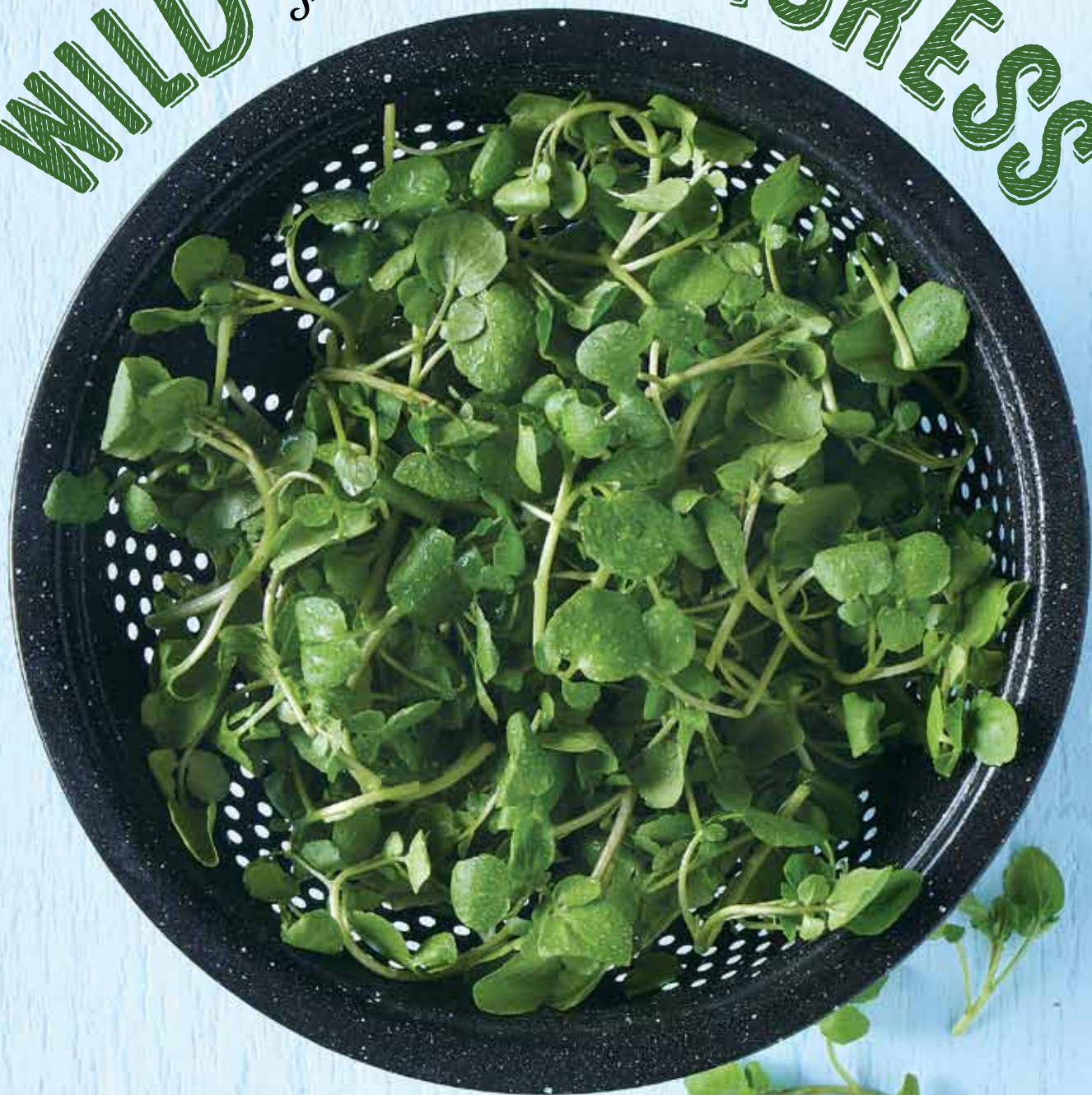


WILD *for* WATERCRESS



This peppery green punches up
salads, stir-fry & more.

BY LAURA B. RUSSELL

AT FIRST GLANCE, WATERCRESS LOOKS INNOCENT ENOUGH. Its deep green leaves are small and rounded, considerably more diminutive than some of its relatives, such as collard or mustard greens. But take a bite of its soft leaves and crunchy stems, and you'll find a big, peppery burst of flavor that can be downright spicy.

True to its name, watercress grows in water. Wild watercress finds a home in shallow streams, springs, lakes, and ponds, with leaves floating on the water's surface, anchored to the bottom by a thin root system. Cultivated watercress—the kind you're most likely to see in the store—takes root in a hydroponic greenhouse system and is very similar in taste and appearance to its wild cousin; the two can be used interchangeably. And if you happen to spot red watercress—a regional wild variety that's now cultivated—that's interchangeable, too.

In the grocery store, you'll find watercress in bags or bunches. Look for bright green leaves and no signs of yellowing or slimy wet spots. The stems can be thick and wiry (more so with wild watercress). If serving it raw, trim off any that are too tough for your liking. The stems will become more tender with cooking, but they can still be a bit leggy, so are best served with a knife and fork.

Watercress is highly perishable, and you should plan to use it within two days. Fortunately, with the recipes on the following pages, you'll have plenty of ways to eat it in a hurry.

*Laura B. Russell wrote the cookbook **Brasicas** (one of which is watercress). She lives in Portland, Oregon.*

Two glasses filled with vibrant green juice, garnished with fresh watercress sprigs. The glasses are set on a light-colored wooden surface. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the same setup.

spring tonic

*Watercress's bracing vibrancy makes it an invigorating addition to green juice, especially when paired with a tart apple. A sweeter apple will make a more mellow juice. If you don't have a juicer, you can make this in a blender and strain it. **Serves 2***

- 2 ribs celery**
- 1 apple**
- 1 English cucumber**
- 1 medium bunch watercress (about 6 oz.)**
- 1 ½-inch piece fresh ginger (optional)**
- 1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice; more to taste**

Cut the celery, apple, and cucumber into pieces that will fit in the mouth of a juicer. Set aside a few sprigs of watercress for a garnish, if you like, and run the remaining watercress, celery, apple, cucumber, and ginger, if using, through the juicer into a pitcher. Stir in the lemon juice, adding more to taste. Serve garnished with the cress sprigs, if using.



Cress Cousins

There are other varieties of cress that grow on land, not in water. Although they appear more delicate than watercress, they often have a more intense flavor. These may be used in place of watercress in recipes, but taste a leaf first to gauge its spiciness.

UPLAND CRESS/LAND CRESS:

The most common cress after watercress has a horseradish-like flavor. It's often sold with the roots still attached. The roots should be trimmed immediately before eating, but the short, thin stems can be left intact.

GARDEN CRESS: This is often harvested young, so it has a microgreen appearance that belies a sharp bite and tender stems that can be eaten without trimming.

WINTERCRESS: This cress flowers in the winter after its leaves have fallen off and can be harvested at either stage (other cresses are harvested only while they have leaves). Whether you find leaves or flowers, you'll get herbaceous notes in addition to peppery flavor, but you probably won't want to eat the tough stems raw.

spicy udon noodles with wilted watercress

Watercress curls and twirls along with the noodles in this full-flavored dish. The cooling cucumbers balance the hot sambal oelek in the sauce for a pleasant tingle. Serves 4 as a main course, 6 as a side dish

- 8 oz. dried udon noodles
- 2½ Tbs. soy sauce or tamari
- 2 tsp. sambal oelek
- 2 tsp. Asian sesame oil
- 1 large bunch watercress (about 7 oz.), stemmed

- 1 Tbs. canola oil or other neutral oil
- 5 oz. English cucumber, peeled, seeded, and cut into small dice (about 1 cup)
- 2 scallions, green parts only, thinly sliced
- 1 Tbs. toasted sesame seeds
- Lime wedges, for serving

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Add the noodles and cook according to package directions until done. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, whisk together the soy sauce, sambal oelek, and sesame oil.

Drain the noodles in a colander set in the

sink. Immediately put the watercress in the hot pot. Return the noodles to the pot, add the canola oil, and toss to combine and wilt the watercress. Add the sauce and toss until well incorporated. Serve warm or at room temperature, topped with the cucumber, scallions, and sesame seeds, with the lime wedges on the side.



Pair With: KÖLSCH These easy-drinking German pale ales will complement the heat of the noodles without exacerbating it.

chicken, shiitake, and watercress stir-fry

This stir-fry gets deep complexity from Chinese fermented chile-bean sauce, also called toban djan, which can be found in the Asian section of well-stocked supermarkets. The dish comes together in a snap and is great with rice.

Serves 2 to 4

- 1 lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut into ¾-inch pieces**
- 1 Tbs. reduced-sodium soy sauce**
- 1 tsp. sake or Shaoxing**
- 2 tsp. cornstarch**
- Kosher salt**
- 2 Tbs. canola or other neutral oil**
- 1½ Tbs. Chinese chile-bean sauce; more to taste**
- 2 tsp. minced fresh ginger**
- 6 oz. shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and sliced (about 2½ cups)**
- ¼ cup lower-salt chicken broth**

1 medium bunch watercress (6 oz.), stemmed


1 Tbs. rice vinegar

Put the chicken in a medium bowl and toss with 2 tsp. of the soy sauce, the sake, cornstarch, and ¼ tsp. salt. Heat a wok or a 12-inch skillet over high heat. Add 1 Tbs. of the oil and the chicken to the pan in a single layer. Leave the chicken undisturbed for about a minute before stirring, and then cook, stirring occasionally, until browned and partially cooked, about 4 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a bowl.

Return the pan to high heat. Add the remaining 1 Tbs. oil, the chile-bean sauce, and ginger to the pan, and stir to combine. Add the mushrooms, and cook, stirring frequently, until tender, about

2 minutes. Return the chicken and any accumulated juices to the pan. Stir in the broth and the remaining 1 tsp. soy sauce. Cook, stirring frequently, until the chicken is cooked through, about 2 minutes.

Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the watercress, vinegar, and more chile-bean sauce to taste. Toss until the watercress wilts. Serve hot.

 **Pair With: OFF-DRY RIESLING** These clean, crisp white wines have a slight sweetness that will stand up to the heat in this dish.

Three States of Watercress

Watercress can be eaten raw, wilted, or cooked. The more heat it's exposed to, the tenderer and mellower it gets. Here's what to expect in each form.

Raw

Flavor

Bold and peppery

Texture

Soft leaves, crisp stems

Wilted

Flavor

Peppery backdrop, but muted

Texture

Tender leaves; stems retain some crispness

Cooked

Flavor

Mild, pleasant bitterness but no sharp bite

Texture

Tender leaves and stems





warm potato and watercress salad

Tender roasted fingerling potatoes pair harmoniously with wilted watercress in this simple salad. Be sure to toss the watercress and vinaigrette with the potatoes as soon as they come out of the oven so the cress wilts and the dressing penetrates the potatoes as they cool. Serves 6 as a side dish

- 1½ lb. fingerling potatoes, halved lengthwise
- 5 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt
- 2 Tbs. white wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 medium bunch watercress (about 6 oz.), stemmed
- Freshly ground black pepper

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 400°F. On a large rimmed baking sheet, toss the potatoes with 1 Tbs. of the oil and ½ tsp. salt. Roast, tossing occasionally, until golden brown and tender, about 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a small bowl, whisk the vinegar, mustard, and ¼ tsp. salt. Whisking constantly, slowly pour in the remaining 4 Tbs. olive oil to form a thick dressing.

Pour half of the dressing directly over the hot potatoes on the baking sheet. Add the watercress and toss until the potatoes absorb the dressing and the watercress starts to wilt. Season to taste with additional salt and pepper. Serve with the remaining dressing on the side.

thai watercress and steak salad

A bright, tangy, fruity Thai dressing enhances the peppery bite of raw watercress. If you happen to have some leftover grilled steak, feel free to substitute it here. Serves 4

- 1 lb. skirt steak or flank steak
- 1 Tbs. canola or other neutral oil
- Kosher salt
- 2 Tbs. fish sauce
- 1½ Tbs. fresh lime juice
- 1 tsp. dark brown sugar
- ½ jalapeño, seeded and finely chopped
- ¾ cup halved cherry or grape tomatoes
- ¾ cup diced fresh pineapple
- ½ cup thinly sliced red onion


- 1 large bunch watercress (about 7 oz.), stemmed and torn into bite-size pieces
- ¼ cup chopped unsalted peanuts

Prepare a medium (350°F to 375°F) gas or charcoal grill fire or heat a grill pan on the stove over medium-high heat. Brush the steak with the oil and season all over with ¼ tsp. salt. Grill the steak, turning occasionally, until cooked to your liking, about 3 minutes per side for medium rare (125°F). Transfer the steak to a cutting board and let cool slightly, about 10 minutes (if the steak is too hot, it will wilt the greens).

Meanwhile, in a small bowl, stir together the fish sauce, lime juice, sugar, and jalapeño.

Thinly slice the steak against the grain.

In a large bowl, combine the steak, tomatoes, pineapple, and onion. Add the dressing and toss to combine. Just before serving, put the watercress on a platter, lightly salt, and toss. Top with the steak mixture and peanuts, and serve.

 **Pair With:** NORMANDIE OR BASQUE CIDER These dry, sparkly hard ciders are hearty enough for the beef yet sweet enough for the pineapple.

