

Savor the Flavor: Building Flavor with Herbs

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Herbs are usually what give many of our favorite foods their characteristic taste, like the boldness of a pasta sauce or the depth of a savory soup or stew. Generally, these ingredients add to the dish by providing a new dimension of flavor. Learning to use herbs allows us to transform meals prepared at home into even more flavorful and robust dishes.

Herbs come from plants that have traditional culinary purposes. Specifically, herbs come from the leaves of plants and can be used either fresh

or dried. Although they come from plants, they are not considered vegetables by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). With such a wide variety of herbs, it can be difficult to know which to use and how to use them when preparing a dish at home. This publication will address commonly used herbs and how to best utilize them in the kitchen.

Fresh versus Dried

Fresh or dried herbs can be purchased at most grocery stores. Some individuals choose to grow their own herbs right

at home. Dried herbs are often stronger and more concentrated in taste than fresh herbs, so less can be used. If a recipe calls for a fresh herb, then you can substitute one-third the amount of the dried version. For example, each teaspoon of dried herbs is equal to a tablespoon of fresh.

Dried herbs may need to be added earlier in the cooking process to allow flavors to infuse into the dish, whereas most fresh herbs will be incorporated toward the end of the cooking process. For example, dried basil is typically used at the beginning of a recipe so flavors have time to incorporate while fresh basil may be added immediately before serving to add freshness to a dish.

Most fresh herbs can only be stored a week or so in the refrigerator. Some may last a bit longer, but their flavor will decrease over time. Dried herbs, whole leaf or ground, can be stored in airtight containers for one to three years in a cool, dry place out of sunlight. For more information on growing, dry-



ing, and storing herbs at home, see the publications *Culinary Herbs* (HO-74) and *Drying Food at Home* (FCS 3-501).

Common Herbs

Herbs commonly found in grocery stores or at farmers' markets include basil, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, and thyme. Some herbs may seem like they pair only with foods in certain cultural or ethnic cuisine. That isn't necessarily true. Have fun experimenting with herbs in a variety of dishes. The opportunities are limitless and it can be a fun experience tasting as you go.

Basil

Although basil originated in India and is now grown around the world, it is traditionally used in Italian foods and often brightens tomato sauces for pasta. Basil is primarily used fresh to add a crisp, refreshing taste and bright green color. Basil can be used like other greens to add flavor, color, and texture to sandwiches and wraps. It is the main ingredient in pesto sauce, blended with walnuts or pine nuts, olive oil, garlic and Parmesan cheese. Basil is also found in Thai dishes. A helpful tip for cooking with fresh basil is to chop it up finely before adding it to sauces or dressings. This allows the oils to be released and fuse into the dish.



Unlike other fresh herbs, basil should be stored at room temperature and may last 7-10 days.

Oregano

Oregano is another well-known Mediterranean and Italian herb. It is often found in pizza and pasta sauces due to its bold, peppery flavor. Oregano can also be used for salad dressings, soups, or vegetable dishes to add a comforting, savory flavor. Oregano is mostly used in the dried form and may be referred to as wild marjoram.

Parsley

Parsley is one of the most common and versatile herbs used around the world. Because of its fresh, clean taste, it is used in almost all foods except for desserts. There are different varieties of parsley, but most common in the United States is curly parsley. Chopped, dried parsley is found in almost all herb blends and seasonings. If you are new to using herbs, parsley is a good first choice because it pairs so well with all vegetables and meats.

Rosemary

Rosemary originated in the Mediterranean region and is widely used in Italian and Greek dishes, but can be used with a wide variety of different foods. Rosemary can be used fresh or dried. It is strongly aromatic and its smell contributes to the taste experience. It makes a nice addition to potatoes, bread, olive oil for dipping, and lemon-flavored dishes. Rosemary can be added to creamy or tomato based soups for added flavor depth. Rosemary, parsley, and thyme are often used together to season chicken or broth-based soups. When using rosemary leaves, whether fresh or dried, chop or crush them before adding to your dish.

Sage

Sage originated in the Mediterranean and has an earthy flavor and smell. It has a savory, slightly peppery taste and a

unique, silver-gray appearance. Sage is traditionally used dried in stuffing mixes with dried cubed bread, onion and celery. It is sometimes used in sausage seasoning, and makes a nice addition to lasagna and other pasta dishes. Sage pairs well with citrus flavors like orange or lemon in salad dressings and desserts but does not pair well with other herbs due to its strong flavor.

Thyme

Thyme also has origins around the Mediterranean region. The flavor pairs well with rosemary and is used around the world on its own. The strong, versatile, slightly sweet taste of thyme has many applications, making it a great addition to your kitchen. Thyme is found in pizza and pasta sauces, used with all types of meat, poultry, fish, and vegetables.

Other Common Herbs

Other common herbs include cilantro, mint, and bay leaves. Each of these have distinct aromas and flavors. For example, cilantro is commonly enjoyed fresh as a garnish on Mexican or Latin-inspired dishes. Mint is highly aromatic and is typically used fresh. It is associated with fruit, teas, candies, and jellies, as well as Middle Eastern cuisine due to its sweet flavor. Bay leaves are commonly used in their whole, dried form and within dishes with long, slow cooking times like soups, stews, and sauces. They are not enjoyable to eat so they are typically removed prior to consumption of the dish.

Some common herbs are blended and sold as seasonings. For example, Italian seasoning is a common item found at the grocery store. This seasoning is primarily a combination of



dried basil, oregano, rosemary, and thyme. Poultry seasoning is another item that is commonly available for purchase and is a blend of sage, thyme, marjoram, rosemary, and nutmeg (spice). These seasonings could be prepared at home to your personal taste preference.

Benefits of Using Herbs in Cooking

Experimenting with different herbs and herb combinations may provide a unique way to add flavor to foods without using extra salt or added saturated fat. It may take trial and error to find the right combinations of herbs and the amount of herbs necessary to make the dish the way you like it. Using herbs frequently to build flavor in healthy, nutrient-dense foods may improve diet quality, increase intake of antioxidants, and potentially lead to a healthy body weight.

Many people take herbal supplements for medicinal purposes, but they are not regulated and research is limited as to whether they achieve the marketed health claims.

Cost and Quality

You may wonder why some dried herbs and spices cost more than others. Is there truly a difference between lower and higher priced products? Many people wonder if there is a true difference between the different products. The answer to this question is not simple. Sometimes the difference in cost is related to quality. It is difficult to know if the color, aroma, and appearance of a spice meets your preference without purchasing the product. You may want to choose a lower priced product if you are learning how to incorporate herbs and spices into dishes or you want to experiment with new flavors. You may want to choose a higher priced product if you truly enjoy an herb or spice, and will use it before the “best if used by date.” These dates are provided for quality purposes only. Some herbs and spices may be labeled as “organic” which may cost more, but this does not mean the flavor or nutritional value is different than products not labeled as organic. For more information about spices, read *Savor the Flavor: Seasoning with Spices* (FCS 3-630).

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