

Cook's Books

Building a better salad

By Amanda Gold
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Catherine Walther had turned to pre-washed, bagged greens one too many times before realizing that her salads needn't be an afterthought to the rest of the meal.

A private chef, Walther began experimenting with different lettuces, seasonal ingredients, varying textures and homemade dressings — it wasn't long before her clients happily took note.

Now, she brings more than 100 of these combinations to the pages of her new book, "Raising the Salad Bar."

Recipes are arranged by the main ingredient, so you'll find numerous options for vegetable, chicken, beef, seafood, potato, pasta, grain and bean salads, in addition to instructions for dressings and slaws.

Walther also provides tips on buying and storing greens, making croutons, and instructions on how to cook different grains or potatoes that will become the base for salad recipes.

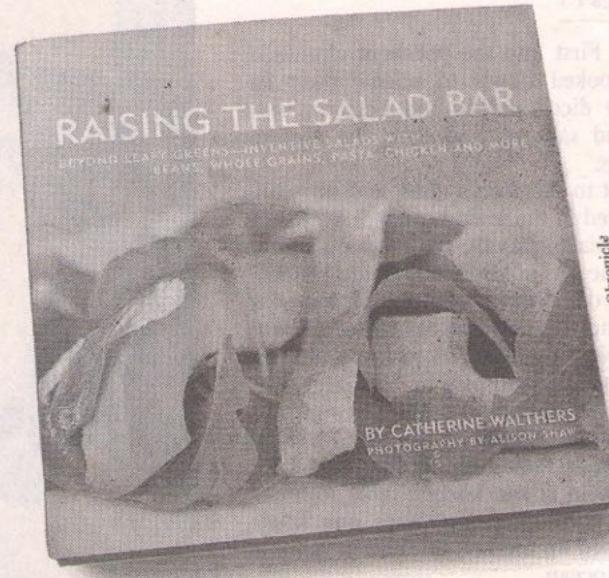
Interlaced with beautiful, vivid photographs, the pages contain salads that are accompanied by their own recommended dressing recipes, many of which are quick and simple. Still, Walther stresses the importance of being flexible, alluding to the fact that many of the parts are interchangeable.

Inventive combinations like arugula and orange salad with fig-tangerine dressing, or bulgur with apricot, radicchio and parsley, show the range of Walther's creativity.

Others, like the recipe for a BLT salad with chicken and ranch dressing, might be more expected, but still remind us of some familiar arrangements that shouldn't be ignored.

Either way, they beat bagged greens by a landslide.

"Raising the Salad Bar," by Catherine Walther (Lake Isle Press, 272 pages, \$19.95).



JOHN LEE / Special to The Chronicle

BLT Chicken Salad with Ranch Dressing

Serves 4

From "Raising the Salad Bar" (Lake Isle Press; \$19.95) by Catherine Walther.

The salad

- 1 small head romaine, or other lettuce (about 5-6 cups), washed and dried
- 1 cup frisee, washed, dried and torn into pieces (optional)
- 8 slices bacon
- 3 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves
- 1 avocado, sliced
- 2 tomatoes, diced, or 1½ cups cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 2 cups garlic croutons (optional)

Salt and pepper

The dressing

- ½ cup low-fat buttermilk
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons low-fat yogurt
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced
- 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives

Instructions: Cut or tear the lettuce into bite-size pieces. Cook bacon until crisp; drain well on paper towels.

Heat a stovetop grill pan, skillet or outdoor grill over medium-high heat. Pound the chicken breast halves to an even thickness, about ¼- to ½-inch thick. Season with salt and pepper and brush with oil. Cook chicken about 4 or 5 minutes per side, until just done. Let chicken rest on a cutting board for a few minutes before slicing into ½-inch-wide strips.

Arrange the lettuce on a platter and combine with chicken strips. Top the salad with avocado slices, diced tomatoes and crumbled bacon. Add the croutons, if using.

To make the dressing: In a bowl, whisk together the buttermilk, mayonnaise, yogurt, garlic and vinegar. Whisk in oil until creamy. Season generously with salt, lots of pepper and chives. Serve the dressing on the side. If you're not serving the salad immediately, set the bacon and croutons aside separately; then add them and combine with the salad just before serving.

Per serving: 440 calories, 25 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 35 g fat (6 g saturated), 66 mg cholesterol, 366 mg sodium, 4 g fiber.