



How to Use Herbs and Spices in Cooking

We all know just how important condiments, seasoning, herbs and spices are when it comes to preparing and cooking food. In fact, our overall culinary experience might even completely depend on the judicious use of herbs and spices.

But which herbs and spices go with which food? And how much should we use? And when do we use them? It's easy to get it all wrong and completely butcher what could have been something delectable. You see, bringing with you into the kitchen a little prior knowledge of herbs and spices could be the thing that defines you once and for all as a cook par excellence. So, now's your chance to look and learn.

Herbs and Spices

Basil

Actually, basil in just about everything with tomato is a good idea, especially if it is fresh basil. Dried basil is OK, but fresh is better. Most supermarkets sell little pots these days, which if watered properly, and if you take the tips of the leaves rather than whole stems, can last for months or even years. Fresh basil has a wonderful aroma, quite different from the dried stuff, and a little can go a long way. It is especially good in Italian dishes.

Some people say that when using basil, you should tear it, rather than chopping with a knife because when you chop, you may notice the basil starts to go dark. The end result is that the oil stays in the leaf and doesn't permeate into your food.

Tearing is definitely the way to go as it coats your fingers in the most amazingly fragrant oil, which can't be a bad thing.

If you are feeling adventurous, try having a go at purple basil. It has a much stronger flavour, and is great in Thai food.

Cardamon

Cardamon has a very fruity, warm flavour and works very well with eggs, especially in sandwiches. It is also good with sweet dishes such as caramel.

Caraway Seeds

Caraway seeds work well in the famous caraway seed cake, and they also add a little tang to stir-fries.

Coriander Seeds

Coriander seeds work very well with poultry and fish. You can buy them ground or whole; if you are using them whole, gently crushing them with a pestle and mortar (or put them in a tea-towel, and crush with a rolling pin) helps to release their flavour.

Chilli

In spicy dishes, chilli is an obvious candidate and it comes in three forms: fresh, powdered, or flaked. If using fresh chillis, be careful how you handle them - wash your hands extremely well after touching them. You may like to wear rubber or plastic gloves when handling them.

Chives

Chives go well with boiled potatoes, especially when cold and mixed with copious amounts of mayonnaise for a top potato salad!

Chocolate

This recipe dates back to when chocolate first appeared in Europe and used as a savoury 'spice' for want of a better word.

Basically, you cook a jointed hare in about 3oz unsalted butter with carrots, several crushed juniper berries (the stuff gin is made of) and two glasses of good claret and herbs of your choice. Cover the hare with water and cook for two - two and a half hours. Hare is tough, really tough, so the longer you cook it the better it will be.

Grate 2 - 3oz of bitter chocolate. Once the hare is cooked, strain the juices and stir in the chocolate until melts. Serve with spuds or whatever.

A little chocolate in a chilli con carne also improves the flavour. And it's supposed to be authentic too!

Cloves

Cloves are most obviously used with baked hams, mulled wine and fruit salads but this is truly limiting their full potential. If you finely grind two cloves and add this to an Oriental chicken dish, you'll amaze your guests with a wonderful taste and promising aroma. Don't add too much clove powder as this can turn any meal antiseptic and bring back horrid memories of dentists.

Cloves are an essential ingredient in mulled drinks. Here's a recipe for the perfect hot whisky or rum:

Hot Toddy

- Half fill a small glass with boiling water and let it stand for a couple of minutes for the glass to warm.
- Stud cloves into the skin of a lemon wedge (this releases the oil in the lemon skin).
- Tip out the warming water from the glass.
- Add a teaspoon and a half of demerara (or other dark sugar).
- Add the lemon wedge (with cloves).
- Top up with boiling water until the glass is half-full.
- Then fill to 3/4 full with the spirit of your choice (usually whisky or rum) and stir.

Dried Herbs

Try using dried herbs in the oil when pan-frying. You have to work fast to avoid burning them, but this gets the flavour into the meat. The herbs can begin to stick to the pan, but if you then add a sauce to the same pan, this will lift the herbs into the sauce.

Alternatively, rub the herbs into the meat along with salt and pepper before cooking. As a general point, if in doubt, err on the side of caution and taste; you can always add more, but you can't take it out.

Dill

For fish, dill works extremely well. If you're lucky enough to have a whole fish, place a couple of knobs of butter into the body cavity with a small handful of fresh dill. Also add a little salt and pepper. You can replace the dill for tarragon which gives an equally scrummy recipe.

Ginger

Ginger gives a warming flavour, and can be used to spice up most dishes. Use root ginger (peeled) for savoury dishes (great in Chinese style food) and stem ginger for sweet dishes. Ginger goes very well with plain ice cream.

Lemon Grass

Lemon grass has an aromatic citrus flavour. To use, discard the outer one or two layers, and chop finely. Alternatively, a stalk of lemon grass in the water of a fish kettle gives the fish flesh a lovely lemony hint.

Mint

There's a herb called chocolate mint that actually tastes a bit like mint chocolate. If it's dried, the chocolate mint aroma is especially strong. It can be chopped up fresh and sprinkled over ice cream, cake or anything that could use a mint chocolate flavour.

It might sound a bit strange, but mint is good in drinks in the summer. When you make your ice cubes, just put a leaf or two of mint in the water before you freeze it.

If you wait until the mint leaves dry out (or dry them in a food dryer), you can make tea from them:

Ingredients

1 or 2 tablespoons dried chocolate mint leaves (these should be slightly crumbled but not powdered)
A packet of hot chocolate mix or some instant coffee mix (optional but recommended)

Method

- Bring the water to the boil.
- Put the leaves in a tea strainer and hang the strainer over a cup.
- Pour the boiling water into the cup.
- Leave for about 15 minutes then stir hot chocolate or instant coffee mix into tea

Mustard Seeds

Mustard seeds ground and added to beef, pork or chicken give heat to any meal without burning the palette.

Paprika

Coming from Hungarian meaning 'pepper', paprika has a deep, earthy flavour. It is great for a 'background' flavour if your dishes seem a little bland. It gives a warm red colour too.

Parsley

Parsley has odour-eating properties - if you want to get rid of onion breath, chew a sprig of parsley. Also, if your hand smell of onions, rub them with parsley.

English (curly) parsley has a slightly harsher flavour than continental (flat-leaf) parsley.

Rosemary

Rosemary is great in roast lamb. Cut the rosemary up into small lengths about an inch long, then push the tip of a knife into the lamb to make a small slit and insert the rosemary. Repeat loads of times and then roast as normal. Mmmmmmmmm.

Rosemary is also great finely chopped and sprinkled on potatoes before roasting.

Salt and Pepper

Salt and black pepper are also a must in most savoury recipes, but it is a matter of taste so always under use if you're not sure, and supply these two condiments on the table. Also be wary of sea salt, as it can be much stronger than the usual table salt.

Some declare that pepper is the king of spices. It should be applied liberally (nay, even with abandon) to just about any dish in existence. Very aromatic, full of flavour.

It is fabulous with a proper Irish Stew, pasta dishes, and is just plain sublime with beef, but it also has a couple of more unusual uses. For instance, it's the best thing on strawberries. Don't put sugar on them. Only philistines do that. Just the tiniest amount of black pepper really brings out the strawberry flavour, without making them sickly.

Pepper is also good on chocolate (yes, really), but it has to be good quality plain chocolate, and again, only a tiny amount.

Tarragon

Tarragon is ideally suited to lamb or chicken. With chicken, take one bunch and crush it into an ounce of salted butter, then spread it under the chicken skin. Once cooked, make a gravy from all the juices - your arteries will groan but it is a one-off and lovely.

When using tarragon in dishes cooked in the stove (rather than in the oven or grill), don't add tarragon until the last minute. It has a tendency to lose its flavour quickly - especially dried tarragon.

Canny Ideas

Herb Oils

These are absolutely great to use for salad dressings. You can make your own by one of the two following methods:

Method One

Take a handful of whichever herb you wish to use (basil and coriander work particularly well). Put into a small food processor with 50ml olive oil (not extra virgin - the flavour would 'drown out' the herb flavour). Whiz until the whole thing turns green! Use as a sauce or dressing.

Method Two

Place into a small bottle (one that has previously had oil in it is best) a few stalks of whichever herb you desire. Fill bottle with olive oil. Leave in a warmish place to infuse for as long as you like - at least a couple of weeks. This also works well with chilli, garlic, peppercorns, or any combination of the aforementioned ingredients.

You can also use sunflower oil, rape seed oil, etc - anything which hasn't got a strong flavour of its own.

Herb Salad

Mix together a handful of each of the following: basil leaves, coriander leaves, rocket, spinach.

Tomato Sauces

Blend together one tin (454g) tomatoes (or an equivalent amount of passata), a handful of fresh basil, and a handful of fresh oregano. Because you're flavouring the sauce, the flavours run right through whatever you're cooking.

For a slight variation, try fennel seeds in a tomato sauce for pasta or pizza - fantastic!

Rice

Just before you dish up your boiled rice, add a dash of one or more of the following for flavour and colour:

Tumeric

Saffron

Cloves

Cardamon

Paprika

When cooking rice, try adding a little chilli or mustard powder. You shouldn't be able to taste the spice, but your body will recognise it - so you'll salivate more. This helps you to taste the food, so it should taste better than ever before!