

Hail, Caesar (Salad)!

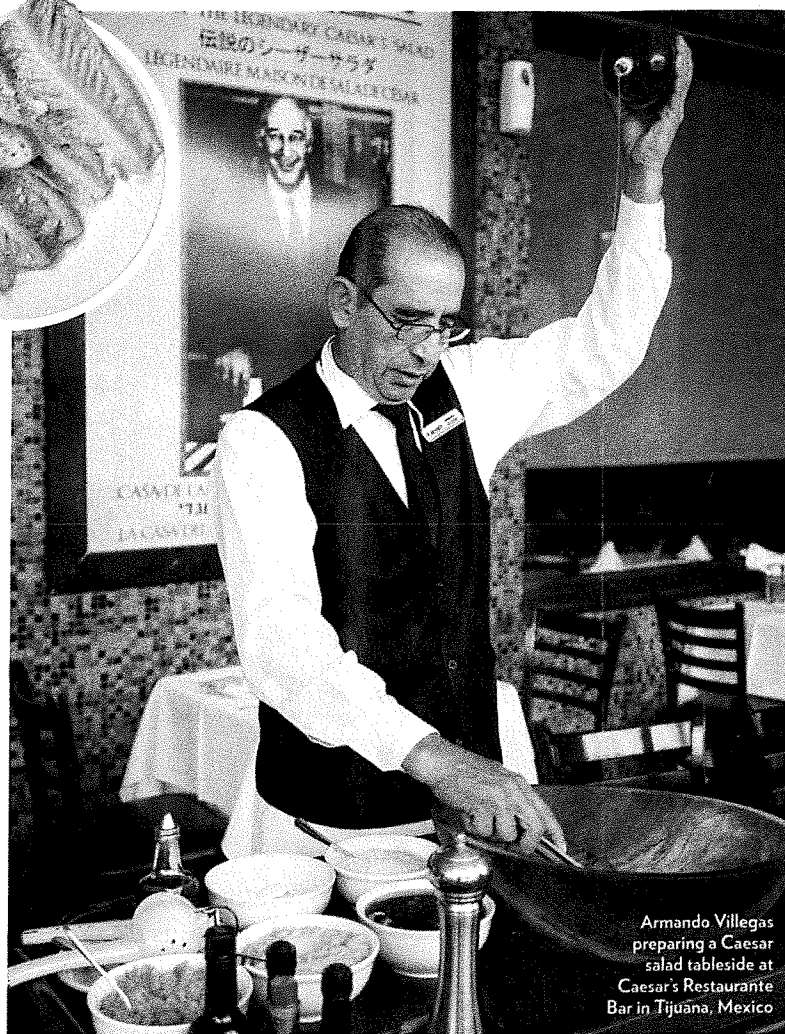
To mark the ides of March, we look at the origin of the classic dish—which is far from its Roman namesake *By Gerald Tan*

THE CULINARY WORLD IS RIFE WITH misconception, often stemming from a misleading name. French fries aren't French at all, but Belgian. The croissant, a hallmark of any self-respecting boulangerie, is originally Austrian. And Mongolian barbecue, as fans will attest, is neither—the stir-fry dish hails from Taiwan.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the beloved Caesar salad bears little relation to its apparent namesake, Julius Caesar. But it uses romaine lettuce! How much more Roman does one get? Alas, illustrations of the statesman crowned in a laurel wreath merely serve as advertising for salad dressing. The real tale lies a leisurely stroll south of the border from San Ysidro, California.

The Roaring '20s: Tijuana, Mexico, was the playground of Hollywood's rich, famous and thirsty seeking an escape from Prohibition. Along with the business elite, they flocked to bustling Avenida Revolución and its watering holes—among them, Caesar's Restaurante Bar, named after its founder, Caesar Cardini.

"There are a lot of stories about how the salad was invented," explains restaurant manager Mario Espinoza. "One of the most famous is that Cardini had an employee named Livio Santini, who came from Italy at the age of 15. He would make the salad for his own meals based on his mother's recipe." As the legend goes, a regular spotted his dish in the kitchen, requested it, and the rest is history.



Armando Villegas preparing a Caesar salad tableside at Caesar's Restaurante Bar in Tijuana, Mexico

But there's more. Cardini died claiming to have invented the Caesar salad himself. So did his brother Alex. The feud was never quite resolved. The conflicting accounts add to the intrigue.

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Caesar's prepares the salad tableside with dramatic flair. Into a wooden bowl two feet wide, the *ensaladero* combines minced anchovies, garlic, Dijon mustard, pepper, Worcestershire sauce, egg yolk and

lime juice. Next comes the emulsification, achieved by a stream of olive oil swirled in with rhythmic, hypnotic intention. Then a healthy flurry of Parmesan cheese to bind the flavors. Finally, whole leaves of romaine lettuce are individually coated in the dressing. On a good day, servers are tossing some 400 orders to eager patrons.

"There is no secret. We share the ingredients with everyone. Our clients come from all over Mexico and all over the world. They see every step we take, and they're free to film the process," Espinoza says. "The best part for us is the pride we feel in Tijuana that our salad is so well known around the world. And this happened in the days before social media." It is—to borrow a line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*—"a dish fit for the gods."

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