

Food & Drink

Tip. The best time to add spices to a dish is immediately after sauteing the onions and garlic as the hot oil helps to release their delicious aromas.



Enhance your meal with herbs and spices

Flavours. You do not need expensive equipment or culinary school. You need to learn how to balance robust spices with delicate herbs. The rest will follow.

BY MARIA MURORE

Bland food is not always a matter of poor ingredients. You can buy the freshest produce, the finest meats, the most fragrant oils, and still end up with a meal that tastes like nothing. The missing element is almost certainly herbs and spices. They are the heart of every delicious dish. They enhance flavour, aroma, and colour. They also reduce your reliance on excess salt, sugar, and fat. What follows is a guide to balancing robust spices with delicate herbs, so that ordinary ingredients become something worth remembering.

What are herbs and spices?

Although the term 'herbs and spices' is often used interchangeably, they are actually two distinct types of seasonings, derived from different parts of various edible, aromatic plants. Herbs are the leaves (and sometimes the stems) of these plants, while spices come from seeds,

flowers, buds, pods, fruits, roots and barks. Spices are commonly used dried, whole or ground, although some can be used fresh.

Herbs on the other hand, yield their best flavour when used fresh, although they too can be used dried. Spices are robust, have bold flavours and can withstand higher temperatures and longer cooking times than herbs. Thus, they are usually added at the beginning of cooking, while fresh herbs are best added towards the end of cooking, as high temperatures and long cooking times destroy the delicate flavours and fresh notes they add to dishes.

Other benefits of herbs and spices

Due to their antimicrobial properties, herbs and spices can be used to preserve certain foods, as used to be the case before the advent of refrigeration. They also contain high concentrations of antioxidants and other health-promoting phytochemicals.

“Less is more. When cooking with herbs and spices the general rule of the thumb is ‘less is more.’ Adding too much will destroy a dish as herbs and spices are meant to enhance the flavour of foods and not to overpower them.”

Herbs used in cookery

Common herbs used in preparing dishes include: rosemary, thyme, mint, basil, parsley, dill, fenugreek leaves, lemongrass, peppermint, oregano, celery, marjoram, bay leaves, fennel leaves, tarragon, curry leaves, oregano, coriander leaves, scallions, chives, garlic leaves and spring onion leaves.

Spices

These include: cinnamon (bark); vanilla, cardamom and tamarind (pods); cloves and capers (buds); turmeric, ginger, horseradish, galangal, garlic bulbs, onion bulbs and licorice (roots); black and white peppercorns, allspice, paprika, cayenne, chili and star anise (fruits); cumin seeds, mustard seeds, coriander seeds, fenugreek seeds, caraway seeds, celery seeds, nigella seeds, cardamom seeds and nutmeg (seeds) and saffron and organic rose petals (flowers).

How to use spices

The best time to add spices to a dish is immediately after sauteing the onions and garlic as the hot oil helps to release their delicious aromas. The heat should not be too high however, so as to prevent burning, as burnt spices make food taste bitter. You can also start off by tossing the spices for a few seconds in a little hot oil and then setting them aside and adding them to the dish after sauteing the onions and garlic.

Whole spices versus ground

Whole spices when stored correctly, retain their flavourful oils for years, so for the deepest flavour, buy small quantities of whole spices and grind the amount you require at home. Buying ground spices is convenient, but they lose potency much faster than whole spices.

Dry versus fresh

The advantage of dry herbs is that they can be stored for long, while fresh herbs wilt and decay quickly. Dry herbs are also concentrated, so a little goes a long way. Dishes that are cooked for long periods such as soups and stews are perfect for dry herbs and spices, which should be added during the long, simmering phase, to allow the liquid to rehydrate them and extract their flavour. Fresh herbs are best added at the end of cooking to keep the food fresh and vibrant.

Pairing foods with flavours

Mediterranean and tomato-based dishes usually go well with rosemary, thyme, oregano, paprika and cinnamon. While leafy greens do well with garlic, cumin and chili. Mushrooms and eggplant go well with garlic, thyme and rosemary. Garlic and freshly ground black pepper are perfect for beef steaks, while dill and tarragon pair beautifully with fish fillets. Poultry goes well with a variety of herbs and spices that include, rosemary, thyme, sage, paprika, garlic and black pepper.

Storage

Store fresh herbs in the fridge; wrap small bundles in dry paper towels, place inside a sealed plastic bag with a few slits for ventilation, and keep dry herbs and spices in a cool, dark cabinet away from sunlight.

Recipe

Zucchini lasagna

BY MARIA MURORE

This lasagna is low in carbohydrates, high in protein and simply delicious.

Ingredients

- 4 medium zucchini, thinly sliced
- 2 cups ricotta cheese
- 1½ cup mozzarella cheese, grated
- ½ kg minced beef
- 1 large egg
- 300g cooked spinach, water squeezed out
- 8 medium tomatoes, finely chopped
- 2 medium onion, sliced
- 4 large cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tbsp Italian seasoning
- 1 tbsp salad seasoning
- Ground black pepper
- Salt
- Olive oil
- You will need aluminium foil

Method

Heat one tbsp oil in a saucepan and fry half the onions and half the garlic. Add the tomatoes, half a teaspoon of salt and quarter teaspoon of black pepper and one tablespoon of Italian seasoning. Bring to a boil and simmer until reduced and thick. Blend the sauce until smooth and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 350°F/177°C/gas mark 4. Lightly grease a 9 by 13 inch baking dish or casserole dish. Slice the zucchini lengthwise to thin 3mm slices. Lay the slices on a large tray, sprinkle with salt and after 20 minutes, pat dry with kitchen towels.

Heat one tablespoon of oil in a large frying pan over medium heat and cook the beef until brown all over. Add the onions and garlic and cook stirring for a few minutes. Add three and a half cups of the tomato sauce and the salad seasoning and cook stirring for five minutes before removing from the heat.

Beat the egg, ricotta cheese and spinach and mix well.

To assemble: Spread half a cup of the beef and tomato mixture on the bottom of the baking dish. Add a single layer of zucchini slices and top with some of the ricotta cheese mixture. Sprinkle some of the mozzarella cheese on top. Repeat the process in that order until all the ingredients have been used up, finishing with a generous sprinkling of mozzarella cheese. Cover the dish with foil. Bake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes, remove the foil and bake for a further 20 minutes, or until the cheese is nicely golden. Cool for 10 minutes, before cutting into four slices. Serve hot with a fresh vegetable salad.

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