FRISÉE

Frisée is actually not a lettuce, even though it’s often called “Frisée lettuce”. It is a leafy green related to endive and chicory. It has rich green leaves on the outside; pale yellow-green leaves toward the centre of the plant. The leaves are crisp and look like fern fronds. They taste mildly bitter and have a bit of a peppery taste. The exotic plant resembles a lettuce gone horribly awry, with a pale green explosion of frizzy leaves that adds a frisky note to green salads.

Frisée is a member of the chicory family, which includes radicchio, treviso, Belgian endive, green endive and escarole. It’s a fine-leafed endive displaying dark green outer leaves, paler yellow middle leaves and delicate white center leaves.

Frisée is a minor crop grown in Yuma County with less than 50 acres in production.

Some consumers are radically opposed to Frisée, while others adore the bitter and sometimes woody green. Frisée was popularized in the United States in the 1990s by chefs across the country, who integrated the green into a wide variety of salads, and it has since become available in many upscale grocers and some spring mix salad blends.

Frisée often appears in baby leaf salad mixes, because the green is extremely laborious and therefore expensive to produce as a sole salad ingredient. In addition, its distinctive flavor can be overwhelming, and a small amount can go a long way. Frisée is generally served in loose chunks in salad to highlight its exotic feathered appearance.

When growing, Frisée resembles lettuce, with a loosely arranged head of curled leaves around a central stalk. In the United States, Frisée plants tend to be small, although much larger heads are grown overseas. Frisée grown for eating must be carefully protected from sun damage, which will turn the plant the rich green of a lettuce and make it woody and extremely bitter. Yuma area producers have a variety of techniques for keeping the center of the green tender and white, or blanched, for market.

When cooking with Frisée, always tear it rather than using a knife. Remember that the inner leaves are the most tender and can be used in more abundance than the tougher outer leaves. Because Frisée can brown or yellow, cut it shortly before use and dress it directly before bringing it to the table so that it doesn’t discolor or become waterlogged.

Frisée is a spicy addition to green salads, or it can be served in more complex gourmet salads, starring with walnut vinaigrette and other bitter greens.

Frisée is typically harvested like other lettuces, with a sharp knife close to the base, and it can be stored under refrigeration for approximately five days in ventilated bags.

Tear Frisée into small pieces as chomping down on big pieces of it can be overwhelming.

As with other salad greens, only put vinaigrettes on at the last minute. Frisée leaves stand up well in salads with warm dressings. Some feel, in fact, that warmth and heat even improves Frisée, making its taste more mild and the frizzy leaves softer in the mouth, and for this reason call for it as an ingredient in warm salads and in pasta recipes.

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