



# the spice kitchen

everyday cooking with organic spices

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SARA ENGRAM and KATIE LUBER with KIMBERLY TOQE



The image features a teal background with a repeating pattern of stylized, overlapping floral and leaf shapes in a slightly lighter shade of teal. The text "the spice kitchen" is centered in the middle of the image.

the spice kitchen



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## Acknowledgments

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We have many people to thank for making this book a reality. Kimberly Toqe brought technical skill, imagination, and good humor to the task of pulling together and testing a collection of recipes that reflected our desire to help cooks broaden their use of spices in foods their families already know and love.

Anne Pushkal's formidable research skills, nimble writing, and infectious wit resulted in profiles of our favorite spices, herbs, and zests that will surely tempt even spice-shy cooks to expand their culinary horizons.

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*Tarragon and rosemary*

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Metric Conversions and Equivalents

# Introduction

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People like to change things. We turn dirt into dye, clay into cups, words into poems, and grab bag of ingredients into meals as varied as a hearty wild-game cassoulet or a simple vegetable curry. This persistent urge to transform raw materials into something useful and appealing sets us apart from other creatures. Why settle for a plain slab of tough meat when you can season it, simmer it, and enjoy a feast?

In the annals of cooking, spices rank as one of our oldest and most reliable tools—right up there with fire and heat. Excavations of Neolithic caves have uncovered traces of cumin and other spices, evidence of an active spice trade reaching back 8,000 to 10,000 years—an ancient prehistoric grounding for one of our favorite food mantras: eat locally, but season globally. Neolithic humans probably obtained their spices by way of trade routes established overland from India and Sri Lanka into Mesopotamia, the fertile “cradle of civilization,” located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (now largely part of Iraq).

When archaeologists were able to decipher tablets dating back 4,000 years to the Mesopotamian empire of Babylon, they found records of numerous spices, including anise seed, cumin, coriander, mint, juniper, cardamom, fenugreek, mustard seed, and asafoetida. Excavations of 4,000-year-old Mesopotamian archaeological sites have uncovered cloves from their home in Indonesia.

The Babylonians even had recipe tablets with descriptions of more than 100 different varieties of soups and stews. In these recipes, meats were always braised in water with some form of fat and combinations of up to four spices—not so different from our “fusion” cooking of today.

The ancient Egyptians were spice lovers, too, cooking with cumin, anise, coriander, fenugreek, black mustard seed, fennel, dill, mint, marjoram, sage, and thyme. Spices also played a role in their elaborate death rituals. They were used in the mummification process, and the departed were always provided with a good supply of spices to accompany them in the afterlife. The Egyptians celebrated spices in life as well. On numerous occasions, the great pharaoh Ramses II presented cinnamon to the gods.

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## *a word about organic spices*

Some people believe organic certification for spices is less important than for other foods. We disagree. Spices, herbs, and zests provide concentrated flavors. When you taste a teaspoon of pure cinnamon or cumin or tarragon—with no fillers or additives or other substances—you get pure flavor, a real bang for your buck.

But because most spices are packaged in jars or bottles designed to hold as much as  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup, they often need anti-caking agents or other additives. That dilutes the flavor, if only by a little bit. Moreover, regulations on herbs and spices are relatively loose, and those bargain-basement-like that huge container of basil for a couple of dollars Sara kept in her cabinet for a decade are likely to have a substantial amount of “filler.” Organic spices must be pure, not diluted by



fillers or additives.

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Moreover, organic certification provides assurance that these ingredients do not contain pesticides. Organic certification is particularly important for zests, since pesticides used growing nonorganic citrus fruits tend to lodge in the peel, providing an extra dose of toxins in nonorganic orange or lemon zest.

Around the world, spice growers and suppliers are recognizing that there is value in an organic designation. It tells consumers they get full value for their spice investment. Equally important, it creates working conditions that protect the health of workers and their families and encourages agricultural practices that sustain the environment in which spices and herbs grow best.

We think spices and herbs are among Nature's most magical gifts, gifts that we should treasure and relish. That's why we believe "organic" is important.

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The Greeks and Romans followed suit, embracing a range of spices and herbs, including coriander (a favorite), cumin, cardamom, peppergrass, cress, saffron, and ginger grass. Cinnamon was a rare and beloved luxury—so costly that the Greek historian Herodotus suggested that it was secretly harvested from the nests of huge, dangerous birds in the mountains of Ethiopia.

The value the ancient Greeks ascribed to spices like cinnamon reflects a larger reverence for food and healthy living. By "diet," they meant a way of life that paid attention to the connections between sleeping and waking, exercise and rest, and, not least, food—consuming it, evacuating it, and all other factors that must be under control if a person is to be healthy, strong, and beautiful.

In light of today's food trends, it's worth noting that this Greek "morality of food" prized wild-harvested (local) above cultivated foods. As Greek philosophers pondered the best way to live, they also paid attention to folklore and accumulated wisdom about the medicinal properties of the plants around them. Aristotle is said to have conducted the first botanical research.

Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia and other Eastern lands yielded new sources of spices for the West. We can also credit him with bringing an early version of fusion cuisine westward, as Persian ingredients, customs, and techniques traveled back to Greece and the Mediterranean when his soldiers returned home.

By the second century BC, the Romans had taken a leading role in trade, including the spice trade—underscoring their power, while also helping to maintain it. Romans, as well as those in other parts of the empire, enjoyed the benefits of trade. In fact, some have said that the annals of the Roman Empire could also be called the annals of gluttony. The demand for exotic cultivated foods soared. Pliny the Elder railed against the market for luxury food that encouraged cultivation of such large specimens of vegetables like asparagus that a poor man could not afford them.

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**In twelfth-century France, St. Bernard of Clairvaux criticized the luxuries enjoyed by the rival monks of Cluny, warning that their use of “pepper, ginger, cumin, sage, and a thousand such types of seasonings ... delight the palate, but inflame the libido.”**

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Spices helped make possible the art of culinary disguise, which became quite popular in ancient Rome. The Latin poet Martial, remembered for his epigrams, had a cook who could make a simple gourd into any kind of dish. He succeeded so well that people were convinced they were eating beans and lentils, mushrooms, tuna, or even sweet cakes, rather than the meat of a gourd.

As they secured the Empire, the Roman legions also spread Roman food customs. The Romans had access to white and black pepper, as well as Melegueta pepper (often known as “grains of paradise”) and long peppers (cubeb) from Africa, introducing to far-flung peoples a love of that irresistible tingle of a pepper on the tongue.

As the Roman Empire collapsed, many of its sophisticated trade networks began to break apart. But the hunger for spices persisted, and since these crops could not be cultivated locally, the spice trade never completely disappeared. In 735, as the Venerable Bede lay dying in Anglo-Saxon England, he directed that his personal valuables, including incense and some grains of pepper, be distributed to his fellow monks.

During the Middle Ages, spices were still a sought-after commodity. Although they were too expensive for widespread use, they were in demand for flavoring wine and beer. Scholars do not think that spices were used to compensate for the taste of less-than-fresh or heavily salted meat, as some have proposed. In fact, the use of spices in this period was relatively sophisticated. There seemed to be a rather complex theory governing the use of spices in the Middle Ages, a theory that encouraged their judicious use and relegated certain spices to particular seasons of the year.

As Europe moved into the Renaissance, spices fueled the growth of trading fortunes. It helped that sixteenth-century pharmacists thought nutmeg could cure the plague. They may or may not have been right about that, but twenty-first-century research is showing that spices like nutmeg have a beneficial effect on blood pressure, digestion, and joint and muscle pain.

Whether the clamor for spices derived from their exotic flavors or from the health benefits attributed to them, the business of transporting and selling these exotic goods continued to flourish. Wealth from the spice trade helped build some of the great cities of Europe—first Venice, then Lisbon and Amsterdam—as the search for spices prompted European explorers to turn their gaze from East to West. The riches of the New World included new taste sensations like allspice and chile peppers and, yes, chocolate. But after the flush of discovery had subsided, European cuisines became less outward looking and more codified and regionalized.

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**Magellan never made it back from his famous voyage around the world, but his**

**second-in-command, Sebastian del Cano, finally reached Spain in 1522 with precious cargo of spices—some 30 tons of cloves, which was more than enough to repay the cost of the expedition. King Charles I of Spain honored him with a coat of arms that displayed three nutmegs, two cinnamon sticks, and twelve cloves.**

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Upper-class French cuisine turned toward a narrower range of ingredients. Haute cuisine abandoned the broad palette of spices that had trickled into Western Europe and relied instead on butter, cream, and the sauces that could be made from them, as well as a limited number of herbs like tarragon, thyme, and marjoram. It was a form of eating locally that would dominate the notion of fine food through most of the twentieth century.

Recently, some Parisian chefs have made news by attempting another transformation of French food—not with radically new techniques but by adding the global ingredients long missing from haute cuisine. These twenty-first-century chefs are rediscovering how the simple addition of a spice like cardamom or cumin can utterly change a dish, bringing the global element back to the neighborhood.

It's fitting that it was an apostle of fine French cooking, Julia Child, who demystified the masterful techniques of haute cuisine and helped twentieth-century Americans broaden their culinary horizons—and eventually embrace the taste revolutions that now enliven the food scenes in American cities. The revolution in American taste has also prompted American cooks to rediscover the importance of top-quality ingredients, including good, flavorful spices and herbs. The United States is now a melting pot of culture and cuisine, as the flavors of Asia, India, Latin America, and Africa mingle with the established, yet interwoven traditions of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Eastern European foods.

Like many Americans, we have lived our own versions of this transformation.

Both of us grew up in the South, surrounded by people who cooked good food day after day. Much of the year they had access to fresh, local vegetables, and often to chicken, pork, and beef raised nearby. These confident cooks seemed to have no trouble turning it all into a table groaning with good things to eat.

Sara's earliest memories of chicken are the free-range hens from her grandmother's backyard in L.A. (Lower Alabama). Another grandmother presided over patio pea-shelling sessions on summer mornings, with produce freshly picked from the extended-family garden. By noontime, those same peas would be steaming on the midday "dinner" table.

A fifth-generation Texan, Katie learned early the value of a super-hot skillet for making crusty cornbread, or for frying the crispiest chicken. She rolled out pie dough with her mother and baked chocolate cakes with her grandmother.

Many of our fondest childhood memories come from the kitchen, hanging out with mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and even dads and uncles, soaking up stories, hoping for a chance to stir something or lick an empty batter bowl. We also loved the family meals that followed, the

sense that food is something to share with people you love, and that meals are a time not just for eating but also for talking, catching up, and taking pleasure in the moment. But if we had a time machine and the chance now to revisit those convivial kitchens, we would love to take along some of the marvelous herbs and spices that weren't present in our mothers' cabinets—or at least weren't used on a regular basis.

Katie would surely throw a teaspoon or two of coriander into the black-eyed peas and the cornbread too—and maybe some fennel seeds for good measure. When her Grandmother Coco baked her famous chocolate “sheath cake,” Katie would be tugging on her apron, urging her to stir in some chile pepper and cinnamon for an adventurous taste of “sweet heat.”

Sara can't help but wonder how her mother's school-night casseroles would taste with a teaspoon or two of tarragon, or maybe some chile pepper and cumin. What fun she would have suggesting unexpected spices for Aunt Nadine to stir into her perfectly plain pound cake and banana breads—or those ubiquitous Christmas fruitcakes.

We would both be sprinkling chile pepper on slices of watermelon, adding cumin or thyme to the butter we slathered on corn on the cob—and experimenting with new flavors on all the other foods we loved but that everyone seemed to think had to taste the same every time.

Having plunged into the spice business together, we love nothing more in our own kitchen than taking the foods of our childhoods—especially the stained recipes with notes like “This one; your dad really liked it”—and reinventing them for our families and friends by reimagining the range of spices and herbs we can add. For the most part, our experiments have been a success, making mealtimes more interesting—and turning the task of cooking from a chore into an adventure.

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### *fun fact*

In the first century BC, the royal physician of King Mithradates of Pontus (now in modern Turkey) formulated an antidote for every poison. The Mithridaticum, as it was called, included anise, cardamom, cassia, frankincense, saffron, ginger, and cinnamon, and Mithradates took some every day to guard against treachery. But it backfired when, unable to bear the shame after losing a disastrous battle, he decided to poison himself and couldn't.

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### *fun fact*

The ruler of Moorish Seville, seeing how his wife envied the life of a peasant brick-maker, had a lake filled with cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and rose water so she could make bricks from the scented mud of its shore.

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We hope these recipes will encourage you to do the same. Think of them as starting places for your own experiments with spices and herbs. If a recipe calls for cinnamon and cumin, feel free to use another combination—maybe anise seed and coriander, or perhaps allspice and ginger. It won't always be perfect. But meals—and the time spent preparing them—will

be a lot more fun. Even if you occasionally strike out, you'll also have some spectacular home runs.

That last bit of advice comes from experience. Sara's son still complains about the day his morning oatmeal had an overdose of cardamom. (Sara insists there is no such thing as too much cardamom.) Katie's kids have been overheard whispering to their friends to be careful when eating dinner with them—some things can “taste weird.” Somehow, though, other children's friends are always eager to stay for dinner and the food disappears.

Our company, The Seasoned Palate, Inc., specializes in packaging dried organic spices, herbs, and zests in premeasured, one-teaspoon packets, and so you will notice that most every recipe in this book calls for exactly one teaspoon of a dried spice, herb, or zest. We package our products that way partly for the cook's convenience, but mostly because it protects them from light, air, and humidity, the elements that combine to turn a fresh-tasting spice, herb, or zest into a stale shadow of itself. Fresh spices make food better, and we have discovered that in traditional recipes calling for only a partial teaspoon, a full teaspoon almost always improves the taste. As for those recipes that call for  $\frac{1}{8}$  of a teaspoon of something—unless it's referring to cayenne or some other very hot pepper, why bother?

Spices are good, and good for you. Embrace them! Increasingly, we're seeing references to nutritional research showing the benefits of spices. If you're watching your weight, researchers have produced evidence that spices help you feel satisfied with less food. Apart from controlled studies, we know from experience that when you use more spices, you can easily cut down on sugar and fat.

Consider Enlightened Oatmeal (page 35), our fancy name for a simple, nourishing, and delicious breakfast. Until we started cooking with spices in earnest, we tended to avoid oatmeal because we always ended up compensating for the plain taste by pouring on lots of sugar and cream. Spices solved that problem so well that now we almost never add sugar, and we find that low-fat milk is fine. Even better, we look forward to breakfast—and all the good fiber keeps us happy till lunchtime. Similarly, we think you'll find that you won't need as much syrup on our Gingerbread Waffles (page 40) and Spiced Pancakes (page 41) as you would use on regular waffles or pancakes.

Good health and great flavor are solid reasons to become better acquainted with spices and herbs and to use more of them in your food. But there's another reason, too: spices connect us to the past, to our ancestors and their ancestors. The spices in our food reflect the primitive human itch to explore and experiment. When you add a spice or herb to your food, you're participating in one of history's oldest culinary traditions.

Far from being an exotic extra, spices from around the world make it easier—and much more fun—to turn out delicious and healthy food. They also connect us to the wider world, making it possible to explore customs and cultures around the globe without leaving your own kitchen. On page 119, you'll find an easy recipe for curry powder, a spice blend that can take any number of forms. Rather than buying a premixed curry, we hope you'll try blending your

own, and thereby learn how tweaking the amount of a single spice can affect the flavor of a finished dish. We encourage you to try our curry recipe, but then to adapt it to your own taste. You'll have a deeper understanding of the flavors that are fundamental to Indian cooking. The same goes for the chili powder recipe on page 95. Try ours—we think you'll love it. Then play with it and make it your own. When you're comfortable with spices, you can easily change an ordinary weeknight meal to a Caribbean-themed jerk chicken (page 111) or an Indian tandoori dish (page 116). Use locally raised, free-range chicken and you'll experience the best taste of all—local food and global flavor.

When you see how spices can dress up your old favorites, you'll understand what we mean when we talk about “spice enlightenment”—simple but flavorful additions to familiar foods that will make you think you're tasting them for the very first time.

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### *dried vs. fresh*

What's better, dried or fresh? For most foods, there's an easy answer—fresh! Most of us don't have the choice of using fresh spices—it's dried or nothing. But for herbs, the answer isn't quite as easy. We're big fans of homegrown herbs. Sara's patio is a staging area for a summer basil crop, and any day now her potted rosemary bush will make its seasonal move outdoors. But we've learned something about dried herbs. Most herbs that are dried commercially are grown in warmer climates closer to the equator and, in many cases, nearer to their native habitat. Whether it's the extra hours of sunlight, the higher temperatures, or just being closer to the soil in which they first sprang up, the herbs we've tasted from sunnier climes usually have more intense and complex flavors than those grown in more temperate areas.

That doesn't mean dried herbs can always replace our local bounty. After all, there's nothing better than a fresh-picked basil leaf on a slice of ripe tomato, or a batch of homemade pesto from homegrown basil. But if you like the flavor of an herb, we've learned a handy trick. The flavors of a top-quality, organic dried herb can complement the fresh herb in surprisingly delicious ways, adding layers of flavor and complexity to any dish.

The recipes in this book are designed for dried herbs, but we encourage you to experiment with both fresh and dried varieties. In fact, feel free to substitute fresh herbs for dried. Typically, you should use a three-to-one ratio of fresh to dried, or 1 tablespoon of fresh herb for each teaspoon of dried.

Better yet, use a mixture of dried and fresh. Keep in mind that the dried herbs will usually have more flavor, but let your palate be your guide. In short, don't let the fresh-or-dry debate derail your approach to well-flavored food. Fresh or dry, herbs are magical tools that can turn any cook into a flavor artist.

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*Allspice and cardamom*

## **The Cast of Characters**

In most cookbooks, authors take pains to introduce methods, or materials, or equipment, or philosophy. In this one, we must introduce the stars of the show, a colorful cast of flavors that can take you around the world—and you won't even have to leave your own kitchen.

This “cast of characters” is a handy guide to the herbs and spices you'll find in these recipes. Our intent in this book is to encourage you to get to know all of these flavors, what they can do for food on their own, and how you can combine them with other seasonings to create new combinations—and new possibilities for pleasing your palate.

We like to think of our palates, and all those taste buds, as a blank canvas. With each meal we are painting on that canvas with flavors, textures, and even colors. Seasonings—herbs, spices, zests—expand the range of possibilities. Artists don't like to paint pictures with only



couple of colors. They want a rich, full palette of hues from which to choose.

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That's how we want you to think of spices—as a wonderful way of broadening your culinary palette. Whether your intention is to paint culinary masterpieces, to enhance some of your favorite recipes, or just to try a few kitchen adventures for the fun of it, you will appreciate how delicious, fresh-tasting spices can improve your food. And if you take time to learn the personality of each herb or spice, you'll soon have an instinctive feel for how and when you like it best. The more you know about a spice, the easier it is to incorporate it into your repertoire of recipes.

We hear a lot these days about the global kitchen and the once-foreign flavors that can add great satisfaction to our meals. We also hear a lot about the virtues of eating locally grown foods—and we heartily embrace the eat-local principle. We think spices can play well with both of those themes. Not many cooks have ready access to a local cinnamon crop, but people have been transporting spices around the world for thousands of years—a much more efficient process than shipping heavy, perishable produce and meat. In short, the spice trade makes it possible to transform local foods into global cuisine.

There's also a case for global trading in herbs, despite the fact that, like many cooks, we both grow and use fresh herbs. The fact is, when we compare the basil or sage from our Mid-Atlantic backyards to varieties grown closer to the Equator, we have to admit that more southern produces stronger and more complex flavors. We still use our homegrown herbs, but we bolster them with dried herbs, resulting in another layer of flavor and richer-tasting food.

There were good reasons those ancient explorers set out in creaky ships for parts unknown. Embrace the spices that first fanned the fires of global trade, and you'll find many answers to the explorer's itch.

## Alluring Allspice

Fragrant and mysterious, allspice has a complex flavor all its own, but takes its name from its pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove notes. Allspice comes from *Pimenta dioica*, a tropical evergreen with dark glossy leaves and small white flowers; its berries are painstakingly hand-picked and air-dried to a rich red-brown.

Versatile allspice perfumes fruit dishes, jams, and apple and pumpkin pies. It lends subtle warmth to cakes and breads, but it's also a must in pickling spice and corned beef. Allspice creates depth and aroma in rubs and marinades for pork, beef, and venison. With cinnamon, tomatoes, and white wine, it adds exquisite flavor to lamb moussaka. And surely allspice is responsible for the popularity of that guilty pleasure, ketchup!

Most allspice comes from Jamaica, where the same rich earth that makes its coffee so renowned produces the finest allspice. Early Spanish explorers mistook the tiny berries for black pepper; the name stuck, and allspice is still sometimes called Jamaican pepper. Later pirates used allspice to season meat they cooked on their boucans, or barbecues, earning them the name buccaneers. When the English seized Jamaica from Spain in 1655, they gained

control of the only source of allspice for the next 300 years.

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Today, Scandinavians import the most allspice (for pickled herring and baking), but allspice has retained its place in the English kitchen, too, in spiced beef and traditional holiday fare like Christmas pudding and mincemeat. Allspice remains a staple of Jamaican cooking, combining with other tropical tastes in the famous jerk seasoning for chicken, pork, or goat.

Try substituting allspice in recipes that call for ground cloves, cinnamon, or nutmeg.

### **Amazing Anise Seed**

Not to be confused with the stronger star anise of Chinese cooking, anise seed, *Pimpinella anisum*, originated in western Anatolia. Its sweet, delicate flavor, reminiscent of licorice, tantalizes in baked goods like biscotti and pastries. But it is treasured, too, for the subtle sweetness it lends to pork, duck, or fish. Anise seed distinguishes the French apéritif Pernod and the liqueurs anisette and ouzo.

In ancient times, the Assyrians and Greeks valued anise seed as a medicine and an aphrodisiac. Pythagoras (yes, that Pythagoras) praised it as an antidote for scorpion stings. But it was the Romans who really got creative with anise, using it to settle the stomach, freshen the breath, quell coughs, and repel moths. Tributaries could even pay taxes with it.

Fortunately, the Romans also developed the culinary uses of this lively seed, spicing wine and baking it into after-dinner cakes that may be the ancestors of the modern wedding cake. Medieval Europeans associated anise seed with youth and vigor; it toned the skin and revived travelers on the grueling journeys of the day. Sixteenth-century people continued the tradition of eclectic use with anise-baited mousetraps.

The opening of Portuguese, Dutch, and English direct trade with Asia led to the increasing popularity of anise seed in Europe and beyond. In colonial Virginia, each man was required by law to plant at least six anise seeds; while in Spanish America, anise added a sweet new note to an old Aztec drink, chocolate. Today, anise seed enlivens Greek, Scandinavian, Arabic, and East Indian cuisines. It goes well with eggs, chicken, fish, and pork and adds an unexpected zip to carrots and spinach—and even our favorite mac and cheese. It makes pie, pastries, cookies, and sponge cake irresistible.

Try adding 1 teaspoon each of anise seed, cinnamon, and orange zest and ½ teaspoon ground cloves to your favorite sweet bread recipe for a teatime treat.

### **Extravagant Basil**

Basil's vibrant taste and ravishing scent, with subtle undertones of anise and cloves, call to mind the perfumed warmth of a summer garden. We know it as the quintessential herb for the warm-weather bounty of zucchini, fat eggplants, glossy peppers, and best of all, tomatoes. Sprinkle it over ripe wedges drizzled with balsamic vinegar and fruity olive oil. Or slow cook it in a lazy Sunday sauce to serve with spaghetti al dente, crusty bread, and a good Chianti.

Barolo. Either way, basil and tomatoes are a royal pairing. In winter, serve pasta tossed with basil, sun-dried tomatoes, porcini mushrooms, and tangy Romano cheese as you dream of dolce vita.

The plant *Ocimum basilicum*, a native of Persia and India, gets its name from the Greek *basileus*, “kingly,” and it was said to be reserved for kings alone to harvest with golden sickles. The Romans knew basil at least as early as the first century AD, and in medieval times the fragrant leaves were used as a strewing herb. As with its relative, mint, basil has many varieties. The three kinds of Thai basil have more pronounced clove or lemon notes than the “sweet” basil that is common around the Mediterranean.

Use basil to evoke the sensual joy of the Italian or Provençal table. Its heady flavor bursts from chicken stewed with tomatoes and olives, or from pistou, a seasoning of basil, garlic, and olive oil, ground in a mortar and stirred into vegetable soup or minestrone just before serving. Basil suits egg, cheese, or pasta dishes, especially those with opulent ricotta and creamy fresh mozzarella.

Accent vinaigrette dressing with basil and a touch of mint and orange zest; or try quirky but addictively refreshing fresh pineapple slices sprinkled with basil and drizzled with sweet balsamic vinegar.

## Queen Cardamom

Sweetly seductive with a slightly pungent scent reminiscent of pine needles, green cardamom is hailed as the Queen of Spices. From the Cardamom Hills of India's Western Ghats mountains, cardamom's domain ranges from Indian feasts with their fragrant platters to snuggly Scandinavian kitchens to the narrow lanes of Middle Eastern bazaars where buyers and sellers seek respite from the heat over a cup of cardamom-spiced coffee.

With the versatility to enliven sweet or savory dishes, cardamom is one of the world's most widely used spices. Cardamom adds its ambrosial warmth to baked goods, rice, meat, fish, and vegetable dishes. In Scandinavia, bakers prefer it to cinnamon for their breads and cakes.

*Elettaria cardamomum* grows in perennial stands of reedy shoots with long, dark green leaves. The spice comes from its pods, which must be snipped off by hand, then air-cured. All that care makes cardamom the third most costly spice on earth, after saffron and vanilla, as well as one of the most beloved. Sanskrit religious texts mentioned cardamom in the fourth century BC. About a thousand years ago an Indian compendium noted its medicinal uses, and recipes began appearing not long afterward. Around this time Arab traders encountered the spice and enthusiastically spread it throughout Southeast Asia and to the ancient Persians and Greeks. The Romans distinguished between two kinds of cardamom, using green cardamom to spice wine and sauce meatballs and black cardamom to perfume men's hair.

In India, by 1500, the Sultan of Mandu was enjoying cardamom in rice and sherbets; soon after, the Portuguese in Asia began to take note. By the mid-sixteenth century cardamom was commonly traded on both maritime and overland intercontinental spice routes. Amazingly, a

cardamom was harvested from wild plants controlled by the Raja of Kerala until about 200 years ago, when the British began cultivating it in other regions of India that had come under their rule. Today, India and Guatemala are the two main producers of cardamom.

Although both green and black cardamom (*amomum*) are members of the ginger family, black cardamom is a different species with a smoky, coarser flavor and cannot be substituted for green or “true” cardamom.

Cardamom perfectly complements yogurt’s tanginess. Try it in a yogurt-ginger-lime-based marinade, or in a carrot-apple slaw flavored with lemon and dressed with yogurt and mayonnaise. Add a little salt, honey, and a handful of raisins, if you like. For an appealing fruit dip, stir some cardamom into yogurt sweetened with honey.

You can use cardamom in place of all or part of the cloves or cinnamon called for in recipes.

To substitute ground for whole green cardamom, use 1 teaspoon of ground for every 6 or 7 pods of the whole spice.

## Feisty Chile Peppers

More nice than naughty, mild chile peppers will gently tingle your tongue and add depth to foods that need a bit of warmth to truly blossom. Fruitier and more flavorful than cayenne pepper, milder chile peppers are perfect for brightening creamy sauces like béchamel and mayonnaise and salad dressing. A pinch of mild chile pepper takes macaroni and cheese, canned soups, casseroles, and meat loaf from blah and bland to sassy. Use it to pick up the pace of morning scrambled eggs, or substitute it for cayenne to make brazen deviled dishes mild and impish.

Mild chile peppers belong to the species *Capsicum annuum*, whose hundreds of varieties range from gentle bell peppers to five-alarm habaneros. Botanically, the chile pepper is a berry, and belongs to *Solanaceae*, the same family as potatoes and tomatoes. Like its cousins, it is rich in vitamins A and C.

Chile peppers’ hotness is measured in Scoville Heat Units (SHU), named after the pharmacist Wilbur Scoville, who invented the system in 1912. Sweet bell peppers score 0, jalapeño peppers around 3,000-6,000, and a habanero pepper a flame-throwing 500,000. Milder chile peppers, including ancho, typically register around 15,000 SHU or below.

Although they have been cultivated for more than 5,000 years, chile peppers were unknown outside of the Americas before 1492. Spanish and Portuguese traders introduced them to Europe and Asia. Today, one-fifth of the world’s people eat chile peppers. They are used in Indian, Thai, Chinese, Italian, and Hungarian cuisines and lend festive notes to southwestern Mexican, Caribbean, and South American foods.



*Chile and cinnamon*

Outside the kitchen, Indian families hang chile peppers and a lemon over the threshold of their homes to keep harm away. Italian-Americans sometimes wear gold charms shaped like chile peppers to ward off the evil eye. Chile pepper is reputed to relieve arthritis, revive flagging love life, and cure intestinal worms. Scientists note that preliminary studies indicate chile pepper may help regulate the body's production of insulin.

Eating chile pepper releases endorphins in the brain, producing a feeling of pleasant well-being. But forget drinking water to quell chile pepper's heat: its fiery active ingredient, capsaicin, isn't water-soluble. Instead, follow the lead of Indian, Thai, and Mexican cooks and serve cooling dairy-based side dishes like yogurt raita, or cucumbers in yogurt; creamy Thai iced tea; or rich cheese or sour cream on the side. Or eat plain rice, bread, or sweets to tame the flame.

## **Outstanding Ancho**

Ancho, one of our favorite of the relatively mild chile peppers, is prized in Mexico and the Southwest for its sweet, sexy smolder, hinting of fruit and smoke. More complex and much milder than cayenne, it adds smoky zest to rubs and marinades for beef, pork, chicken, and turkey, and sparks up robust greens like spinach, collards, or chard. In pre-Columbian times, chile peppers added flavor and vitamins to the sacred triad of corn, beans, and squash that were the daily fare of the Maya and Aztecs.

Ancho chile is superb at bringing out food's underlying flavors. Use it to jazz up cornbread batters, stews, or your favorite chili powder blend, or combine it with true cinnamon for a "sweet heat" effect. Team ancho chile pepper with lime juice in marinades for fish or flank steak, or in melted butter for zesty corn on the cob.

### **Charming Cassia Cinnamon**

If the aroma of fresh-baked cassia cinnamon buns transports you to another world, it should be no surprise—the ancient Greeks believed the wind blowing from paradise was cassia-scented. The most popular type of cinnamon in the U.S., cassia is heavenly for baking, but it's also divine in marinades and meat dishes. The best cassia cinnamon has an aromatic, sweet note that is slightly more assertive, with a bit more bite than "true" cinnamon.

Cassia cinnamon is the tender inner bark of *Cinnamomum cassia*, a tree of the laurel family originally native to China. Around the Mediterranean, Romans burned it as incense; the Egyptians included it in burial unguents, and the ancient Hebrews anointed sacred places with cinnamon-scented oil. Traditional Chinese medicine uses it to reinforce yang, treat kidney ailments, improve circulation, and stimulate the fire element in the body. In medieval times, knights and ladies spiced meat with camelyne, a sauce made from cinnamon, garlic, ginger, vinegar, and breadcrumbs that was all the rage at castle banquets.

Cassia cinnamon warms the taste of apples and summer fruits like blueberries or peaches, but it also has an affinity for oranges, onions, carrots, spinach, and squash. Choose cassia cinnamon for recipes with robust flavors—like a Corsican beef stew with earthy dried mushrooms, bacon, white wine, tomatoes, and rosemary, ladled over pasta with grated Parmesan. Or follow an Asian lead: combine cinnamon with ginger, soy sauce, and garlic to make a succulent marinade for pork or chicken. Cassia cinnamon adds subtle interest to curries, pilafs, couscous, and split pea or lentil dishes. Stir cassia and brown sugar into hot dark-roast coffee for a Mexican after-dinner treat. But don't stop in the kitchen—sprinkle cassia cinnamon on rose petals spread out to dry for an angelic potpourri.

### **Classic "True" Cinnamon**

Neil Young sang about being happy with a cinnamon girl, and once you catch the intoxicating perfume of true cinnamon you'll know why. Woody, warm, and lively, true cinnamon is sweeter, more delicate, and lighter in color than cassia cinnamon. Matchless in baked goods and desserts, true cinnamon is the most prevalent variety in Europe; elsewhere it inspires Mexican, Asian, Turkish, and Moroccan cuisines.

True cinnamon, *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* or *C. verum*, is the bark of a tree originating in the moist air and sandy soil of Sri Lanka; the name “cinnamon” comes from a Malay word that means “sweet wood.” Since ancient times, outrigger canoes carried cinnamon from Ceylon, and it was known, through Indonesia to East Africa, where Arab traders shipped it by caravan through the Nile Valley to Egypt, or via the Red Sea to Somalia and on to the Mediterranean. In the Middle Ages, Venice grew wealthy on this trade. After 1500, the Portuguese captured Ceylon, breaking the Venetian monopoly, but were in turn driven out by the Dutch in 1638. By the end of the eighteenth century, the island changed hands again, falling under control of the English East India Company, which used its network of botanical gardens to spread the lucrative cinnamon trees to other places.

Today, true cinnamon is sometimes known as Sri Lankan cinnamon, Ceylon cinnamon, or Saigon cinnamon, depending on where it was grown. All these names distinguish it from cassia, a cousin of the cinnamon tree, which in the United States has become commonly known as cinnamon. If, like most Americans, you have grown up on cassia cinnamon, introduce yourself to true cinnamon and you’ll likely have a new favorite spice friend.

Substitute ripe pears for half the apples in your favorite apple pie recipe, and spice the pears with delicate true cinnamon for a luscious home-baked treat. Cinnamon also has a natural affinity for lamb, sprinkled on chops or roasts, or in piquant Turkish lamb stew with tomato, apricots, and pistachios. A pinch or two in tomato sauce or on baked acorn squash brings out the natural sweetness in both. Hot buttered toast soars to new heights with true cinnamon and sugar; or try cinnamon blended with honey and butter as a tasty spread.

## Clever Cloves

Part of cloves’ appeal is their scent. In braised meat, stews, and vegetables, in sweet desserts, and baked goods, cloves lure with their spicy promise. The darkly romantic, headstrong taste of cloves hints at the mystery and drama that have surrounded this precious spice since ancient times.

Once a scarce luxury, cloves today appear in fine Asian, European, and American cooking. The Spanish braise lamb in red Rioja wine, onion, garlic, and cloves, and serve it alongside saffron rice and crisp green beans. French charcuterie relies on cloves in the *quatre épices*, or four-spice powder, for seasoning fine sausages and piquant marinades.

Cloves are dried from the rose-colored flower buds of *Syzygium aromaticum*. These evergreens, native to the volcanic slopes of the Moluccas, are so pungent that sailors could smell them far out at sea. Although cloves have been traded widely for nearly 4,000 years, for most of that time no one knew for sure where they came from. Even after Arabic and European traders learned of the source, the Moluccas—and the spice they produced—retained their exotic aura, perpetuated by authors like Milton and Cervantes.

Cloves’ profitability drew less benign attention: the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch each controlled the Moluccas in turn. In 1770, a daring French former missionary, aided by native

bitterly resentful of Dutch rule, smuggled out hundreds of clove seedlings, which were planted in Mauritius, and later Madagascar and the Seychelles. After the Napoleonic wars, the British eventually brought clove trees to Grenada in the Caribbean. All these places supply cloves to today's brisk world market.

Cloves are versatile. They build complexity in rich bourguignonne sauce, simmered from red wine, bacon, onions, and mushrooms. A hint of cloves lends an air of intrigue in beets, winter squash, ham dishes, rice, soups, and cranberry sauce or fruit compotes. We like the way the clever spice can wake up a chocolate cake or a batch of chocolate chip cookies.

## **Cheerful Coriander**

Warm, citrus-noted coriander's sweetly spicy flavor makes it a natural for sweet desserts and savory meat, fish, and vegetable dishes. The plant, *Coriandrum sativum*, is used as both a herb and a spice, but its green leaves, known as cilantro, have a completely different taste from the spice ground from its "seed," which is actually a tiny fruit.

One of the oldest known spices, coriander originated in the eastern Mediterranean and spread by trade and conquest throughout the ancient world. The Greeks burned it as incense to please the gods, and Egyptians placed it in the tomb of Tutankhamen for use in the afterlife. In the book of Exodus, the manna that sustained the ancient Israelites on their trek through the desert was compared to coriander seeds; today it is commemorated as one of the traditional herbs of the Passover seder. Coriander reached India by way of Persia in the fourth century BC. Later, during China's Han dynasty, it was believed coriander could confer immortality, but only if consumed by the virtuous. In the West, Roman legions carried coriander throughout Europe, from whence it crossed the Atlantic: by 1670 settlers were growing coriander in colonial Massachusetts.

Today, coriander is synonymous with Indian cooking and curries. Beloved in Middle Eastern and Moroccan dishes, it also flavors the marinades and rich pork dishes of France's Burgundy region. Elsewhere in Europe and America it appears in stews and sausages, often paired with thyme. It is an ingredient of pickling spice, and its sweet fragrance wafts from ovens when apple pies and gingerbread bake.

Try coriander in marinated mushrooms or tomato salad. Or for a new twist on a summer favorite, combine allspice, coriander, dill, and basil with baked or sautéed eggplant.

Add a teaspoon of ground coriander to the batter for banana, carrot, or zucchini bread.

Place salmon fillets in foil or parchment packets with sliced fresh tomatoes, fresh mint leaves, coriander, and black pepper. Bake, and open the savory, steaming packets at the table. Or marinate firm-fleshed fish in coriander, allspice, lemon juice, and extra-virgin olive oil.

## **Comforting Cumin**



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