

# Cooking With Herbs

These healthy additives add zero-calorie zip to your meals

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Food would be so much less flavorful were it not for the wonders of herbs. Think Mexican food without cilantro or pesto without basil. Herbs elevate any dish, be it scrambled eggs, a salad, grilled vegetables, a vinaigrette, or meat.

They're also a dieter's dream come true. These delicate leaves and pods are bursting with flavor yet contain not a single calorie. And what herbs lack in calories, they make up for in disease-fighting phytochemicals.

Not only that, but herbs can help fill in the "flavor gaps" when you decrease or eliminate fat, sugar, and salt from your favorite recipes. And folks who are not big fans of vegetables may find the addition of an herb or two will lift the vegetable to whole new level.

Another benefit is that generous flavoring with herbs and spices may help dieters feel satisfied with less food. Meals bursting with flavor tend to be more satisfying, and if you eat slowly, you might be surprised at how little food you really need to get that feeling of fullness.

## Fun With Herbs

Lining our cupboards in little bottles are the familiar dried and concentrated herbs that we typically use when cooking. Also available at the market -- or growing outside your kitchen window -- are fresh herbs, more delicately flavored and more eye-appealing than the dried varieties.

Whichever type you choose, herbs are essential ingredients for any great cook. If you look at most any restaurant menu, you'll likely see that the kitchen uses herbs extensively.

Have fun with herbs; experiment with different combinations to discover new ways to enhance your meals. But be careful not to overpower your food with too much of any herb or too many types of herbs. Delicately flavored foods, like seafood, eggs, and white sauces, need only a light touch of flavor embellishment. Heartier foods, like meats, stand up well to a heavier hand with the herbs.

When you first start cooking with herbs, my advice is to start with milder types -- parsley, chives, chervil, and mint -- then progress to "medium" herbs -- basil, tarragon, thyme, and oregano -- and finally to the stronger-flavored ones such as rosemary, bay leaves, and sage.

Here are some tips to help you get the most from cooking with herbs:

- Fresh herbs are best added at the end of the cooking process. Adding them too early dilutes their essence. For example, I add fresh rosemary to my roasted potatoes in the last 10 minutes of roasting.
- You can perk up the taste and appearance of most savory dishes by sprinkling fresh or dried herbs on the plate before serving.
- Store fresh herbs in the refrigerator, either in a glass of water or wrapped in a damp paper towel in a sealed plastic bag.
- Dried herbs lose their potency after about a year. It's a good idea to replace bottles that have been around a long time.
- Use herbs instead of salt to keep down your sodium consumption. With all the extra flavor, you won't miss the salt.
- When a recipe calls for herbs, it means dried herbs unless otherwise specified. Fresh can be used in place of dried, but increase the amount to make up for the less concentrated flavor of fresh herbs.
- In creating herb combinations, balance a strong herb with a mild one until you gain experience in which herbs work well together.

## What Goes With What?

Here are some of my favorite ways to use various herbs:

- Mix rosemary, parsley, and garlic together along with some lemon, and you have a fabulous rub, marinade, or sauce for chicken, pork or lamb.
- Tarragon is an herb with a delicate flavor that matches well with light sauces and seafood.
- Basil works in almost any dish. It's delicious on sandwiches, spreads, salads, cheeses, appetizers, soups, and more. One of my favorite summer meals is a sandwich made with a crusty, whole-grain Tuscan bread, grilled veggies (Portobello mushrooms, red peppers, and eggplant), goat cheese, and fresh basil. The sandwich really comes alive with the essence of fresh basil.
- Add rosemary to roasted potatoes, couscous, or any whole grain.
- Salsa without cilantro is just tomatoes and onions!
- Mint takes iced tea from flat to exciting. It also does wonders for smoothies -- not to mention the occasional mojito.
- Fresh rosemary is so aromatic that I put some in a vase on the kitchen table for ambience.
- Put your favorite herbs in a bottle of olive oil to add flavor to the oil.
- Use herbs like thyme to enrich the flavor of broths
- Create your own bouquet garni. Tie a few herbs together in a bit of cheesecloth, then toss it into soup, stock, or stew.

## Grow Your Own

There are certain fresh herbs I just can't live without, namely basil, rosemary, parsley, and mint. All of these are fairly easy to grow, even for those of us without green thumbs.

Rosemary, mint, and thyme seem to grow without any assistance, while basil (my personal favorite), does require a bit of tending. A little water, sunshine, and soil in a pot or little plot are all you need to have your very own herb garden. Herbs in pots are more versatile, as you can move them around to control the sun and shade.

At season's end, you can dry your own herbs to use in the fall and winter. Simply snip clusters of herbs off at the base, tie the bunches together, and then hang upside down to dry. These pretty little clusters add a homey and aromatic touch to any kitchen while they are drying. Once dry, store them in airtight containers -- or toss clumps into your fireplace for a wonderful room freshener.