

FEATURE

Of Spices and Aromatics

Pepper, clove, rosemary, basil, turmeric, garlic, ginger, parsley, thyme... our food would be so less tasty and fragrant without spices and aromatic herbs, which have become integral ingredients in both Western and Asian recipes.

Text: Chow Ee-Tan Images: Courtesy of iStockphoto

Spices and aromatic herbs, apart from having nutritional value, impart aroma, enhance flavours, and add zest to recipes and dishes to stimulate the appetite.

The main difference between a spice and herb is where it is obtained from a plant. Herbs usually come from the leafy part of a plant and can be used fresh or dried. Spices are obtained from seeds, fruits, roots, or bark. Herbs can be found in many places around the world while spices are commonly found in the Far East. Many of the world's highly prized spices—such as cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and pepper are cultivated in tropical and subtropical regions.

Spices are usually used dried, though some, such as chilli peppers and ginger, are used in both their fresh and dried forms. They mostly come in the forms of seeds—tiny aromatic fruits and oil-bearing seeds of herbaceous plants such as anise, caraway, cumin, fennel, poppy, and sesame.

Used in small amount to perfume and season dishes, sometimes spices also give colour and help preserve a dish. In spices, the bioactive compounds may be present in the flower (saffron), bud (clove), bark (cinnamon), root, fruit (pepper, dill, mustard), rhizomes (ginger) or seeds (fennel, coriander, nutmeg) of the plant. Sometimes, the parts are dried and grinded into powder.

Aromatic herbs, meanwhile,

are fresh or dried aromatic leaves of plants that can be found in vegetable gardens or market garden stalls. Aromatic herbs are used for their aromatic, condiment, or medicinal qualities. Their active ingredients are present in the leaves (parsley, bay leaf sauce, chives) or bulbs (garlic, shallot, onions).

As the name suggests, aromatic herbs have the main characteristic of giving aroma to a dish, and they are used fresh in most cases, added on the ingredients, or as garnishing at the end of cooking.

Among the aromatic herbs that are most frequently used include parsley, rosemary, basil, sage, oregano, and mint. These plants can naturally be grown in pots, or we can also find them in the wild.

Many aromatic herbs also have an intense taste, and some of them can be dried and reduced to powder, and some spices can be used fresh. For example, oregano is hardly found in fresh leaves; ginger meanwhile can also be used fresh and cut into slices. The right usage of spices and aromatic herbs brings on a delectable, distinctive aroma, and taste to a host of dishes.

ORIGINS AND THE SPREAD OF SPICES AND HERBS

Spices are historically a symbol of luxury and of refinement. The term “spices” comes from the Latin word “species”, from which

also comes “grocer”, the seller of spices.

The use of spices was found more than 6,000 years ago in Ancient Egypt, for their aroma, taste, and the power to preserve quality. The increased trade with Magna Graecia and the conquests of the Roman Empire brought spices to Europe. The Spice Route is known as the first fruit of globalisation and over centuries, spices have been the source of struggles and violence to gain a monopoly on trade.

In contrast, aromatic herbs with medicinal virtues have been known in Europe since the Middle Ages.

The most notable uses of spices and herbs in very early times were in medicine, in the making of holy oils and unguents, and as aphrodisiacs. Priests employed them in worship, incantations, and rituals; and shamans used them as charms to ward off evil spirits. Aromatic herbs were used to clean and add fragrance to homes.

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Ancient herbal manuals for identifying plants and preparing medicinal remedies were found in places such as Cathay (northern China), Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and spices and herbs were used to treat diseases.

In the first century of the Christian era, Pliny the Elder, in his book, *Natural History*, exalted the efficacy and healing powers of spices and herbs in the treatment of nearly every ailment known in his day. Such beliefs, although tempered and moderated, were accepted through the Middle Ages and into early modern times.

LIFTING THE FLAVOURS OF WESTERN CUISINE

The modern uses of spices and aromatic herbs are legion, ever-changing, and distinguish the food of one country from another. And it is this simultaneous titillation of the palate that has chefs and foodies falling head over heels.

"Spices play a significant role in all recipes and how to use them is a knowledge by itself," says Chef Darren Chin, founder and head chef at DC Restaurant and Bref, a French bistro. For Western cuisine,

he says spices should be used sparingly so as not to overpower the key ingredients of the dish.

"Western cuisines use more fresh aromatic herbs than dry spices. To me, spices are not essential items in my recipes but if I'm looking for something different, I would use them for the extra push. But I don't usually use more than one or two spices for each recipe," he adds.

Rather than direct application of spices onto the food for example, marinating spices on meat, Chef Darren prefers to use spices as infusion to give a less robust flavour.

"For instance, carrots and cumin go well together. I would make the spice into a puree, infuse the carrot with the cumin

puree so you can taste the different layers of flavour," he says.

Spices, especially dry spices are used to lift the flavour profile of a dish to a different dimension altogether, he says. It gives the diner a different perspective of the dish.

"It's best for spices to be incorporated fresh. The grains will be in the purest form. Dry spices have natural oil in them, so when you release those aromatic oils, it gives much flavour to the dish," he says.

Some of the more subtle spices include cumin, fennel seeds, coriander seeds and mustards, says Chef Darren, who seldom uses the more pungent spices such as cloves, star anise, khasiat or cinnamon bark for Western cuisine.

"For aromatic herbs, the common ones are thymes, rosemary, tarragon, turmeric (which goes well with grilled chicken and pork), lemongrass, shallots, lime leaf, galangal, ginger, and orange peels. Aromatic herbs do not have a prolonged flavour on the dish compared to dry spices," he adds.

To Chef Darren, cardamon and calandria go very well with lamb. "I crush cardamon seeds and marinate them with lamb racks. Caraway seeds are also one of my favourite spices and they have an aromatic anise flavour. The seeds are commonly used in German cuisine," he says.

In any commercial kitchen, it is essential to have a spice rack at hand. And the key utensil is a spice grinder.

"Spice grinder is useful for grinding your spices fresh, rather than using spice powder. One of



"Western cuisines use more fresh aromatic herbs than dry spices."





A RECIPE BY CHEF DARREN CHIN

Aged Hiramasa king fish with "Chao Zhou" black olive vinaigrette, glazed heirloom carrots with dried Nora pepper and "larb spice" from northern Thailand topped with Shansho Togarashi.

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

- 300g aged Hiramasa king fish (Aged 4-5days)
- "Chao Zhou" black olive vinaigrette
- 50g Chao Zhou black olive from jar
- 1 tbsp English mustard
- 4 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- 1 tbsp salted kombu
- 3 tbsp warm water
- 2 pinches Nora peppers (ground)
- 1 pinch Northern Thailand larb spice
- 200g heirloom carrots (peeled)
- Unsalted butter
- 1 sprig fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 100mls chicken stock for de-glazing
- Shansho togarashi (store bought)

METHOD

1. Mix olives, mustard, lemon juice, and kombu.
2. Gradually mix in olive oil, and water into a sauce consistency.
3. Place peeled carrots into saucepan, add in butter, spices, thyme sprig, chicken stock, seasoning salt and pepper.
4. Cover with a paper lid.
5. Cook over medium heat, till carrots are tender.
6. Remove paper lid and glaze until liquid is evaporated.

TO ASSEMBLE

1. Place a spoonful of vinaigrette on the centre of the plate.
2. Place 4 slices of kingfish on top.
3. Drizzle olive oil and sprinkle togarashi.
4. Use a blow torch and lightly char carrots.
5. Place fish on top and serve.

the methods to use spices on meat dishes is to create a spice crust of mixed spices," he says.

He says *foie gras* goes very well with *quatre épices* (Four Spices), a French all-spice mix containing ground pepper (white, black, or both), cloves, nutmeg, and dried ginger. *Quatre épices* is mainly used in French cuisine but can also be found in some Middle Eastern kitchens.

The four spices mellow the liverish taste of the fatty liver and enhance the flavour for the *foie gras*, he says.

Recently, Chef Darren has been experimenting with dry peppers from Spain and Mexico known as Nora peppers. There are different types of peppers that have different flavours—some smoky and some with a sweet after taste. Instead of paprika or cayenne pepper, he has been using Nora

peppers to make lobster sauce and lobster pasta.

AROMATIC NYONYA COOKING

A local cuisine that widely uses spices and aromatic herbs is Peranakan or Nyonya cuisine, which combines Chinese ingredients with various distinct spices and cooking techniques used by the Malay/Indonesian community. The results are recipes that are tangy, aromatic, spicy, and herbal.

There are regional variations in Nyonya cooking. Dishes from the Northern part of the country such as Penang has Thai influences, with more liberal use of tamarind and other sour ingredients. Dishes from the south have greater Indonesian influences, featuring the prominent use of coconut milk. A classic example is *laksa*—the two more famous variants



KEY SPICES & AROMATIC HERBS IN NYONYA COOKING

- Red chilli or chilli powder
- Galangal
(a mustard-scented rhizome from the ginger family)
- Ginger
- Garlic
- Shallot
- Lemongrass
- Pandan leaf
- Tamarind
- Torch ginger (bunga kantan)
- Shrimp paste (belacan)
- Laksa leaf
- Kaffir lime leaf
- Curry leaf
- Coconut milk (santan)

being *assam laksa* from Penang and the coconut milk-based *laksa lemak* from Southern regions in Malaysia.

Spices determine the flavour of not just the laksa but other Nyonya recipes. In traditional Nyonya cooking, the various combinations of spices and aromatic herbs are pounded into a paste of specific texture and density, with a mortar and pestle.

A typical Nyonya dish is *nasi ulam*—herbal rice packed with fish flakes, *kerisik* (fried coconut paste) and aromatic herbs, delicious when eaten on its own or with other dishes. There are variations but three ingredients—the rice, *kerisik* and shallots—are constant. Salted fish and dried shrimps are also added to the dish. The spices and aromatic herbs used are wild betel/pepper leaves, turmeric leaves, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves,

mint leaves and torch ginger. Side dishes that go well with *nasi ulam* include *sambal belacan*, grilled turmeric chicken, steamed sambal okra, and sambal prawns.

Another Nyonya speciality is *otak-otak*—a blend of fish, coconut milk, chilli paste, galangal, and herbs wrapped in banana leaf. Then we have *cincalok*—a pungent and powerfully flavoured, sour and salty shrimp-based condiment that is typically mixed with lime juice, chillies and shallots.

For both Western and Eastern cooking, the pairing of relevant spices with the main ingredients is key. All you need to do is experiment using the trial-and-error approach to find out the spices that work with certain ingredients. Traditional recipes call for the use of specific spices. Try not to redesign those recipes but experiment with a bit of innovation. ©

HERBS & SPICE MIXES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

THESE HERBS AND SPICE COMBINATIONS WILL HAVE YOU WHIPPING UP DISHES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. GIVE YOUR MEALS THOSE ETHNIC FLAVOURS YOU LOVE!

MEXICAN

- Coriander
- Cumin
- Oregano
- Cinnamon
- Garlic Powder
- Chilli Powder

FRENCH

- Nutmeg
- Thyme
- Garlic Powder
- Rosemary
- Oregano
- Provincial herbs

MEDITERRANEAN

- Oregano
- Rosemary
- Thyme
- Bay Leaves
- Cardamom
- Cinnamon
- Cloves
- Coriander
- Basil
- Ginger

CHINESE

- Star Anise
- Cloves
- Cinnamon
- Sichuan Pepper
- Fennel Seeds
- Sesame
- Ginger

JAPANESE

- Chilli Peppers
- Roasted Orange Peel
- Sesame Seeds
- White Sesame Seeds
- Hemp Seeds
- Ground Ginger
- Nori

THAI

- Basil
- Cumin
- Garlic
- Ginger
- Turmeric
- Curry Powder
- Cardamom

INDIAN

- Bay leaves
- Cardamom
- Cayenne Pepper
- Cinnamon
- Coriander
- Cumin
- Ginger
- Nutmeg
- Paprika
- Turmeric
- Garam Masala
- Curry Powder