

Fall in Love with Green

A chef's guide to acquiring a taste for healthy green drinks

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This is the era of the Green Drink.

Organic juice bars are everywhere and Vitamix is a household name. This is good. There's power in these beverages. There's an addictive high from the nutrient blast, an enduring energy burn from infusing the blood with chlorophyll and other super foods. The skin begins to glow – at any age. The digestive system gets a break from the heavy lifting, freeing up all kinds of energy for other things, like spontaneous jumping jacks and cleaning marathons.

It can be a challenge, though, to learn to love the flavor of green drinks. It's a process, an evolution that can take place once you are convinced of its worth. To push past the initial aversion depends on acquiring a taste, and knowing how to ease into it. Training the palate is where the success or failure of this endeavor lies. Many have given up because they went from no experience with green drinks to gagging on a spinach and yogurt concoction. Turned off for life, they wonder how anyone can drink that stuff.

Crafting a green drink, whether blended or juiced, deserves the same approach to design as any other culinary creation. Above all, a green drink has to taste good. The goal is not to choke down a glass full of super nutrients like it's a handful of horse pills. Pleasure is the goal. Free your mouth. Your body will follow.

Here are a few guidelines for creating juices or smoothies that you will love, and that will love you back:

START WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY LOVE

Do you love piña coladas? Make the basis of your drink coconut milk and pineapple and from there add in spinach or kale, ginger, etc. Be open to compromising the original flavor a bit. The essence of what you love about piña coladas will be there. Does a chocolate milkshake sound good? How about an almond milk smoothie with raw cacao and ice and a scoop of green powder full of super intense nutrients? Big fan of lemonade? The flavor of juiced cucumbers can be camouflaged with lemon juice and a bit of agave or honey. Serve over ice.

The integrity of a drink depends on choosing ingredients that work well together. Everything but the kitchen sink is not the goal. Take advantage of flavor combinations that are proven winners and build from there.

FALL IN LOVE WITH THE COLOR GREEN

Color is deeply connected to the perception of taste. A chef has to consider how the color of a dish will affect the presentation, since the eyes do taste first. When it comes to juice though, there must be a commitment to overcoming our natural aversion to drinking the color green. A beautiful plate of fresh picked spinach garnished with blueberries in a ginger vinaigrette is one thing. Spinach + ginger + blueberries blended together with ice in a glass is another.

But the whole point of juicing and blending is to get to the green stuff. Chlorophyll is the prana we seek. It is the medium by which plants absorb energy from the sun. We get in on that transaction when we eat or drink green plants.

To slowly adjust to the color of green in your glass, add small amounts at first. Spinach is mild in flavor, a perfect starter green. Then move to kale and romaine. A half a handful at first will make a difference in your health. Add more as you want. Then start to experiment with stronger flavored greens, and even herbs. Parsley, cilantro, mint add floral notes. Carrot tops are spicy. Swiss Chard. Beet greens. You will start to look at every green leafy thing in a different way, wondering, can I juice that?

Your body will start to crave the energy and vibrancy and clarity of mind you will experience from drinking green vegetables often. And slowly your eyes will adjust to the hue of green. And eventually, that bright green color will be like a pat on the head. You did well.



TASTE AND ADJUST IS THE CHEF'S MANTRA

Use recipes as a catapult into your own creative arena. Start with a recipe you find on line or in print, or borrow one from a friend. Make the recipe exactly the way it was written. Now taste. What does it need? More ginger? Less chocolate?

Tasting during preparation is, bottom line, the single practice that will determine your success with every dish you ever prepare, including your morning smoothie. It's the practice of tasting during cooking that is the responsibility of a good chef. There's no other way to guarantee flavors are headed where you want them to go. The same skill can be applied to your morning smoothie or juice.

Recipes are just guidelines, someone else's idea. Taste as you go. Be willing to add more of this or that. Experiment. Play. Keep a clean spoon handy.

RAISE THE FLAVOR VIBRATION

Chefs use certain ingredients to unify all the components in a dish, elevating the flavors from just okay to perfect harmony. Citrus, sugar and salt are three that can do that kind of magic for green drinks. Using them strategically will boost the flavor without negating the

nutritional benefits. And there is a whole world of spices that lend personality as well as their own nutrient credentials to a drink.

CITRUS JUICE

Lemon juice is an obvious one. Lemon juice brightens and synchronizes the flavors in a glass of juiced greens and vegetables. Flavors pop. And the nutritional benefits of lemon juice go on and on. Of course, we know about the immunity building qualities of Vitamin C. Add to that cancer-fighting, ph-balancing, kidney detoxing, skin-brightening, etc.

Bring in citrus cousins to add dimension. The juice of an orange will round out the edge of lemon with its softer acidity. Don't forget limes, grapefruit or whatever is in season: pomelos, blood orange, clementines. Mix it up.

Add the fresh squeezed citrus juices to your drink after all of the other ingredients, but before a sweetener. Then, of course, taste and decide if you want more of it.

THE SWEETENER OF YOUR CHOICE

It's easy to over do the sugar element in green drinks on the quest for palatability. Too much honey or agave and even certain fruits can chip away at the nutritional benefits. Too little and you may struggle to enjoy the drink. Find your perfect edge, where the least amount is needed to appease the tongue. Do this by tasting as you go, and then adding sweetener in small increments if needed to get you there.

Honey and agave syrup are the best choices for sweetening up a cold juice or smoothie. Regular granulated sugar of any kind (even raw) does not dissolve well in cold drinks. Simple syrup was invented for this reason.

Agave nectar has a neutral flavor profile. But there is some controversy around agave, which is the sap of the same plant from which we get the lovely spirit, tequila. Agave allies like its supposed low glycemic levels. Opponents say it's no better than high fructose corn syrup. Always use it in moderation and always choose raw and organic; that means minimal and chemical free processing.

Honey has a distinct personality and many nutritional benefits: nutrients like vitamins B and C and other antioxidants. Like any added sugar, it too should be used in small amounts. Raw and locally produced is best.

Maple syrup gets less press than the others in this new culture of the green drink, but you can reach for it when you want warmer notes in a drink: vanilla, caramel. It doesn't have raw bragging rights like honey and agave. But even cooked, maple syrup is full of nutrients, including manganese and iron and tons of antioxidants.

Stevia is calorie- and chemical- free and made from the leaf of a plant by the same name. It's the perfect sugar alternative but it may take getting used to. It can be perceived as bitter even in small amounts – a potential turn off. Learning to like it is worth the process.

To balance the bitterness of Stevia until you do, try the double sweetener trick. Start with a small amount of Stevia in your smoothie or juice to lay the foundation; then finish it with an even smaller amount of honey or agave for their unique flavor contributions.

Stevia is available in liquid or powder. Always make sure there are no added ingredients.

SALT

A pinch of unrefined sea salt will heighten the inherent flavors of other ingredients in any dish, including a juice or smoothie. A tiny amount will do. A smidge, really. Sea salt has tons of health benefits. Forget the refined table salt of your childhood.

SPICE

Cinnamon is the most common; always top of the list of nutritionally powerful spices, with fiber, manganese and on and on. Nutmeg, turmeric, clove....this list is endless. Again, your choices in spice should complement the other ingredients. So mid-summer, think: tomato + celery + lemon juice + cayenne pepper for a take on a Bloody Mary. Or in winter: a kale smoothie with chocolate + nutmeg + ginger.

THE ART OF PRODUCE MANAGEMENT

For maximum health benefits, or getting the most nutrients with the least amount of sugar, the general guideline is 3 parts vegetables, 1 part fruit. That means the one part fruit has to work really hard.

There is a beautiful point in the life of every piece of fruit when it reaches the height of its ripeness. In that moment, its sugar content has peaked, elevating its inherent flavors to their full potential, softening the flesh to an ideal texture that is neither too firm nor too soft. If you have memories of the best mango you've ever eaten, you understand.

There is an art to managing produce to achieve this perfect state. The pay off is big. A piece of fruit at its peak ripeness means less added sweetener in your drink. This trick applies mostly to bananas, mangoes, peaches, plums; these softer kinds of fruits. They should start their life in your kitchen sitting on the counter. Monitor them every day. And when they begin to soften to the touch or to smell more like themselves, put them in the refrigerator until you are ready to use them. Baby your avocados and tomatoes in the same way. Apples, citrus and berries are best always kept in the frig.

TO JUICE OR NOT TO JUICE:

The big question on everyone's mind: to blend or to juice? There are advantages to both and your repertoire should include both.

Blending fruits and vegetables into a smoothie keeps the fiber in the drink. And it seems shameful to chuck all that fiber into the compost bin, so the debate goes. However, by juicing fresh produce, and in the process taking out all the fiber, the powerful nutrients go directly into the blood, mostly bypassing the middleman of digestion. The result is an instant infusion of goodness into the cells of the body. And instant energy for you.

So both methods have their place. Smoothies in the morning provide the fiber: a slower energy burn, which sustains hunger longer. Perfect breakfast. Juices in the afternoon are good for an energy boost, a 4 o'clock detour around the coffee shop next door.

The blended juice: a compromise.

Here's another scenario that is the best of both worlds: a blended + strained juice. Instead of using your juicer to separate the fiber, you put your vegetables into a blender and fill it halfway with water. Blend well until the fiber is broken down. Then pour the juice through a fine mesh strainer to strain out any residual pulp.

There are some serious advantages to this method. It's a time saver when you don't want to clean up the juicer. It saves money since you are wasting less produce. And because you are adding in water using this method, you get a juice drink with less intense flavor. It's another way to ease into the flavor of green juices.

The Martini Shaker

Here's one last professional tip for getting maximum pleasure from a green juice. (This tip doesn't work for a smoothie.) This is an extra step that adds a little glamour to the experience. Plus chilled juice is more palatable.

Pour your green juice into a martini shaker filled with ice and shake well. Strain off the juice into a beautiful glass and garnish with a slice of lemon or lime. Cheers!



TEMPLATE RECIPES

Here are three foundational recipes. Play around with these and add your own ideas!

Chocolate Milkshake of Your Dreams

In a blender, add:

16 ounces of unsweetened coconut, flaxseed, almond or soy milk
1 Tablespoon of raw cacao powder
½ ripe banana
 and/or ¼ ripe avocado
 (if you use avocado, you may need to increase your sweetener a bit)
½ Tablespoon green powder of your choice
Small handful of fresh spinach
¼ inch fresh ginger, peeled
½ Tablespoon ground cinnamon (again, more or less to your liking)
½ Tablespoon of raw honey or raw organic agave
½ teaspoon of vanilla extract

Blend until smooth. Taste and adjust. Also add a handful of ice and blend again, if you like.

Basic Green Juice

2 cups spinach or kale or other greens
½ cucumber
1 inch fresh ginger
1 apple

Push all ingredients through a juicer. Add juice of one lemon. Taste and add more citrus if you like.

Blended + Strained Green Juice

Generous handful of spinach, kale, Swiss chard or combination of them
½ inch fresh ginger, peeled
¼ apple, red or green
Pinch of cilantro or parsley
Juice of one small lemon or lime

Place all the ingredients in a blender and add water to cover halfway. Blend until the greens are broken down completely. Pour the juice through a fine mesh strainer. Taste and add more citrus if you like.

Note: replace the water with coconut water for additional nutritional benefits and flavor.



