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Spring Strawberry Panzanella

Serves 2 - 4

This spring panzanella salad is punctuated with spicy arugula, toasted bread, and the sweet elements of goat cheese and aromatic strawberries, along with a drizzle of balsamic reduction. A delightful entrée or side dish, this eye-catching salad tantalizes the tastebuds.

Salad Ingredients:

1 loaf Italian bread, cut into 1" cubes
3 tablespoons olive oil
8 oz fresh strawberries, sliced
8 oz arugula
8 oz fresh goat cheese, crumbled
1 cup toasted pecans, coarsely chopped
4 sprigs fresh thyme, leaves removed

Dressing Ingredients:

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1/4 teaspoon Kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2-3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar reduction (2 cups balsamic vinegar, reduced by half)

Directions:

1. Place 2 cups of balsamic vinegar in a small saucepan and simmer gently over medium heat. Do not boil. Stir occasionally and cook for 10-15 minutes until the amount of liquid is reduced by half. The consistency will change from watery to a thicker, syrupy character. Remove the balsamic reduction from heat and set aside in a small bowl or ramekin.
2. Cut the bread into 1" cubes. Coat a large skillet or sauté pan with olive oil and cook the bread cubes over low heat, tossing frequently, until golden brown, and slightly crispy. Set aside.
3. In a small, dry skillet, heat the pecans for 3-4 minutes until they are golden brown, moving them around often so they do not burn. Remove from the pan to cool. Coarsely chop into smaller pieces.
4. Mix the strawberries and arugula in a large serving bowl. Dress with 2 tablespoons of olive oil, and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
5. Add the toasted bread and pecans, and gently toss the salad. Break apart the goat cheese into 1/2" chunks and sprinkle on top along with the fresh thyme leaves. Finish the salad with a drizzle of the balsamic vinegar reduction.