

August 15, 2010

Know Your Salt

Table Salt: Of the various kinds of salt available, the most common is table salt, which usually contains added iodine along with additives that prevent it from caking and keep it pouring easily. Table salt is granular and is made by evaporation in vacuum pans.

Sea Salt: By contrast, sea salt has no additives but has more minerals than table salt. Naturally evaporated, sea salt is available in coarse or fine grains that are shaped like hollow, flaky pyramids. As a result, it adheres better to foods and dissolves more quickly than table salt. It also has more flavor than table salt, and sometimes a smaller amount is sufficient to season the same amount of food. Sea salt is also preferred for bread making, as its mineral content helps in the development of gluten. Most sea salt comes from France, England or the United States. Salts from different areas carry a subtle difference in flavor. One of the most prized sea salts is the grayish-ivory fleur de sel from Brittany, France.

Kosher Salt: Because its large flakes are easy to handle, kosher salt is another favorite of cooks. This coarse-grained salt, made by compressing granular salt, has no additives. It is used in the preparation of kosher meats, as its large surface and jagged shape help to draw more blood from meat, one of the aims of koshering. Since it is not as salty as table salt, kosher salt can be used more liberally, and it has a superior flavor.

Rock Salt: Mined from salt deposits rather than being processed by evaporation, rock salt has less taste than other salts. It is primarily used in making ice cream in hand-cranked ice cream makers and as a bed for roasting oysters on the half shell and other foods (the bed of salt keeps the foods level).

Pickling Salt: This finely ground salt has no additives. It is used in pickling and canning because it dissolves quickly and won't cloud liquids.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

Ingredients for Basic Spice Rub

2 tsp. cumin seeds

1 tsp. fennel seeds

2 Tbs. Spanish smoked paprika or sweet Hungarian paprika

2 tsp. dried thyme

2 tsp. dried sage

2 tsp. dried oregano

2 tsp. salt

2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

1½ tsp. garlic powder

1½ tsp. onion powder

1 tsp. cayenne pepper

Ingredients for Salt & Pepper Shrimp

2 Tbs. Tellicherry peppercorns

Kosher salt, to taste

3 to 4 Tbs. olive oil

1½ lb. large shrimp, peeled and deveined, tail intact

Ingredients for Spicy Baked Eggs with Spinach

Unsalted butter as needed

4 oz. coarsely chopped baby spinach leaves

4 extra-large eggs

2 Tbs. heavy cream

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

½ tsp. smoked serrano chili powder, or to taste

Basic Spice Rub

Rub this all-purpose spice blend onto chicken, pork or salmon before grilling.

Heat a small, dry fry pan over medium heat. Add the cumin and fennel seeds and toast, stirring or shaking the pan constantly, until the seeds are very fragrant and are toasted a slightly deeper shade of brown, about 1 minute. Remove from the heat.

Immediately transfer the toasted seeds to a mortar or an electric spice grinder and let cool completely, about 10 minutes. If using a mortar, crush the seeds with a pestle until coarsely ground in small pieces measuring about ¼ inch. If using a spice grinder, pulse on and off continually until the seeds are coarsely ground, about ¼-inch pieces.

Transfer the ground cumin and fennel to a small airtight container. Add the paprika, thyme, sage, oregano, salt, black pepper, garlic powder, onion powder and cayenne. Using the handle of a wooden spoon, stir and mix well to combine the spices and herbs. Cover the container tightly with the lid. Store in a cool, dark place for up to 3 months. Makes about ½ cup, enough for about 6 lb. meat or poultry.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Mastering Series, *Grilling & Barbecuing*, by Rick Rodgers (Simon & Schuster, 2006).

Salt & Pepper Shrimp

This simple recipe demonstrates the potential of salt and pepper to bring amazing flavor to food.

In a mortar using a pestle, crush the peppercorns until coarsely ground. Transfer to a small bowl, add salt and stir to combine. Set aside.

In a large sauté pan over high heat, warm the olive oil. Add the shrimp and season with some of the salt and pepper mixture. Cook, stirring frequently, until the shrimp turn pink and are opaque throughout, about 2 minutes. Season the shrimp with more of the salt and pepper mixture and serve immediately. Serves 6.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen

Spicy Baked Eggs with Spinach

These baked eggs get their bold, spicy heat from smoked serrano chili powder, which is made from serrano chili peppers that have been dried, smoked and then ground.

Preheat an oven to 375°F.

Generously butter the insides of four 6-oz. ramekins. Divide the spinach among the ramekins and crack an egg over the top. Drizzle ½ Tbs. cream over each egg and season lightly with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the eggs with the smoked serrano chili powder, dividing evenly. Bake until the egg whites are firm and the yolks are cooked to your liking, 10 to 14 minutes. Serve immediately. Serves 4.

Adapted from a recipe by Williams-Sonoma.

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Technique Class: The Art of Seasoning

Spices and other seasonings can transform everyday cooking into extraordinary cuisine, as the addition of a spice blend or a sprinkle of sea salt boosts and brightens foods and enhances the flavor. To learn the art of seasoning, it's important to understand all about salt and spices, including how to use them, store them and enjoy them!

Salt—The Master of Seasoning

Since the dawn of civilization, salt has been a valuable commodity whose availability helped to found some cultures, while other cultures often created extensive trade routes to reach it. Salt is the most basic of seasonings. It is the one essential flavoring ingredient in almost all savory dishes, and a tiny amount helps to bring out the flavors in many sweet dishes. Salt substitutes such as ground seaweed and lemon juice will also heighten flavor, but they add a flavor of their own that can distract from food in a way that the proper amount of salt does not.

Aside from flavoring foods, salt performs a range of chemical actions that are important in cooking and preserving. It draws moisture away from bacteria and mold cells in food, for example, slowing their growth. In early history, when adequate food storage was crucial, salt was valued for its ability to preserve food as much as for its flavor. Many foods, such as bacon, ham, cured sausage and pickles, originated because food had to be salted to keep it from spoiling.

All About Spices

The average person's love for spices comes second only to his or her love for salt and sugar. These highly scented seeds, barks, roots and fruits have been commodities since prehistory. They have been used since ancient times in sacred rituals, to anoint royalty, to mask the taste of spoiling foods, and to add aroma and flavor to prepared dishes.

For centuries, spices had to be brought overland by camel from Asia and India, and the spice trade was monopolized by the Arabs. By medieval times, spices were almost as valuable as gold, and Venice controlled their commerce, becoming a great power in the process. Christopher Columbus was only one of many European explorers who hoped to break the Venetian hold on the spice trade by finding a sea route westward to the spice lands. North America just happened to be in the way.

Spices are still valuable today, for only a small amount is needed to add a haunting or heady fragrance and taste to food. The cuisines of India and Indonesia, the two

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All About Spices

Herb or Spice? Although the two are used for similar purposes, herbs and spices actually refer to distinct categories of seasonings. Herbs are the fragrant leaves and tender stems of green plants, having an almost floral bouquet and more delicate flavors.

Spices, on the other hand, generally come from woody plants, many of them native to the world’s tropical regions. Most familiar in their dried forms, spices can be taken from the rhizomes, stems, buds, seeds or bark of the plants, where concentrated amounts of their complex aromatic components result in significantly stronger flavors. Cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and clove all display the intense aromatic qualities of spices.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

countries where most spices are still grown, use a wide range of them. Spain, Mexico, Ethiopia and North Africa also depend on blends of spices to perfume their foods, reflecting their ancient connections with Arabic cuisine. Northern European countries continue to demonstrate their love of spices in a wide range of foods both sweet and savory, including gingerbread, sauerbraten, honey cake, mulled wine and cardamom-scented butter cookies.

Selecting: Ideally, spices should be bought whole and ground just before use. But in the interest of convenience, cooks stock many spices in two forms, whole and ground. Buy your spices, especially ground ones, in the smallest amounts you can, as they lose flavor over time.

Storing: Keep spices in tightly closed containers in a cool, dark place, such as a pantry, rather than beside the stove or elsewhere in a bright kitchen. Some cooks keep their spices in alphabetical order for ease of selection. If you buy your spices in bulk, purchase some empty glass spice jars for storing them. Whole spices kept this way will last for about 1 year; replace ground spices after 6 months.

Preparing: For grinding small quantities of spices, use a mortar and pestle, a spice grinder or a pepper mill reserved for spices. Or buy a small electric coffee grinder and use it only for grinding spices. Grind just the amount you need. To add whole spices to stews and mulled wine, tie them in cheesecloth or place them in a tea ball for easy removal. If using an orange or onion and whole cloves, stud the orange or onion with the cloves. Bruise or crack whole peppercorns before using.

Toasting: To intensify their flavor, toast spices in a dry fry pan. It is best to toast whole spices before grinding, but ground spices may be toasted if you keep a close eye on them. Some recipes call for frying spices in oil. Take care not to burn them.

Put the spices in a small, heavy fry pan (cast iron is ideal) over medium heat. Toast, stirring constantly, until fragrant. Immediately empty the spices into a bowl and stir them to stop the cooking.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

The Spice Pantry

Here’s a sampling of the spices in the new Williams-Sonoma spice collection, including the flavor profile and simple ways to use the spice in your own kitchen.

Annatto Seed

Subtle, earthy flavor with a hint of peppery sweetness; delicate nutmeg-like aroma. After grinding, add to rice or risotto to lend mild flavor and a rich, reddish-gold hue.

Green Cardamom Pods

Intense aroma and warm, spicy sweetness with hints of ginger, nutmeg and pepper. Use whole pods for chai; sprinkle the ground spice on oatmeal and hot chocolate.

Ancho Chili Powder

Hearty, mildly hot flavor with a complex fruity sweetness. Ideal for moles, burritos, fajitas and chili; or sprinkle on roasted sweet potatoes.

California Chili Powder

Rich, peppery flavor with a hint of tanginess and mild, spicy heat. Great for Mexican and Southwestern dishes; or sprinkle over popcorn and scrambled eggs.

Chinese Five Spice

An aromatic spice blend showcasing sweet, tangy, bitter and savory flavors. Adds distinctive flavor to everything from roast meats and poultry to soups and stir-fries.

African Curry

A complex blend of vibrant, spicy flavors with tangy hints of citrus; mild heat. Perfect for chicken, shellfish and vegetable curries; also seasons vegetable dips and steamed rice.

Madras Curry

Southern Indian–style spice blend with rich complexity, toasty sweetness and mild heat. Enhances any curry dish, from beef, pork and lamb to chicken, shellfish and vegetable varieties.

Ground Fenugreek

Distinctive flavor often described as a combination of pleasant bitterness and delicate sweetness. Traditionally used for Indian curries and pickles; also enhances creamy salad dressings.

Garam Masala

A harmonious blend of peppery, spicy-sweet Indian flavors; mild heat. Adds spicy warmth to curries, sauces, roasted vegetables, grilled meats and kabobs.

Gumbo Filé

Woody, herbal sassafras and thyme flavors, with delicate tangy and peppery notes. A traditional thickener for Cajun and Creole gumbos; also enhances seafood dishes and marinades.

Granulated Honey

Delicate natural sweetness with subtle notes of wildflowers and herbs. Sweetens everything from baked goods and cereals to your favorite beverages.

Juniper Berries

Aromatic berries with a spicy evergreen flavor balanced by floral and woody notes. A classic spice for salmon, beef, pork, lamb and venison; use in marinades and brines.

Black Mustard Seed

Pungent, spicy flavor with deep floral aroma and a vibrant peppery finish. Use whole seeds for pickled vegetables, curries and stir-fries; ground seeds are great in salads.

Mexican Oregano

Intense herbal aroma and bold flavor, with hints of anise and sage. Perfect for seasoning spicy burrito and taco fillings, bean dishes, vegetables and salsas.

Hungarian Paprika

Sweet, gently spicy flavor with rich, peppery highlights and a hint of tanginess. The signature spice for goulash; also complements meats, vegetables, potatoes, rice and pasta.

Ground Szechuan Pepper

Mildly hot flavor with subtle notes of citrus and woody spice. Adds distinctive flavor to a variety of Asian dishes, from stir-fries to soups and braises.

Ras el Hanout

Traditional Moroccan spice blend with a rich, spicy aroma and robust, complex flavors. Seasons chicken and fish before panfrying, grilling or baking; enhances tagines and couscous dishes.

Tagine Spice

Traditional Moroccan blend with a complex balance of sweet, spicy, savory and herbal flavors. Authentic addition to any tagine; enhances grilled meats, soups, stews, sauces and braises.

Turmeric

Prized for its rich golden hue and pungent flavor with delicate herbal notes. For Indian and Southeast Asian recipes, including curries, soups, rice, vegetables and lentils.

Zahtar

Lively herbal, earthy flavors with delicate sweet and salty notes. Enlivens grilled or roasted meats and vegetables; sprinkle on pizza and flatbread before baking.

Lemon Herb Seasoning

Traditional blend of tangy citrus, fragrant herbs and savory spices. Use as a substitute for salt on vegetables, meats, poultry and seafood.

Pizza Seasoning

Aromatic Mediterranean seasoning blend with rich herbal notes and a hint of peppery spice. Sprinkle on pizza, focaccia and flatbread before baking, or to enhance any Mediterranean dish.

Extra-Fine French Grey Sea Salt

Moist, delicate crystals with rich ocean flavor, highlighted by subtle mineral and floral notes. An all-purpose finishing salt for vegetables, meats, poultry, seafood, breads and desserts.

Hickory-Smoked Sea Salt

Delicate flakes of premium Pacific sea salt, naturally smoked over fragrant hickory wood fires. Adds rich, smoky flavor to meats, poultry and salmon; delicious sprinkled on popcorn and French fries.

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