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CHICKEN PAILLARDS WITH TOMATO, ARUGULA, AND RED ONION SALAD

If any dish is tailor-made for my Upper East Side customers, it's a chicken paillard. It's lean protein, so it fits into whatever diet is in style at any moment. Combining salad with warm ingredients is a vestige of nouvelle cuisine, and I'm glad it's here to stay.

In this deceptively simple dish, the warmth of the just-cooked chicken releases the aroma of the dressing and enhances the slight bitterness of the arugula. The tomato and arugula add sweetness and sharpness, respectively. Like all simple dishes, making it perfect means all the elements have to be right. That starts with the best-quality chicken breasts from your local butcher. It's not that easy to pound a perfect paillard, one that's evenly thin all the way around, but not too thin in any one spot—especially when you're doing dozens per day.

In addition to being a fixture on the restaurant menu, the paillard is also one of the most popular items we serve for large catered dinners. Barneys' Public Relations and Special Events teams always create world-class events, so the challenge for us is making sure what we serve measures up, especially for events when we are feeding many people at the same time. We are Barneys, and can't serve anything less than delicious, so how do you cook something this thin and delicate for a large group? The answer, when you're cooking for a hundred or more: lots of staff! Six chefs cooking paillards, two people topping them with salad, and three food runners sprinting them quickly to our waiting, fashionable guests.

You probably won't be making them for quite as many people, but however many you make, you should pound the paillards ahead of time; in fact, you can prepare them up to 24 hours ahead of time and store them in the refrigerator.

Serves 2

EQUIPMENT

Heavy, thick, wooden cutting board Metal meat mallet/tenderizer Plastic wrap

Storage container with cover

12-inch nonstick skillet

Kitchen tongs



CHICKEN PAILLARDS

2 (7-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts
2 tablespoon Freds Herb Mixture (page 12/recipe follows)
Drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil

SALAD

2 cups baby arugula
10 cherry tomatoes, halved
(or 2 plum tomatoes, quartered, seeds and center removed, then cut lengthwise into ¼-inch strips)
4 (¼-inch-thick) slices red onion
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons Madison Avenue Dressing (page 44/recipe follows)
1 lemon, halved, for garnish

Pound the paillards (See Note/below), in between sheets of plastic wrap, according to the instructions on page 102. Peel back the plastic, one side at a time, and sprinkle each paillard with a tablespoon of herb mixture and drizzle with olive oil. Keep refrigerated in the plastic wrap for up to 24 hours, until you're ready to cook.

Place the arugula, tomatoes, and onion in a mixing bowl. Place the dressing close at hand but do not add to the salad yet.

Unless you have two skillets, you'll need to cook the paillards one at a time. They cook quickly, so the first one will stay warm while you cook the second. Take one paillard out of the plastic wrap and sprinkle it on both sides with salt and pepper. Heat the skillet over medium heat until it's very hot. To check if it's ready, drizzle a drop of water into the pan. If it sizzles and balls up, the pan is ready. Briefly turn off the heat as you quickly remove the paillard from the plastic. Flip it into the hot pan, making sure it's flat in the pan, then turn the heat back to high. Cook until the top side starts to look cooked, and then use tongs to turn it over. If the paillard is very thin, turn off the heat, but leave it in the pan to finish cooking. If it's a bit thicker and needs more time, keep the heat on until the piece is firm, but do not overcook. Use a large spatula to transfer the paillard to an oversize dinner plate. Repeat with the second paillard. Quickly add the dressing to the salad, toss together, and then place in the center of each paillard. Garnish with half a lemon, and serve immediately.



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FREDS HERB MIXTURE

A container of our own finely chopped fresh herb blend sits on most of the stations around the kitchen because we use it in so many dishes—in salad dressings, in pastas, a pinch as a garnish for soup or on top of a chicken paillard, and more. It's an aromatic, similar to the famous herbes de Provence, except that ours is always made with fresh herbs and is our own blend.

This mixture is a great trick for home cooks, too. I don't know about you, but whenever I buy a bunch of herbs for home use, I end up using about half, and then the rest goes bad. Chopped finely and blended this way, and then stored in a sealed container in the fridge, the mixture should stay good for about one week. It also freezes well, although I would freeze it in individual portions. Spend a little time making this mixture and you will reap the reward of having fresh herbs on hand to toss into salads, mix into salad dressings, sprinkle over fish, omelets, or steamed vegetables, or use in a million other ways. Tailor-make your own blend just the way you like it—you might like tarragon more than I do, for example, or you might want to include dill, which we don't at Freds.

The key is to remove all the leaves from the stems (except for chives, obviously) and chop them very finely. On the illustration of Classic Cuts (see page 6/not included), the cut for this mixture would be whisper. It's easiest to finely chop the herbs with a mezzaluna, but you can also use a large chef's knife. Since you are chopping so finely, use a large stable cutting board, and make sure to give yourself lots of elbow room for leverage. It's tempting to use a food processor, but that's not the best option in this case because it will tend to grind the juicier herbs (the basil and parsley) too much and turn the whole thing into a paste. What you're looking for here is a slightly dry mixture resembling sawdust.

When talking about bunches of herbs, I'm aware that the size of a bunch can vary wildly, depending on the store and the time of year (summer bunches of basil are usually enormous!). As a point of reference, consider each bunch used in this recipe to be the standard, medium-size bunch you find in the supermarket. Depending on your need, you can obviously adjust it to the smaller single-size packages that are so widely available.

Yield varies according to the size of the bunches

EQUIPMENT

Mezzaluna (can substitute knife)



INGREDIENTS

1 bunch fresh Italian parsley
1 bunch fresh chives
1 bunch fresh thyme
1 bunch fresh rosemary
1 bunch fresh basil
1 bunch fresh chervil
1 bunch fresh oregano
½ bunch fresh tarragon

Pick the leaves off the stems of all herbs, with the exception of chives, and discard the stems. Pile the leaves on a large cutting board, and, ideally using a mezzaluna, chop them all together very finely, until the mixture almost resembles sawdust. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 10 days.

MADISON AVENUE DRESSING

Makes 1 cup

1 clove garlic
¼ cup red wine vinegar
¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Dash of kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Peel the garlic clove, smash it with a chef's knife and place in a stainless-steel bowl. Add the vinegar and set aside for 1 hour to let the flavors meld, then remove the garlic.

Add the olive oil and whisk together. Add the salt and pepper, mix again, and then taste and adjust seasoning if needed.

NOTE:

HOW TO POUND A PAILLARD

(OR SCALOPPINE, MILANESE, OR CARPACCIO)

This technique for pounding meat works whether you're making a paillard, a Milanese (breaded paillard), or carpaccio (raw pounded steak—not a suitable way to serve chicken, obviously!). The goal is to end up with a piece of meat that is evenly thin all over.



Use a countertop where you have enough elbow room for leverage and that's sturdy enough to stand up to pounding—we use a butcher block instead of the usual metal kitchen surfaces. Be sure to remove any objects that might fall off from the rattling as you pound. Place a very thick wooden cutting board (such as the ones made by John Boos, which are widely available) on the surface to absorb the impact of the pounding. The best tool to use is a metal meat mallet/tenderizer, but they're not all created equal. The best for home use is a solid stainless-steel round disc because it's heavier and has a smaller center of weight than the more common square ones. It's a bit small to do the volume a restaurant requires, but it's perfect for home use—or for beginners. Use the flat side, not the scored one.

For each piece of chicken, tear off two equal size pieces of plastic wrap. Place one piece on the cutting board, lay the chicken on top, and drizzle 1 teaspoon of cold water over the chicken, which prevents it from sticking to the plastic. Lay the second piece of plastic on top. Now you're ready to pound, but do so strategically by starting from the center. Part of the art is using the right force; too much will rip holes in the meat or the plastic wrap. The time to exert a little extra pressure is not in the strike, but just as the mallet hits the meat. Rotate the piece (in the plastic) about 20 degrees clockwise after each strike, so you work your way around, and feel with your free hand to make sure it's evenly flat. From a 7-ounce chicken breast you should end up with a piece that's about the size of a 10-inch plate. About halfway through pounding, lift the top layer of plastic and drizzle the meat with a little olive oil so the plastic won't tear the meat as you remove it for cooking. When the piece is fully pounded, remove the top plastic again, and drizzle with a little more olive oil and with herbs, if desired. Cover with the plastic and store flat in the fridge until you're ready to cook it.

