where they are triple-washed and sorted to create different spring mix blends. Blends are packaged in multiple sizes of bags and clamshells ranging from 8 ounces to 3 pounds, then shipped within 24 hours in refrigerated trucks to grocery retailers, wholesalers and foodservice operations under the Pacific name or other brands.

Although a Pacific spring mix can be made up of 16 components, a mix typically includes nine to 14



Alfredo Deniz, procurement manager for Salinas-based Pacific International Marketing, carries lettuce for use in spring mix, left. The harvesting machine operates like a giant lawn mower, cutting the delicate leaves as close to the soil as possible, right. Greens from various fields are washed and sorted to create different spring mix blends for use in a variety of dishes, such as salads, above right.



varieties, depending on the time of year and availability of each green. During the past several years, the packaged salad category has grown, and the company has expanded its line to meet the demand.

Besides the convenience and healthy attributes of spring mix, people appreciate the spectrum of flavors in each blend.

"Consumers like variety, and they look for creative salad mixes to keep things interesting on their plates," said Pacific's commodity manager, Ray Cunanan. "They like blends with memorable flavors and textures. Bolder flavors, like peppery arugula, have become popular in spring mix."

Cunanan said the company keeps an eye on customer preferences such as these, while tracking trends that often begin in commercial kitchens to create their retail blends.

"We work with foodservice customers to help them develop spring mix combinations for their new menu items, depending on the tastes, colors and textures they're looking for," he said.

Food safety begins in the field

In addition to flavor, customers want a product they can consume with confidence. It's a responsibility that California leafy green producers such as Pacific take seriously, following stringent food-safety procedures throughout their operations. Using standards set by the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, the company tests its irrigation water and monitors handling and packing processes to ensure a safe product. Employees are trained in reducing and eliminating food-safety hazards. Third-party inspectors routinely check the company's growing, harvesting and processing operations.

"We have an integrated food-safety program that begins in the field and extends through the packaged product," said Sharan Lanini, director of Pacific's food-safety program. "Millions of units of produce are scrutinized at all levels and tracked by computer-based programs. It's critical for us—and to our consumers—that we provide a product that's whole-

some, healthy and food safe.

"During the past 10 years, both the leafy greens industry and regulators have continuously improved their food-safety programs with the newest science, techniques and processes that benefit consumers," Lanini said.

This care and attention means home cooks and professional chefs can confidently enjoy the convenience, flavor and versatility of spring mix—freshly delivered from the Salad Bowl of the World to the salad bowl on their tables. 🌿

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MORE ONLINE

Chef Chris Vacca shares a trio of recipes featuring spring mix: one on the following page and two more at www.californiabountiful.com.

In the mix

Earthy mushrooms complement spring mix in this recipe.

MUSHROOM SANDWICH with spring mix

Serves 2

Cashew spread

2 cups raw cashews

Juice of 1 lemon

1 tsp. kosher salt

Pepper, to taste

Sautéed mushroom filling

1 cup sliced oyster mushrooms

1 cup sliced shiitake mushrooms

*1 cup sliced maitake mushrooms
(see note)*

Vegetable oil

Juice of 1 orange

3 tbsp. apple cider vinegar

2 cloves garlic, chopped

1 small shallot, julienned

1 sprig thyme

Salt and pepper, to taste

Sandwich

2 soft brioche rolls, sliced

Softened butter

1 to 2 tbsp. olive oil

2 cups spring mix

6 slices tomato

Red onion, cut into rings

For cashew spread: Soak cashews in water for 4 to 8 hours. Drain, reserving some of the liquid. Place cashews in a high-speed blender with lemon juice and salt. Blend until smooth, adding reserved water so it's not too thick, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Place spread in a covered container and let it rest at room temperature for 4 to 6 hours or until it reaches an acid level that's somewhere between ricotta and goat cheese. (Smoked option: Smoke the cashew spread by placing in a heatproof container in a smoker with apple wood for about 25 minutes, stirring occasionally.) Makes enough spread for 6 to 8 sandwiches. Leftover spread, which can be stored up to a week in the refrigerator, can be used as a savory topping on pita chips, bagel or toast.

For mushroom filling: Keep mushroom varieties separated as you clean and slice them. Heat a nonstick pan to smoking hot. Add oil, then place mushrooms, one variety at a time, evenly in the pan so they sear but don't steam. Once halfway cooked, remove from pan and repeat with next type of mushroom. Mix all cooked mushrooms together and set aside.

In a bowl, mix together orange juice, vinegar and garlic. Using the pan that was used to cook the mushrooms, heat oil and add shallots until slightly cooked. Add mushrooms and deglaze with orange juice mixture and thyme. Remove thyme sprig and season mixture to taste with salt and pepper.

To assemble: Lightly butter the cut sides of the bottom rolls. Heat oil in a pan and toast on medium heat for 30 seconds. Spread the cut sides of the top rolls with cashew mixture. Begin building the sandwich with spring mix, then tomatoes and mushrooms. Top with onion rings.

Note: Look for maitake mushrooms at an Asian grocery store. They can be substituted with other Asian mushroom varieties.

