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# Dressing up: the perfect vinaigrette

Is vinaigrette really the queen of sauces, and what's the house recipe in your kitchen?

The test: salad servers



Salad dressed with Felicity Cloake's perfect vinaigrette. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

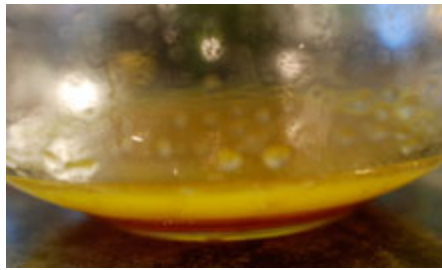
On a recent visit to Paris, I was reminded of why, for all their fondness for le

Big Mac, and hypermarkets the size of Wales, the French can still teach us a thing or two about good food. My epiphany came in the form of a simple side salad - no micro herbs or heirloom radishes here - dressed with the most perfect of vinaigrettes. Each lightly coated leaf was a delicate essay in culinary restraint. The kick of the vinegar, the heat of the mustard, the seasoning - all so finely balanced I wanted to weep.

Prior to this moment, I'd regarded the Californian chef Thomas Keller's suggestion that vinaigrette was perhaps 'the perfect sauce' with the unhealthy scepticism of a true butter lover. Now I began to see what he meant: not only could a well-crafted vinaigrette be a thing of heart-breaking beauty, but whereas a bechamel or a veloute repels creative customisation, the good-natured vinaigrette positively encourages it. Plus, it can be put together in under five minutes, which is not something you can say for anything involving a roux. I decided it was high time I gave this noble dressing the respect it deserved.

As vinaigrette, or sauce ravigote, also goes by the name 'French dressing' (although, like the unappetising-sounding 'French stick', this seems to have fallen from favour in recent years), I turned to the original Gallic cookery Bible, Larousse Gastronomique, for a definitive recipe. "Dissolve a little salt in 1tbsp vinegar," it counsels. "Add 3tbsp oil and some pepper." And that's it, according to the French - all else is mere flavouring. I get to work with a whisk, and discover they've hit the nail on the head with this 3:1 ratio - 2:1, which I have seen described elsewhere as vinaigrette's 'sacred' proportions, seems thin and unpleasantly acidic, and adding any more oil makes the dressing bland, and difficult to bring together.

For the purpose of this experiment, I'm using wine vinegar, as recommended by Michel Roux Jr, and the vegetable oil suggested by Larousse (which remains mysteriously silent on the subject of vinegars - perhaps no true Frenchman would consider using anything else). I'd usually use extra virgin olive oil instead, but notice that the first dressing has a much lighter, silkier feel, and a more delicate flavour without it. The vegetable oil is also easier to incorporate, but it seems a shame to use such a bland example in one of the few recipes in which oil can really shine. I decide on a compromise: a 2:1 vegetable/extra virgin olive oil mix to add just the merest hint of peppery greenness to my dressing.



Simple olive oil vinaigrette separating.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake

So, I have my recipe for a basic vinaigrette. It's fine, but not terribly exciting, and however slowly I drizzle the oil into the vinegar, and however hard I whisk the two together, it begins to separate within minutes - which is where those other ingredients come in. Vinaigrette is what is known in the trade as an unstable emulsion - two liquids (water, in the form of vinegar, and oil) that, in the words of the great Harold McGee, "can't mix evenly with each other", and which will eventually separate back into their original forms. You can slow this process down by adding an emulsifier which will act as a bond between the two ingredients. Many commercial dressings use a fatty substance called lecithin, but at home, it's much easier, and tastier, to add a flavouring that will do the same job.



Mustard powder vinaigrette. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Although wisdom has it that you can use everything from egg yolk (which, in my opinion, starts to stray dangerously into mayonnaise territory) to cold mashed potato to stabilise your dressing, the most popular choices are things which actively complement the existing ingredients - miso paste, for a Japanese-style vinaigrette with rice vinegar, for example, or tahini if you're feeling a bit Middle Eastern. For a more classic flavour, I generally use English mustard powder. Whisked into one of the existing vinaigrettes, it adds heat, but has very little effect on how long the dressing holds together. Stir it into the vinegar along with the salt, however, and your sauce should be good for quarter of an hour or so.

As the French tend to be a bit snobbish about English mustard, the more traditional choice here would be Dijon, which also has the inestimable advantage of having wine vinegar as its base. I mix together half a teaspoon with a pinch of salt, then whisk in the vinegar, followed by the oil. To my

surprise, the results are noticeably thicker, and distinctly more mustardy. I'm not entirely sure why, but still, I approve. Sorry, Norwich.

However, even accounting for the rose-tinted spectacles of memory, I can't help thinking that it's not as well-rounded as that perfect Parisian vinaigrette. Perhaps it needs something sweet to balance the saltiness, sourness and heat of the existing ingredients? I try mixing in half a teaspoon of honey as well. Although I wouldn't say I can pick up a distinct sweetness, it seems to bring out the flavour of the mustard, in a way that sugar (which I also experiment with) does not.



Thomas Keller's blender method for emulsifying vinaigrette. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

So that's the recipe sorted. Now for the method. I've been using a whisk to bring the oil and vinegar base together, but Thomas Keller (obviously a man who appreciates his vinaigrette), suggests a blender. This apparently smashes the oil and water molecules up so finely that it takes them ages to reassemble and subsequently separate. I blend together the base ingredients (salt, honey, Dijon mustard and red wine vinegar), then, with the motor running, drizzle in a third of the oil in a steady stream. To maximise the washing up, I have to whisk in the rest by hand; otherwise, apparently, my dressing will become unpalatably thick and gloopy. The results are incredible - the stuff is so well emulsified that my whisk leaves trail marks on the surface, and three days later, it's still holding together pretty nicely in the fridge.



Perfect recipe vinaigrette in a jam jar before shaking. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

However, reading on, I notice that Larousse recommends the simplest method of all: putting all the ingredients in a jar, replacing the lid, and shaking vigorously. The first time I try this, the honey stays put on the

bottom of the jar, so on the next try, I stir the honey, mustard and salt together into a paste before adding the vinegar, and finally the oil. This is a worthy contender to Keller's crown – although not quite as thick, it stays together for an hour and a half before I notice a slight watery rim appearing at the top (which a quick shake sorts out nicely). Not only has it created very little in the way of washing up, but unlike the blender, which requires large quantities to get going, a jam jar lets you make as much, or as little as you want – depending on the size of your container. And really, I reason, a salad dressing only needs to stay together for as long as it takes you to eat the salad.

Finally, a few quick words on [dressing this salad](#). Firstly, make sure your leaves are completely dry, or they'll repel the dressing. Secondly, I find it helpful to pour some of the vinaigrette into the base of the serving bowl before adding the salad, and then tossing it through the leaves – it seems to give more even coverage for some reason. And thirdly, don't dress a green salad until you're ready to eat it – the oil in the dressing will make your leaves look all sad and wilted.

So, as long as you stick to the ratio of oil and vinegar that suits your taste (different vinegars, in particular, vary in strength, so be careful with anything new), and keep a balance of flavours in mind, the world's best sauce is now your playground. Why, I've even heard rumours of a [bacon fat version](#) ...

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## My perfect vinaigrette

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**Pinch of salt**

**Generous 1/2tsp Dijon mustard**

**Generous 1/2tsp honey**

**1 tbsp red wine vinegar**

**2 tbsp vegetable oil**

**1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil**

1. Put the salt, mustard and honey into a jar, and mix together into a paste. Add the vinegar, and stir well to combine.
2. Pour in the oils, screw the lid on tightly, and shake until you have an emulsion. Store in the fridge.

Is vinaigrette really the queen of sauces – or are you more of a salad cream fan? What's the house vinaigrette in your kitchen – and is there any way to

keep a dressed salad crisp in your lunchbox?

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