

WILD FOR WEDGES

The retro iceberg side dish makes a crispy comeback, with the lettuce acting as a base for a rich, flavorful dressing and crunchy toppings

By **TINA DANZE** Special to the Star-Telegram

In this golden age of exotic greens, few people flip over iceberg lettuce — unless it's quartered, topped with creamy dressing and showered with tasty morsels, such as bacon. In that case, it anchors "the wedge," a classic salad that's having a miniature renaissance in the area.

Sculptural and massive, the lettuce looks like the star; but it's really just a crisp carrier for rich dressings that could double as dips.

A perpetual steakhouse starter, the wedge is turning up at chic bar-and-grill hot spots, where it gets ingredient upgrades — and a hefty price tag (about \$9).

The retro salad may be just the pick-me-up some folks crave in this shaky economy. One crunchy bite might transport you to bygone boom times, and that rich dressing is one lavish indulgence that's easy to justify.

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Local restaurant versions

■ At Neighborhood Services in Dallas, the wedge hews closely to the classic model — lots of blue cheese dressing and applewood-smoked bacon bits. But chef Nick Badovinus adds a few flourishes: a tangy dressing base, spiced pecans, toy-box tomatoes and an extra dose of finely grated blue cheese. The finished dish is a crowd-pleasing beauty, narrowly beating the Boston bibb as the restaurant's top-selling salad.

■ At Fort Worth's Lili's Bistro on Magnolia, chef-owner Vance Martin says the feta green onion dressing for his popular Greek wedge salad is a hold-over from his days with Cafe Panacea, a gourmet deli in the city's hos-



pital district that closed in 1996. And at Lili's, the house salad also is a wedge.

■ Reata's Texas wedge is so popular it got included in last year's *Reata: Legendary Texas Cuisine* cookbook by the restaurant's president, Mike Miccallef. The legendary Fort Worth eatery's version is topped with homemade pico vinaigrette and blue cheese crumbles.

■ A modern local makeover gives the wedge an edge at Rathbun's Blue Plate Kitchen; it's the No. 1-selling salad on the menu. Bibb lettuce from Young's Greenhouses (near Wichita Falls) stands in for iceberg. And the green goddess dressing cradles rich curds of Paula's Cottage Cheese, made by the Mozzarella Company.

(Kent Rathbun was so intent on using local ingredients that he asked owner Paula Lambert to create the cheese exclusively for him; it will eventually be sold to the public.)

The dressing base is a cucumber-ranch blended with basil and spinach; it has an unusually fresh, clean flavor compared with most wedge salad dressings. The wedge is served cut side up, with leaves separated out, "so that there's dressing all through the salad," Rathbun says.

■ At Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse, an architectural wedge is more menu fixture than fad. An iceberg quarter stands tall, atop a mix of torn romaine, iceberg lettuce and julienne-cut carrots. "That gives it more height, so that the pointed tip

goes way up in the air," says chef David Holben. Diners choose from an assortment of rich dressings, including an avocado-based green goddess that's become Del Frisco's signature dressing and which remains a secret recipe.

Tips for wonderful wedges

For creative cooks, a world of wedge possibilities awaits. We created a Mexican wedge, served with roasted corn, tomatoes and avocado, and topped with buttermilk dressing and grated cotija cheese. It's inspired by corn-on-the-cob that Mexican street vendors sell. The dressing is bottled, enlivened with fresh, minced jalapeño.

If you add protein to the platter,

you've got a wedge that stands in for dinner. Consider these options:

■ At Sevy's Grill, a blue cheese-dressed wedge comes with sliced beef tenderloin (bacon is optional).

■ For a wedge dressed with buttermilk-ranch dressing, add leftover chicken and nuts to the salad.

■ Use a remoulade sauce for the dressing and add boiled shrimp and hard-boiled egg to the salad.

■ Even if you're not a salad fan, creamy wedge salad dressings make great party dips to serve with crudité's, chips or boiled shrimp. Whether drizzled over a lettuce wedge or coating a carrot stick, that dressing proves irresistible.

Star-Telegram staff writer Stephanie Allmon did additional reporting for this story.