



Sprightly lemon infused dressing tops this hearty weeknight chicken salad.

Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

CITRUS DREAMS

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Have you ever dreamed of living in an orange grove, like Marjorie Kinnan Rawling, in the movie "Cross Creek," wherein she manages to save her grove, fall in love, and write her best-selling novel, *The Yearling* — all in the space of a couple of hours? No doubt the closest most of us will ever get to that dream is stopping in at a citrus stand while on a road trip to Florida and sampling some fresh-squeezed orange juice from one of those little cups. Oh, and picking up that little orange shaped bottle of cologne, of course. I just love that stuff.

It's a tough cookie, indeed, who can stand up to Old Man Winter without catching a bit of the winter blues. Unfortunately, many of us are not able to simply gather our flock and head south for the duration like geese. Happily though, several varieties of citrus — the bounty of those warmer climes — are available nationwide from fall to spring each year. With their bright flavor and energizing scent, they're a perfect winter pick-me up.

The Orange: Handheld Sunshine

We usually think of oranges as sweet, juicy little balls of sunshine. However, the earliest known oranges were sour, and they appeared in eastern India around 5500 B.C. Roughly 1,500 years later they showed up in China, where they were highly prized and reserved only for nobility. From there, they spread to Persia, the Roman Empire and North Africa. Around 1800 B.C., the Moors (North African Muslims) and Portuguese sailors brought oranges to Spain and the rest of southern Europe, where sweeter fruits were developed alongside the sour varieties. Initially they were used only medicinally, but as their popularity increased, oranges began to be enjoyed purely for their pleasant taste.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus picked up some orange seeds in the Canary Islands, and took them to Hispaniola where he planted an orange grove. Then in the early 1500s, they were brought to Brazil by other Spanish explorers, and today Brazil is the largest producer of oranges in the world. Within a few decades, oranges were introduced to Florida, and eventually their cultivation spread to California, where in the 1800s oranges were harvested for sale to gold miners.

The Chivalrous Lemon

The native habitat of lemons



Photo by Ellen Levy Finch

Blossoms and oranges still on the tree are sunshine for winter weary souls.

has never been determined. They may have come from India, the Middle East or southeast Asia, where they were used ornamentally as well as medicinally for both their antiseptic properties and as treatment for various types of poisoning. By the year 700 A.D., lemons were being cultivated in Egypt. Roughly 400 years later, they reached the Mediterranean and parts of Europe, having been brought back among the treasures of the Knights Templar. So the next time you enjoy a slice of Lemon Meringue, you can thank, in part, Richard the Lionheart and other Crusaders.

As with the orange, Columbus brought lemon seeds with him to Hispaniola, where they continued to be used medicinally. Cosmetically, medieval ladies rubbed lemon juice on their lips and cheeks to make them rosy. It wasn't until the 1800s, when lemons began to be grown in Florida and then in California, that they became an ingredient in desserts and cooking.

Lemon trees produce lemons year round, and a single tree can bear 500-600 pounds of fruit each year. There are over 200 varieties of lemons grown today in the U.S., primarily as a food source, but their medicinal properties have regained credence in recent years.

Limes, Sailors and Mormons

Limes are native to Persia,

parts of Mesopotamia and southeast Asia, but they were first grown commercially in Iraq. There are several varieties of limes, but the most common in the U.S. are the Persian (also called Tahitian) and the Key lime. Persian limes are the larger of the two; they were introduced to the Americas by Portuguese traders in the early 1800s.

The much smaller Key lime has a more exciting history. As with lemons, the small, tart Key limes were brought to Europe from Palestine by the Crusaders. Key limes arrived in the Americas at about the same time as oranges, and by the early 1800s they were already a very popular fruit as far north as Canada.

In the late 18th century, Dr. James Lind, a Scottish physician, discovered that citrus fruits could prevent scurvy, the scourge of sailors around the world. Although lemons were found to be superior for disease prevention, limes worked well, too. They were cheaper and easier to obtain, so they became part of the supplies aboard the ships of British sailors, who were ordered to drink a ration of lime juice every day. Hence the nickname, limey.

Lime Jello is the state snack food of Utah, where residents eat twice as much lime jello as the national average. It's also one of the shelf stable items that Mormons keep in their emergency food supplies.

The Recipes

From the traditional orange juice cake to fresh lemonade, citrus packs a tasty and healthy punch that brings zest to cold weather feasting. Here is a trio of recipes to help you add a little sunshine to your winter meals.

Weeknight Chicken Salad with Lemon-Mustard Dressing

Dinner salads are usually relegated to summertime, but this one is loaded with veggies and filling enough for a winter meal. It uses pre-cooked chicken breast, so you can quickly prepare it on a weeknight. Serve it with a crusty roll to soak up any extra dressing.

For the dressing:
Juice from one large lemon (about 1/8 cup)
1/4 cup olive oil
1 teaspoon grainy mustard
1 clove garlic, minced
1/2 tablespoon dried parsley
1/2 teaspoon coarse salt
1/4 teaspoon fresh black pepper
1 tablespoon sugar or substitute

Put all of the ingredients in a jar with a tight fitting lid; shake to blend. Taste and adjust seasonings, if desired. Shake again just before pouring the dressing over the salad. The standard amount of dressing for an average salad is 2 tablespoons, but I like a little more. This recipe will yield 2-4 servings.

For the salad:
1 Romaine lettuce heart

2 cups baby spinach
1 medium cucumber, chopped
1 large tomato, chopped
1/8 cup red onion, sliced
2 ready-grilled chicken breasts (or grill your own)
4 ounces feta cheese, chunked or crumbled
Pickled beets, for garnish

Wash and trim the lettuce; cut into bite-sized pieces and place in large bowl; toss with the spinach. Divide the greens between serving plates or bowls. Slice the chicken; layer vegetables and chicken in order given onto each plate with 2 or 3 pickled beets on the side for garnish. Top with dressing. Makes 2 small, 3 regular or 2 large salads.

Wild Rice Pilaf With Oranges

I chose the super sweet Cara Cara orange variety for this pilaf, but I think any sweet orange will do.

1 6-oz package brown and wild rice mix
2 oranges
1 tablespoon margarine
1 teaspoon fresh orange zest (from oranges, above)
Pepper to taste

Prepare the rice mix as package directs. Meantime, grate zest from the oranges to measure 1 teaspoon, then peel and segment the oranges; cutting each segment into bits. Heat the margarine in a small skillet, then add the almonds and saute until lightly toasted. Toss in the orange zest and pepper. When the rice mix is fully cooked, mix in the almonds and orange segments, heat through, and serve. 4 servings.

Key Lime Pie

An original recipe Key lime pie is not cooked, even though it calls for egg yolks. I, however, prefer a little cooking to ensure food safety, so here is my own version of this elegant pie. It is important to use only Key limes; the larger, Persian limes simply will not impart the same flavor. Fresh squeezed Key limes are best (it will take about a dozen of the tiny fruit), but you can also purchase Key lime juice in a bottle; you will find it near the bottled lemon juice in your grocery.

1 9-inch pastry crust, baked
4 egg yolks
1/2 cup key lime juice
1 1/4-cup can sweetened condensed milk
1 cup heavy whipping cream, for garnish

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a medium mixing bowl, whisk or beat the egg yolks with a mixer until they are smooth and creamy. Add the lime juice and sweetened condensed milk and blend well. Pour the mixture into the baked crust and bake at 350 degrees for about 10 minutes. (This is simply to heat the egg yolks; watch carefully so that the pie doesn't brown.) Remove the pie from the oven and refrigerate for at least 3 hours. Just before serving, whip the heavy cream and garnish the pie with it. Serves 8.