

## **Ch 11 The Spice Rack**

*Excerpted from **Simple Food for Busy Families** by Jeannette Bessinger, CHHC and Tracee Yablon Brenner, RD, Ten Speed Press*

**[begin sidebar]**

### **Noteworthy Nourisher: Ginger**

- Has a pungent taste
- Gingerol and zingerone give ginger its pungency and have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.
- May help prevent cancer, and help relieve osteoarthritis of the knee.
- Relieves nausea, motion sickness and other digestive ailments. Safe to use during pregnancy to relieve morning sickness.
- Ginger tea can be made from slices of fresh ginger or candied ginger steeped in hot water.
- See page XX for more about ginger.

**[end sidebar]**

## **[A] Demystifying Herbs and Spices**

Herbs and spices can add a tremendous amount of variety to whole foods. They bring extra nutritional value and medicinal properties to your meals, as well as providing wonderful flavors to satisfy the taste buds.

What is the difference between an herb and a spice? An herb is any leaf, flower or stem of a plant used for seasoning food or for medicinal purposes. Spices are seeds, seed pods, barks, roots or rhizomes (underground stems such as ginger) prepared into aromatic food seasonings.

We will provide you with a “Starter Spice Rack” for your Whole Life Nutrition Kitchen, which includes both herbs and spices. These are the basic seasonings you should have on-hand to get your everyday cooking off to a delicious start. We include plenty of information on how to store, work with and combine everything in your new Spice Rack.

### **[B] About Herbs**

Fresh summer herbs should be chopped or torn, then tossed into your dish at the last minute so they cook only lightly and taste very fresh in the dish. Some great examples are basil, oregano, parsley, cilantro, tarragon, mint and chives. Using fresh herbs, you really have to play with the quantity to see what tastes best to you. Start with less and taste it. You can always add more.

In general, we prefer fresh herbs to dried, but dried herbs are definitely essential if fresh herbs are not accessible. Cooking with dried herbs, you always need about half the amount you would when using fresh herbs. When substituting in recipes, a general rule of thumb is 1/4 teaspoon of ground herb or 1 teaspoon of dried herb leaves equals 1 tablespoon of finely chopped fresh herb.

Winter herbs, are more effective when dried. They lend themselves to heartier dishes such as stews and soups. They add depth and aromatic flavors, which become more pronounced with

longer methods of cooking, such as braising or slow cooking. These herbs include bay leaves, rosemary, thyme and marjoram. They shouldn't be used raw; cooking mellows their intense flavors and aromas.

Organic herbs, whether dried or fresh, are often more flavorful than conventional herbs because they are harvested in smaller quantities, and prepared and sent to market more quickly.

### **[B] About Spices**

Spices are usually dried, either whole or ground. If you will not use certain spices often, it's a good idea to buy them whole and grind or grate them when needed.

The seeds last longer and impart an intense flavor if you buy them whole and grind them as needed in a coffee grinder that you designate for spices only, no coffee beans. (This is also a cost-effective strategy; your whole spices will stay fresh longer.) You can also intensify their flavor by toasting spice seeds: shake them for a couple of minutes in a dry skillet until you smell their aroma, being careful not to burn them.

If these techniques seem like too much work, simply buy small quantities of your spices already ground. They will still be quite flavorful.

### **[B] How to Store**

Fresh herbs are quite perishable. They need to be stored properly once cut from their original plants. Store bunched herbs in the refrigerator with the stems in water. For loose leaves and flowers, pack them loosely and store in perforated plastic bags in the refrigerator crisper. If there is extra moisture on the leaves, pat them dry and put a crumpled paper towel on the bottom of the bag. Place the leaves on top. A bit of moisture is good to help keep leaves fresh, but too much will make them spoil sooner. This storage technique also works well for spices such as whole ginger root that need to be kept fresh.

There are many herbs available fresh in most grocery stores today. Some stores also carry herbs frozen in small containers. A great economical alternative to buying herbs every week is keeping a small window herb garden. Pick your favorite herbs that you will cook with most often. Herbs growing in your kitchen window will be accessible during meal preparation and leave a great fragrance in the kitchen. Also you won't have to bother with storage.

Dried herbs and spices should be packed in tightly closed glass jars and kept in a cool, dry, dark place. The refrigerator is ideal but not practical for most people. Glass keeps aromas in and out best. Most herbs become stale quickly (some more than others) and stale herbs do not enhance the flavor of food. For freshness, it is best to buy small quantities and check expiration dates. If your herbs go stale, it's best to throw them out.

### **[A] Using Herbs and Spices for Health: The Six Tastes**

Think back to your middle school science class when you learned about the four distinct tastes—sweet, sour, salty, bitter—that can be experienced on the tongue. Each food, herb and spice you

eat has a dominant taste that has an impact, not only on how your meal tastes, but also on how your meal makes you feel. There are six primary flavors:

- sweet
- sour
- salty
- bitter
- pungent (spicy, hot)
- astringent (drying)

Some ancient systems of health have a deep understanding of how these tastes impact the body. For example in Ayurveda, the ancient traditional healthcare practice of India, practitioners prescribe herbs for health and balance, taken internally and externally, and individualized dietary guidelines, along with breathing exercises and yoga. Ayurveda teaches that it is important to include all six of these primary flavors in every meal to keep the body in balance and to heal health problems. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), an extensive system of health used in China for thousands of years, holds a similar philosophy. Both TCM and Ayurveda emphasize that the taste of each thing you eat has an effect on the body and the mind.

Even without going deeply into these Asian philosophies, it's easy to see the benefits of meals that are well-rounded in all six flavors. You can find complete meals like this at most ethnic restaurants, such as Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Mexican, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern. For example, at a traditional Japanese restaurant, you might start with miso soup (salty) and then a small amount of protein such as tofu, fish, chicken, or seafood (sweet or salty). This would be followed by rice (sweet), ginger or wasabi (pungent,) and sautéed vegetables (bitter), preferably in sesame oil and soy sauce (salty). With your meal, you would drink green tea (bitter and astringent) and end with fruit such as an orange (sweet and sour). This Asian meal is healthy, light and satisfying, stimulates digestion and pleases the taste buds.

Compare this to a typical S.A.D. dinner of grilled chicken breast (bland or salty), iceberg salad (bland or sour) and French fries (very salty). This meal is missing many flavors and does not stimulate the digestive system. It may be filling, but it is not healthy, light or satisfying. Afterwards you will almost certainly crave a rich dessert.

Herbs and spices are a great way to start expanding the number of tastes in your meals. In fact, with very little effort you can start using the six flavors to improve your family's health, help them attune to the seasons and calm extreme cravings brought on by S.A.D. imbalances. Below is a description of the benefits of each of the different flavors, as well as suggestions on where to find them and when to eat them. The Spice Rack below also includes information on tastes so you can keep their balancing effects in mind as you add them to your meals.

### **[B] Sweet**

Sweet tastes are calming, relaxing and moist to the tongue. They're "anabolic," which means they help to build tissue; in excess they will increase body weight. Sweet foods are best to eat in the summer, autumn and winter.

Sweet Herbs and Spices: cinnamon, cardamom, poppy seed, anise seed, dill, fennel seed, tarragon and nutmeg

Sweet Foods: sugar, honey, maple syrup, butter, cream, milk, ricotta cheese, tofu, wheat, barley, almonds, sesame seeds, meats, sweet fruits, dried fruits, carrots, beets, sweet potatoes, winter squashes, fennel, cucumbers, avocados, cucumbers

### **[B] Sour**

Sour tastes stimulate the digestive system and appetite, increase metabolism and help to relieve gas. They also help to add tissue and increase body weight. Decrease sour foods, especially yogurt and some cheeses, in the spring and summer. Winter and autumn are particularly good seasons to eat sour foods.

Sour Foods: yogurt, sour cream, oranges and other citrus fruits, plums, strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes, fermented cheeses such as goat cheese, vinegar and pickles

### **[B] Salty**

Salty tastes are warming, soothing and drying. In small quantities, they can help speed up digestion and increase appetite. However, too much salty food can stimulate water retention. This taste also increases tissue and body weight if eaten in excess. Celtic sea salt contains all of the trace minerals from the ocean but doesn't have water retention properties or raise blood pressure the way processed iodized table salt can. We recommend reducing your intake of salty foods in the spring and summer, as you look to lose weight and stay hydrated; and then increasing them in the autumn and winter to help you to stay warm and digest heavier foods.

Salty Foods: sea salt, iodized table salt, processed tomato sauces, chutneys, soy sauce, tamari, celery, deli meats, smoked meat or fish, baking soda, baking powder, prepared condiments such as catsup and mustard, brined foods such as pickles, olives and sauerkraut. (Note: many poor quality S.A.D. processed foods have a strong salty taste because they are high in added salt: snack foods such as chips or pretzels, processed cheeses, instant or canned soups, frozen food, fast and other restaurant foods.)

### **[B] Pungent**

Pungent tastes are what we think of as spicy. They boost metabolism, digestion and circulation, and they can be drying. They are "catabolic," which means they help burn fat. They can be helpful in lowering body fat. Spring is a good time to indulge in spicy foods. Summer is a time to avoid pungent, spicy foods because too much of them may overheat you, which can be uncomfortable in the hot and humid weather.

Pungent Herbs and Spices: basil, chili powder, cumin, curry, ginger, cloves, peppermint, spearmint, fennel, anise, cayenne pepper, black pepper, Hungarian hot paprika, mustard seeds and powder, dried horseradish

Pungent Foods: hot peppers of all kinds, from chilis to habaneros, mustard, chili oil, hot sauces, horseradish, mustard greens, radish, radish sprouts, onion, ginger, garlic, dill

## **[B] Bitter**

Bitter tastes often have a sharp flavor, which becomes pleasant once the taste buds become accustomed to it. They are drying and cooling. Small amounts help to stimulate digestion, and because they're catabolic they can help reduce body fat. Spring and summer are great seasons in which to embrace bitter foods. Reduce your consumption of them in the autumn and winter.

Bitter Spice: turmeric, fenugreek, cumin seeds

Bitter Foods: eggplant, rhubarb, green tea, coffee, tonic water, dark chocolate, licorice, sesame seeds, dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, collard greens, beet greens, chard, spinach, dandelion greens, lemon and orange peel

## **[B] Astringent**

Astringent tastes are drying, cooling and catabolic, so they can help reduce body fat. They are best eaten in late spring and summer, and less useful in the autumn and winter.

Astringent Herbs and Spices: nutmeg, bay leaf, basil, tarragon, turmeric, rosemary, sage

Astringent Foods: pomegranate, green apples, pears, rhubarb, green grapes, citrus peels, chard, cabbage, spinach, lentils, most beans, aloe vera, avocado

## **[A] Starter Spice Rack**

Here is a simple collection of 17 staple spices we recommend for starter cooks.

### **[begin sidebar]**

#### **Table: Spice Rack**

basil

bay "laurel" leaves

cardamom

cayenne pepper

cilantro

cinnamon

cumin

dill

fennel

garlic

ginger

mint

nutmeg

oregano

paprika

parsley

turmeric

### **[end sidebar]**

Below is a detailed photo library of our suggested Spice Rack, with information about what to buy, uses, benefits (including medicinal properties), cautions and tastes. We recommend experimenting with this set of seasonings to see what appeals to you and your family. When you are ready to experiment with more elaborate spice combinations or add more to your repertoire, check out Appendix C, Great Seasoning Combos.

## **[B] Spice Rack Photo Library**

### **[C] Basil**

Green leaves and an aromatic smell when raw. When using fresh basil, rinse it with running cold water or with a damp cloth. It's best not to use a knife to cut it, as it turns the basil black and causes it to lose some of its vibrancy. If you don't want to use whole leaves, simply tear them gently into smaller pieces.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Fresh basil is best. Growing your own is economical and allows you to pick it as needed. It's best to pick vibrant green leaves and not use the bruised, black leaves. Dried basil, while not as flavorful as fresh, can still be bought and stored easily.

Uses: Flavoring for meat, fish, chicken dishes; in vinegar, soups; with oil and garlic; with tomatoes. Flavor remains stronger when not cooked. Once basil is cooked in a stew, soup or tomato sauce, the flavor diminishes. Add it at the end of cooking, just before serving. Basil's aromatic properties lighten up dark beans and heavy sauces. It is a main ingredient in pesto sauce, which can be made in the summer and frozen for the winter.

Benefits: Warming and calming. Anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties.

### **[C] Bay "Laurel" Leaf**

The bay leaf is the leaf of the laurel tree. It is firm, long and narrow, and has a smoky flavor. Whole bay leaves in a tightly closed glass jar in a cool cupboard keep indefinitely. Wipe each bay leaf lightly with a damp cloth before using. If you have a garden or window garden, you can plant California bay, a sturdy perennial that grows quickly into a long supply of leaves for the kitchen. This bay leaf is sweet, lemony and spicy with a slight clove flavor.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Imported Mediterranean bay leaves are particularly aromatic.

Uses: In soups, pasta sauces, stews and marinades. Requires long, slow cooking for the full flavor to develop.

Benefits: Warming and soothing. Anti-oxidant properties.

### **[C] Cardamom**

Small green and large black pods from India. They release a highly aromatic aroma with a scent of eucalyptus and camphor. When crushed, black cardamom pods have a powerful woody and a smoky aroma; they are milder than the green pods. Mortar and pestle works well to ground the seeds as needed. Ground cardamom has a milder flavor than whole cardamom.

Taste: Pungent and sweet

Purchasing: You can buy the whole pod, which needs to be steamed or blanched for a while in order to soften, or just the seeds, whole or ground.

Uses: To make chai (Indian tea), in sweet baked desserts, with sweet grains (like rice or oatmeal), in poultry dishes

Benefits: Considered a great digestive spice. Relieves gas and calms the nervous system down. Chewing green pods freshens the breath. Balances out the negative effects of caffeine—why it's used in chai.

### **[C] Cayenne Pepper**

Member of the Capsicum family of chili peppers. Use to add a kick of spicy flavor to your food.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Powdered form, in a tightly sealed glass jar

Uses: In meats and vegetable dishes, salad dressings, soups, chilies, marinades and even with hot lemonade as a warming winter treat

Benefits: Heats your body, stimulates digestion and provides quick energy. Antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and congestion-relieving properties; stimulating to metabolism.

Cautions: Too much cayenne pepper could be painful to young mouths or irritate the digestive tract

### **[C] Cilantro**

Greens of the coriander plant. Delightful, fragrant aroma.

Taste: Sweet and sour (citrus-like)

Purchasing: Buy fresh. Dried or frozen cilantro is not particularly flavorful, highly perishable and prone to wilting. Trim, wash and spread to dry on a kitchen or paper towel. Wrap lightly in a paper towel and put in a zip-closure plastic bag.

Uses: In salads, salad dressings, soups, chilies, curries, hummus, salsa, with beans

Benefits: Fresh and uplifting. Very strong antibacterial properties—especially against salmonella.

**[C] Cinnamon**

Adds a pleasant fragrance to food. See also Noteworthy Nourisher, page X.

Taste: Sweet, pungent and astringent

Purchasing: Ground form or stick (rolled bark) form. Store cinnamon sticks in a tightly closed container; will keep for a year.

Uses: In desserts of all kinds, in hot drinks like tea, cider or cocoa, in Mexican savory dishes, or with root vegetables, like sweet potatoes

Benefits: Aids overall digestion and other stomach ailments such as nausea and gas. Produces warmth in the body. Powerful anti-microbial properties. May help those with diabetes to balance blood sugar. Using cinnamon on foods that are high in carbohydrates will reduce blood sugar increases.

**[C] Cumin**

Thin, small, brown seeds. Heat cumin seeds in a dry skillet before using whole, or grind into a powder for a stronger flavor.

Taste: Sweet, pungent and astringent

Purchasing: Dried or ground seeds in a tightly closed glass jar

Uses: In soups, stews, chilies, curries, yogurt sauces; add to ground beef, chicken or turkey

Benefits: Reduces gas, aids digestion, helps relieve colic, promotes energy circulation and increases metabolic rate. Has a cooling effect on the body. High in iron.

Cautions: Excessive amount may inflame the stomach

**[C] Dill**

Thin green feathery leaves

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Fresh dill, packed loosely in a perforated plastic bag, dried dill sold as dill weed in a sealed glass jar, or dill seeds, which have a similar flavor to fresh dill.

Store in a cool pantry.

Uses: In salads, with cucumbers, beets or potatoes, in carrot soup, chicken soup, yogurt dressings; with salmon, lamb, chicken, eggs; in breads or muffins

Benefits: Warming and calming effect on the body. High in iron and calcium.

### **[C] Fennel**

The bulb, stalks and seeds can all be used. Fresh fennel can be prepared as a vegetable or used in smaller quantities as a seasoning.

Taste: Sweet and pungent

Purchasing: Fresh stalks or bulbs; or seeds, whole or ground, sealed tightly in a glass jar.

Uses: In fish soups or with fish on the grill. A few fennel seeds or thin slices of the bulb under an oily fish help eliminate its fishy taste. Slice a bulb into thin strips, plunge into ice water until crisp, then serve with lemon juice and salt—a refreshing snack for kids.

Benefits: Cooling effect on the body, helps aid digestion and reduces gas symptoms

### **[C] Garlic**

A bulb with a papery covering. Separate into individual cloves and peel. To achieve maximum health benefits, cloves must be crushed or chopped, not used whole.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Raw garlic bulbs, crushed garlic in refrigerated glass bottles, peeled garlic cloves in plastic containers, garlic powder in tightly sealed glass bottles

Uses: Sautéed with oil as a flavor base for greens, soups or stews, in sauces, spreads or dips (raw or cooked), on toast, roasted in the oven with olive oil

Benefits: Aids in eliminating toxins from the body, aids digestion, promotes cardiovascular health, helps the body fight off winter ailments. High in phytonutrients and anti-oxidant properties. Very high in vitamin C. Helpful with supporting a healthy immune system.

### **[C] Ginger**

Beige, shiny, bumpy root (rhizome). Root must be peeled and finely chopped before it is added to dishes. Also available as ground ginger, crystallized ginger, pickled ginger and preserved ginger (all should be refrigerated).

Taste: Sweet, pungent

Purchasing: Large, plump shiny root. Avoid roots with any shriveling dryness or mold on the edge. As powder tightly sealed in glass jars.

Uses: Tea, stir fry, soups, stews, salad dressings, marinades, desserts

Benefits: Stimulant to digestive and circulatory systems. Beneficial for nausea, fever, muscle aches and pains and respiratory disorders. Helps relieve gas, colic, indigestion, vomiting, morning sickness and travel sickness. Ground ginger has a heating effect on the body. Anti-inflammatory properties.

### **[C] Mint**

Popular worldwide, with about 40 different varieties. Fresh leaves have a strong aroma. Great to grow in a window garden or herb garden.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Fresh peppermint or spearmint

Uses: In salads, salad dressings, marinades, tabouli, desserts, teas, smoothies and other drinks (cold or hot); with fresh fruit

Benefits: Appetite stimulant, calms the nervous system, helps indigestion and stomach issues, natural antiseptic, freshens breath

### **[C] Nutmeg**

Wrinkled, brown, oval-shaped nut inside the brittle, shiny shell of a nutmeg seed. Warm, citrus-like fragrance balances the bittersweet flavor.

Taste: Pungent and astringent

Purchasing: Whole nutmeg (to grate yourself) or ground nutmeg sealed tightly in a glass jar

Uses: In baked goods, puddings, shakes, smoothies, tea, hot milk, egg nog, on root vegetables

Benefits: Heating effect on the body; calms the nervous system, relieves gas

### **[C] Oregano**

Small green, somewhat heart-shaped leaves. A close relative of marjoram. It changes color and aroma as it gets stale; has a short shelf life.

Taste: Slightly pungent

Purchasing: Preferably dried oregano; it is more pungent than fresh. Store in a tightly closed glass bottle in a cupboard.

Uses: On pizza, in soups, in Italian sauces, with eggplant, beans or salads and in sauce for fish steak such as tuna

Benefits: Softly warming. High in phytonutrients and antioxidant properties. Outstanding antimicrobial properties—oregano essential oil is quite popular during cold and flu season, and as protection against food-borne illnesses.

### **[C] Paprika**

Sweet paprika (India and Hungary) is a beautiful red powder made from mild, non-pungent red chilies. Primarily used for its color. Sweet chili aroma and bitter aftertaste, mellows after it's sizzled in oil. Hungarian hot and smoked paprika are pungent varieties.

Taste: Sweet, pungent

Purchasing: Ground Indian, Hungarian and smoked paprika sealed tightly in glass containers or metal tins

Uses: To top white fish of all varieties, with salt and pepper as part of a flour-based coating for chicken or stew meat, in egg, ham or chicken salad; use smoked paprika as an alternative to liquid smoke in pea soup and casseroles

Benefits: Member of the capsicum family. Soothing.

### **[C] Parsley**

Flat-leafed or curly green leaves. Flat leaf parsley has a more complex, pungent flavor than curly parsley. Parsley brings out other flavors in a dish. Chewing the leaves will destroy the smell of onion or garlic on your breath.

Taste: Bitter and pungent

Purchasing: Fresh, vibrant, green, flat parsley. Dried parsley flakes are dull and flavorless.

Uses: In soups and salads, and for garnish. Parsley stems are used in white stocks and sauces because they do not color the sauce but do add a rich flavor. Great juiced in small amounts with vegetables such as carrots and celery.

Benefits: Improves digestion and prevents bad breath. Diuretic; could help with bloating and PMS. High in Vitamin C, A, antioxidants and flavanoids—which work like antioxidants. Slight warming effect on the body.

### **[C] Rosemary**

Grey-green leaves that look like pine needles on a thin stem. It grows easily in a garden or window garden. Indoors, it likes a sun-warmed spot. It produces pretty violet, pink or white flowers twice a year. Snip off the tips of the younger, more fragrant branches to use in cooking.

Taste: Pungent

Purchasing: Fresh rosemary. Dried whole rosemary leaves are acceptable if there is no access to fresh.

Uses: In sauces and roasts: beef, lamb, chicken, potatoes; tossed with sweet root vegetables; in stuffings. Rosemary should be chopped finely so more of the flavor is released.

Benefits: Warming and clarifying. Anti-inflammatory properties—especially helpful for asthma sufferers.

**[C] Turmeric**

Bright yellow-orange powder. The form we use in the west is the boiled, peeled, sundried rhizome of a tropical plant in the ginger family. It has a warm, peppery aroma, similar to ginger, and a strong, bitter taste that mellows with cooking.

Taste: Bitter

Purchasing: Ground turmeric sealed tightly in a glass bottle

Uses: In poultry, meat, tofu dishes and rice dishes; as an alternative to curry; or used for its color

Benefits: Anti-inflammatory, aids in stabilizing blood sugar, natural antiseptic and blood purifier