

# Arugula the Italian Way

Not just for salad, this peppery green is great with meats, pasta—even pizza

BY TONY MANTUANO



**Preparing arugula is a snap.** Twist off the thick stems and the leaves are ready to be cooked or tossed in a salad. But handle it gently so that the leaves don't crack or bruise, like the one at right.



I discovered arugula when my wife and I moved to Italy in 1983. Known as *rucola* to the Italians, the flavor of the crisp green leaves took us by surprise—nothing this green and lettuce-like should pack such a wallop. We had to have more.

We started to buy it daily from the wonderful produce markets, to eat as part of a mixed salad, dressed simply with extra-virgin olive oil and good vinegar. We also kept our eyes open to all the ways Italian cooks incorporated arugula into pasta, meat, and seafood dishes, as well as salads. Now back in our own restaurant in Chicago, these Italian arugula dishes have become an important part of our repertoire.

Arugula, also called rocket or *rucola* in English, has a distinctive nutty flavor that's somewhat pungent and a little bitter. Since bitterness is the taste that seems to be the most unappreciated by the American palate, arugula takes some getting used to for the first-timer. But once you've tasted it, there's absolutely no mistaking arugula for another green. Its flavor is so intense that it's often labeled incorrectly as an herb in grocery stores.

Actually, the fact that you can find arugula in grocery stores is a major improvement. Ten years ago, Italian restaurant chefs in the United States had trouble finding it at all, and when they did they often cringed at the high price tag. Today, it's readily available to chefs, many grocery stores carry it regularly, and it's even inexpensive at peak summer growing times. Although it's available year-round, arugula grown in the summer has the sturdiest, crispest leaves.

## THE FLAVOR IS BOLD, BUT THE LEAVES ARE DELICATE

Look for emerald-green leaves with no blemishes, spots, or signs of yellowing. The texture should be crisp and firm. Arugula is usually sold either in bunches with the roots attached or packed loosely

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*Sizzling steak, Tuscan style. Juices from the grilled meat mingle deliciously with olive oil, lemon, rosemary, and slightly wilted arugula.*



## Arugula oil—pretty, delicious

At the restaurant, we save the arugula stems to make arugula oil, but you can make it with whole leaves, too. This bright green oil looks attractive and tastes fantastic with beef or seafood. I especially like it with roasted scallops.

To make arugula oil, first blanch the stems in boiling water for five seconds to set the green color, and then dunk them immediately in ice water to stop the cooking. Roughly chop the stems and put them in a blender. Pour in enough good-quality olive oil to cover them by an inch and blend until smooth.

I like the bold color and flavor of this oil as it is when it comes out of the blender, but you can also let the oil steep for 24 hours in the



refrigerator and then strain out the pulp. This leaves you with a more delicate, transparent oil. Strained, it will keep up to ten days in the refrigerator, while unstrained it will only keep for a day or two.

*Save your arugula stems for colorful, peppery arugula oil. Blanch the stems briefly to make them bright green, chop them up, and then whirl them in a blender with olive oil.*

*Unstrained oil is thick and bold (at right), but doesn't keep long. Strained, the oil is delicate and transparent and stays fresh longer.*



in plastic bags with the roots and most of the stem trimmed off. Since it has such delicate leaves, I prefer to buy it loosely packed rather than secured into bunches.

Once you get the arugula home, keep the leaves crisp by sticking the stem ends in a container of ice water, the way you'd put flowers in a vase. The arugula will taste best if you use it right away, but if you must store it for a couple of days, wrap the stems in a damp paper towel, and then seal the arugula in a plastic bag.

When you're ready to use the arugula, trim off the thick stems and save them for making arugula oil (see sidebar at left). To wash the leaves, dunk them very gently in a large bowl of cold water, let them soak for a few seconds to loosen the grit, swish the leaves around, and then lift them out. Dry the leaves carefully with a towel or in a salad spinner. You have to be gentle with arugula; otherwise, it will bruise and crack, marring its flavor and appearance (see photo on p. 28).

### ARUGULA IS A PART OF EVERYDAY COOKING IN ITALY

Italians love arugula's bold and distinctive flavor not only in salads, but in cooked dishes as well. In one of my favorite pasta dishes, I toss arugula with hot spaghetti, fresh tomatoes, sharp aged sheep's milk cheese, extra-virgin olive oil, and cracked black pepper (see recipe on p. 32). The heat of the just-cooked and drained pasta gently wilts the arugula leaves to make a summertime "uncooked" sauce (see photo on p. 32). In this dish, the bitter arugula contrasts with the sweetness of summer tomatoes, while the cracked black pepper brings out the peppery nature of the arugula.

In Tuscany, where Chianina cattle grow tall and lean, a dish called *tagliata* (literally, "cut" or "sliced") is often seen on menus (see recipe on p. 32). While it's really a "restaurant" dish, you can easily make it at home, too. First you sear a cut of beef, usually strip steak or sometimes filet, on a very hot charcoal grill. The steak then comes off the grill and rests for a few minutes, still raw in the center. Slice it into strips, fan out the strips on a flameproof serving platter, and season it with extra-virgin olive oil, cracked black pepper, salt, and rosemary. Put the platter back on the grill until the oil begins to sizzle and the beef cooks a little more. Toss a big handful of arugula around the beef; the greens wilt from the heat of the platter as the whole thing is brought sizzling to the table (see photo on p. 29).

Along the Tuscan coast, cooks combine arugula with sweet, freshly poached shrimp and olive oil to create a warm salad. In Lombardy, there's a centuries-old—but still popular—recipe for capon salad with arugula, pine nuts, citron, roasted red

peppers, olive oil, and balsamic vinegar, which could very well be the first “composed” salad ever.

At the restaurant, we toss arugula with balsamic vinegar and arrange it on top of a hot mozzarella and prosciutto pizza (see photo at right, recipe below). We'll also layer arugula with oranges, red onions, and olive oil to serve with grilled tuna or swordfish.

I find that when I put arugula in a dish, it tends to dominate the other ingredients. It especially overwhelms most herbs: only fresh rosemary and dried oregano seem assertive enough to stand up to it. In most cases I think it's best to let arugula be the dominant flavor and leave out the herbs. In this sense, arugula is the “seasoning.”

### **PIZZA WITH PROSCIUTTO & ARUGULA**

When the pizza comes out of the oven, it's topped with a salad of arugula, sun-dried tomatoes, red onion, balsamic vinegar, and extra-virgin olive oil. This salad is also great on its own. *Yields two 12-inch pizzas.*

#### **FOR THE PIZZA DOUGH:**

*1¼ cups warm water*  
*2 tsp. active dry yeast*  
*1 Tbs. honey*  
*15 oz. (3¼ cups) all-purpose flour*  
*1¼ oz. (¼ cup) whole-wheat flour*  
*1 Tbs. salt*  
*2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil*

#### **FOR THE PIZZA TOPPINGS:**

*1 clove garlic, minced fine*  
*¼ cup olive oil*  
*½ lb. mozzarella cheese (preferably fresh), cut into large cubes*  
*8 thin slices prosciutto (about 4 oz.)*

#### **FOR THE SALAD:**

*6 oz. arugula (about 7 cups, loosely packed), washed, tough stems removed*  
*6 very thin slices red onion*  
*6 sun-dried tomatoes, diced (if not packed in oil, rehydrate first)*  
*2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil*  
*2 tsp. balsamic vinegar*

**Making the dough**—Combine the water, yeast, and honey in a large mixing bowl or in the bowl of a stationary mixer. Allow to sit until foamy, about 5 min. Add the remaining ingredients and stir until incorporated. Knead by hand on a floured surface for 10 min., or in a mixer for 5 min. Cover the bowl and let the dough rise until doubled, about 1½ hours.

**Assembling the pizza**—Heat the oven to 450°. If you're using a baking stone, let it heat in the oven for 30 min. Combine the garlic and olive oil.

Divide the dough in half. Roll out one piece of dough into a 12-in. round. If you're using a baking stone, roll out the dough on a pizza peel or on kitchen parchment. Otherwise, roll it on a lightly floured surface and transfer it to an oiled baking sheet. Brush 1 to 2 Tbs. of garlic oil on the dough. Arrange half the mozzarella around the pizza, and lay 4 slices of prosciutto on top. Bake until dark brown and crispy, 10 to 12 min. Repeat with the second piece of dough.

Meanwhile, toss all the salad ingredients together. When the pizzas are done, top each one with half the salad and serve.

*(Continued)*

*Sharp and peppery arugula salad tops a pizza baked with mild mozzarella cheese and salty prosciutto.*





*Pasta makes its own sauce. Toss fresh arugula, sweet tomato wedges, and sharp ricotta salata with hot spaghetti for a quick summer dinner.*

### **SPAGHETTI WITH ARUGULA, TOMATO & RICOTTA SALATA**

The sharp sheep's milk flavor of *ricotta salata* is unbeatable with arugula. If you can't find this dried cheese at an Italian market or at a cheese shop, use a smaller amount of mozzarella or Parmesan instead (the soft ricotta that comes in a tub won't work). Whichever cheese you use, grate it slowly on a grater with large holes to get long strands of cheese. Serves four to six.

**1 lb. dry spaghetti**  
**½ cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
**Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**  
**2 tsp. dried oregano**  
**3 beefsteak tomatoes, cut into 8 to 10 wedges each**  
**6 oz. arugula (about 7 cups, loosely packed), washed, tough stems removed**  
**5 oz. grated ricotta salata**

Cook the spaghetti in plenty of salted boiling water until *al dente*. Drain well, but don't rinse. While it's still hot, put the pasta in a large bowl and toss it with the oil, salt, pepper, oregano, and tomatoes. Gently toss in the arugula. Divide among bowls, top with the grated *ricotta salata* and serve immediately.

### **TAGLIATA CON RUCOLA**

*(Sliced steak with arugula)*

To capture all the great juices from the beef that mingle with the lemon juice and arugula, you want to serve this dish in the same pan it's cooked in. The trickiest part is finding a plate or pan that can go on a hot grill or stovetop and yet is attractive to serve in. At the restaurant, we use our regular, thick plates, but a couple of times a year we'll lose one as it cracks over the heat. Fajita pans and enameled cast-iron gratin pans work well. It's best to cook each serving separately, but if you have to double up, make sure you don't crowd the meat in the pan. Serve with bread to sop up the juices in the pan. Serves two.

**2 strip or top sirloin steaks, 6 oz. each, completely trimmed of any fat or sinew**  
**1½ tsp. kosher salt**  
**1 Tbs. coarsely cracked black pepper**  
**¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
**4 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary**  
**3 oz. arugula (about 3½ cups, loosely packed), washed, tough stems removed**  
**½ lemon cut in wedges**

Season the beef with a little bit of the salt and pepper. Sear the steaks briefly on a hot grill or in a heavy pan to brown the outside. Remove from the grill (the center will still be raw). When cool enough to handle, slice the steaks on an angle into ½-in. slices. Fan them so they're almost flat on individual heatproof platters (see note above). Drizzle with the olive oil and sprinkle on the rosemary and the rest of the salt and pepper. Put the platters on the grill or on a burner and heat until the oil begins to bubble and the meat is cooked halfway through, about 5 min. The top will still look rare. Remove from the grill and surround each steak with the arugula. Squeeze the lemon on the arugula to taste (if you put the juice on the meat, it will turn the beef gray.) Serve immediately.

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