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TEA LEAF SALAD (LAPHET THOKE)

It's hard to pinpoint exactly why tea leaf salad—*laphet thoke*—is so addictive, but it has something to do with its singular combination of textures and savory, salty, mildly sour flavors—and, of course, the caffeine kick you get after eating it. This version of laphet thoke is served in a large bowl with heaps of peanuts, toasted sesame seeds, crispy garlic, fried yellow split peas, tomato, jalapeño, and shredded lettuce. The textures and flavors all enhance the deep umami quality of the laphet.

SERVES 4 AS PART OF A LARGER MEAL

6 cups thinly sliced romaine lettuce (about 1 1/2 heads romaine)

1/2 cup Tea Leaf Dressing (*recipe follows*)

1/4 cup Fried Garlic Chips (*recipe follows*)

1/4 cup Fried Yellow Split Peas (page 215/*recipe follows*)

1/4 cup coarsely chopped toasted peanuts

1/4 cup toasted sunflower seeds

1 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds

1 Roma tomato, seeded and diced

1 small jalapeño, seeded and diced (about 1/4 cup)

1 tablespoon shrimp powder (see page 235/*not included*)

2 teaspoons fish sauce or a few generous pinches of salt

1 lemon or lime, cut into wedges

To make the salad, place a bed of lettuce in the center of a large plate or platter. Spoon the tea leaf dressing into the center of the lettuce. Around the lettuce, arrange separate piles of fried garlic, split peas, peanuts, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, tomato, and jalapeño. Sprinkle with shrimp powder and drizzle with fish sauce. Before serving, squeeze 2 lemon wedges over the plate. Using 2 forks, mix the ingredients together until the tea leaves lightly coat the lettuce. Taste, adding more lemon or fish sauce at the table, if desired.



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Tea Leaf Dressing

1/2 packed cup (about 2 ounces) whole fermented tea leaves (laphet) or 1/3 packed cup seasoned tea leaf paste (without oil) (see “Faking It” below)

1/3 cup canola oil

1 garlic clove, coarsely chopped

1/4 teaspoon dried chile flakes

1 teaspoon lime or lemon juice

Salt

If using whole, unseasoned laphet leaves, soak them for 5 minutes in cold water to extract some of the bitterness. Drain, squeezing the leaves to remove excess water. Taste the leaves. If they still taste extremely bitter, soak and drain again. Skip this step if using a seasoned paste.

Put the leaves or paste in a food processor with the garlic and chile flakes and pulse a few times. Add the lemon juice and half of the oil, briefly pulse, and then, with the processor running, drizzle in the rest of the oil. If the leaves are not preseasoned, add 1 teaspoon salt. If the leaves are already seasoned, add only a pinch or two of salt. You will have about 1/2 cup of tea leaf dressing.

FAKING IT

There's no easy way to fake the savory flavor of laphet. But by brewing a pot of green tea and saving the leaves, you can get close—kind of.

The hardest part is coaxing out of dried green tea an overripe, bamboo shoot–like aroma that resembles laphet. But leaving used tea leaves out at room temperature for a day or two can help. Once blended with ginger and garlic, they make a nice tea paste for a salad. It's lighter and more like pesto than laphet, but it still supplies a little caffeine buzz.

To try it, put 2 tablespoons good-quality loose-leaf green tea, such as Chinese Dragon Well or Japanese sencha, in a cup. Add hot water (about 190°F, just below a boil) and steep for 3 minutes to make a cup of tea. (Go ahead and drink the tea; it's not needed for the paste.) Press out excess water from the leaves, and transfer to a glass or plastic container. Partially cover and leave at room temperature for 2 days. The tea should take on an aroma resembling overripe fruit.

Mince 1 clove of garlic and a teaspoon's worth of ginger and place in a food processor. Add the tea leaves and 1/4 teaspoon salt and pulse briefly to break up the leaves. Drizzle in 3 tablespoons canola oil and season with 1 teaspoon distilled white vinegar. At this point, the blend is ready to be used in the Tea Leaf Salad recipe, but refrigerate it overnight for a deeper flavor.



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FRIED GARLIC CHIPS AND GARLIC OIL

MAKES ABOUT 1/3 CUP FRIED GARLIC AND ABOUT 1/2 CUP GARLIC OIL

1/3 cup thinly sliced fresh garlic or dehydrated garlic chips

1/2 cup canola oil

If using dehydrated garlic chips, soak them in cold water for 4 minutes. Drain and let sit for 15 minutes to allow the centers of the chips to hydrate.

Line a heatproof bowl with a strainer. Line a plate with paper towels.

In a wok or small saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat for a minute or two (the oil shouldn't be scorching hot). Add the garlic and gently stir into the oil. When bubbles start to form rapidly around the garlic, decrease the heat to low and cook, stirring often, until the garlic is an even golden color and nearly completely crisp, about 3 minutes if using fresh garlic and 7 minutes if using dehydrated garlic chips. If the garlic starts to darken too quickly, remove it from the heat and let it continue to fry in the oil. If the garlic needs more time to fry, return the wok to low heat and continue to fry.

Pour the contents of the wok into the strainer-lined bowl. Lift the strainer up and shake off the excess oil. Scatter the garlic onto the lined plate. The garlic should crisp up as it cools. The chips can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for 1 month. Store the oil in the refrigerator for up to 6 months.

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FRIED YELLOW SPLIT PEAS

MAKES ABOUT 1/2 CUP

1/3 cup yellow split peas

1/2 cup canola oil

Pinch of salt

Cover the split peas with about 1 inch of water. Soak at least 4 hours or overnight.

Drain the split peas through a fine-mesh strainer, shaking off the excess water.



Line a plate with paper towels. In a wok or small saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat for 1 minute. Add the split peas. Once the oil starts to bubble rapidly around the split peas, lower the heat slightly and continue to fry, stirring often, until they begin to crisp up and turn slightly darker, about 5 minutes.

Drain well. Scatter the split peas on the lined plate and season with salt. The split peas should be crunchy but not rock-hard once cooled. They can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for 2 weeks.



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