



ANN BLOOM
NUTRITION: IT'S ALL GOOD

Add fresh flavor to favorite foods

Fresh (or dried) herbs, and spices, are an often overlooked way to add flavor to your dishes without adding salt (if you are watching your sodium intake) or extra calories (if you're watching those, too).

During the early days of the pandemic, when people were working at home more, cooking became a creative outlet for many. People experimented with recipes using combinations of herbs and spices to liven up tried and true recipes, and to try new and different ones.

Herbs are relatively easy to grow. In Northeastern Oregon, most herbs, such as basil, chives and oregano, can be grown from seed. Though basil, a Mediterranean herb requiring warm weather, will not winter over, other herbs such as chives, oregano, thyme, parsley, and dill will either self-seed and return each year, or simply die back and return in the spring. Many types of mint, such as peppermint, also grow well in our area. However, mint, if not contained, can become invasive and take over wherever it's planted, which is OK if you like mint. Rosemary and tarragon seem to do well as starts from a nursery.

A few herbs lend themselves well to kitchen windowsill gardens or grown from seed on a kitchen countertop. Basil, marjoram, oregano, savory and chives can be successfully started from seed and grown in pots even when it is cold and snowy outside, providing a fresh source for pizza toppings or inclusion in a savory winter stew.

When cooking with herbs, dried herbs are used at a ratio of one teaspoon dried to approximately three teaspoons (approximately one tablespoon) of fresh herbs. If using fresh herbs, depending on the herb, and the flavor you are looking for (subtle versus robust), determines when you add the herb. With delicate herbs such as basil, herbs should be added a minute or two before serving. This will allow the flavor of the herb to come through without diminishing it due to the heat of prolonged cooking.

Stronger herbs, such as rosemary, can be added 20 minutes or so, prior to the end of the cooking time. Dried herbs are usually added at the beginning of the recipe. The recipe will also indicate when to add the herbs. An herb sachet called a bouquet garni allows control of the time the herbs are in the dish, since you can remove the sachet whenever you want, and it contains all the herbs in one place, which saves time looking for all those separate herbs to pull them out.

Herbs and spices can be used in savory dishes (i.e., soups, stews, egg dishes) or sweet dishes (i.e., mint in cookies or cakes, and lavender in cookies).

Dried herbs can be purchased in bulk. Buying a small amount when you want to try something new is a practical and economical approach. Bulk herbs tend to be stronger in flavor than those in small bottles in the spice section of the grocery store due to the higher turnover in volume. When buying fresh herbs, look for bright green leaves and stems. Avoid wilted, yellow or brown leaves, which indicates the herbs are old and past their prime.

Store dried herbs in a cool, dark location away from direct heat or light, which will diminish the flavor. Dried herbs will retain their flavor for one to three years. Smell dried herbs which have been stored for a length of time to help determine the potency of flavor. Wash fresh herbs just before using. Remove leaves from woody stems, such as rosemary and thyme, discarding the stems. Chop the leaves before adding the herbs to the dish.

Spices range from the common (cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and cloves) to the less common (cardamom, saffron and coriander) to name a few. Spices also include pepper (red, black, white and pink), curry, cumin, paprika and turmeric. Saffron comes from the red stamens of an autumn flowering purple crocus. It is native to Eurasia and because it requires an enormous amount of the red saffron threads to produce a small amount of the spice, and it is harvested by hand. Saffron is considered the most expensive spice in the world, according to Wikipedia.

Herbs and spices have been used for medicinal and healing purposes for millennia. For example, the spice ginger has been used successfully to relieve the nausea that accompanies motion and morning sickness. Sage, an herb common to the Mediterranean and known since the Middle Ages, contains Vitamin K, which is important for bone health. Oregano, often called the "pizza" herb, contains Vitamins A, C and E and minerals zinc, magnesium, iron, calcium, copper, potassium, manganese, and niacin. Some people also find lavender is helpful as a sleep aid and for relaxation.

Each herb and spice combination seems to claim a piece of the world's culinary turf. For example, Asian cooking often uses combinations of basil, lemongrass and cinnamon. Indian dishes rely on curry, paprika, cardamom and cumin. Italian cooking uses herbs such as oregano, basil and rosemary. In Mexican cooking you'll find cooks using cumin, chili peppers, Mexican oregano and cilantro. And in Greece, cooks rely on allspice, cloves, mint, dill and oregano to flavor their food.

Did you know you can make your own recipes of some common seasoning blends? For example, if you are out of pumpkin pie spice blend you can combine two tablespoons of cinnamon, one tablespoon of ginger, 1 1/2 teaspoons of nutmeg and 1 1/2 teaspoons of cloves. Mix all the ingredients together and store in an airtight container. Use the amount called for in a pumpkin pie recipe. This recipe makes four tablespoons of spice blend. This recipe and others can be found on the food hero website.

For more recipes and information on using herbs and spices go to www.foodhero.org.

Learning from a prosciutto maestro

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

PITTSBURGH — Mike Masciantonio has taught the art of making prosciutto at the American Italian Club in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, for more than a decade. Which is kind of funny, because he never liked prosciutto much as a kid, preferring the dried Italian sausages his maternal grandfather, Angelo Bufalini, learned to make in Italy's Lazio region before immigrating to the U.S. in 1920.

"My mother used to buy it," Masciantonio, 60, of Center, recalled of the dry-cured ham that is sold in papery, delicate slivers, and today has something of a cult following. "But it was the cheap stuff that wasn't good. Too much salt, and I'm not a salt fan."

It wasn't until he tried a bite of friend Tony Cafarelli's homemade sopressata that he realized the error of his ways.

Here's how he recalls his conversion from naysayer to prosciutto devotee and maestro:

Masciantonio's older brother, Joe, owns a concrete block plant in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. One day about 20 years ago, Cafarelli, a block layer, happened to be there at lunchtime and asked if it was OK if he ate his packed lunch on site. "And he breaks out this stick of sopressata," Masciantonio remembered. "While he was eating it, he made my brother try it." He tried it too.

The Italian dry-cured pork salami was so good Masciantonio begged Cafarelli to teach him how to make it. He happily agreed, and at a sausage-making session a while later, brought out a tray of the other "good stuff" he'd made that year. It included some prosciutto he'd perfected over the years by watching (and assisting) members of his own extended Italian family.

Masciantonio initially refused to try it, remembering the prosciutto of his childhood. That made his friend mad. When he reluctantly agreed to sample a piece after some browbeating, boy, was he surprised!

"It tasted like candy compared to what I was used to," he said. He decided then and there he had to learn to make it himself.

Soon he, too, was handing out homemade prosciutto at house parties and gatherings at the club. Everyone enjoyed it so much that club president Danny David, a childhood friend who graduated a year behind Masciantonio at Aliquippa High School, suggested he teach a class on the process.

"We were just looking for things to do, and to celebrate and keep alive Italian traditions and culture," said David. "We decided this is something worthwhile to teach people so it stays alive."

Fifteen people signed up that first year, and it's grown every year since, with some classes drawing as many as 40 wanna-be charcutiers. Most, Masciantonio said, have successfully produced delicate cured meat full of wonderful flavor. He hopes to make even more magic happen when class No. 12 (2020 was a no-go due to COVID-19) kicks off in the club's party room Jan. 15, with additional classes in March and November.

"We want to make sure the tradition is maintained," he said.

Knife skills required

As a food writer who loves all things Italian, I've



Alexandra Wimley/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

Joseph Almonte, Sr., of Raccoon Township, Pennsylvania, helps his son Joseph Almonte, Jr., of Center Township, during a prosciutto-making class at the American Italian Club in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. The class has been happening annually since 2009 to celebrate Italian traditions and teach students to cure a ham.

pondered the class for years. I finally took the plunge last January with 15 others. The experience let loose an alphabet soup of emotions — anxiety, disgust, fear, uncertainty and, finally, surprise and elation at a job well done.

Italian for ham, prosciutto has been around since at least pre-Roman times, at first out of necessity (salt-curing and air-drying pork was a way of preserving meat) and, later, for its exceptional taste. If you don't count air and time, it requires only two ingredients: the hind leg of a pig and salt.

Italy's most famous prosciutto is made from specially selected, heritage-breed pigs in Parma in the Emilia-Romagna region and San Daniele in Friuli Venezia Giulia. It's aged for at least 400 days and up to three years to create a delicate, sweet flavor that melts on the tongue. As a result, it's expensive: Prosciutto Di Parma runs \$24.95 per pound at Pennsylvania Macaroni. But the good news is even a little bit can go quite a long way.

The American Italian Club's process is a little quicker, with a start-to-finish of nine months (though experienced students often allow their hams to age longer.)

The \$100 class fee includes the spices necessary for curing and a 20- to 25-pound fresh ham from Giant Eagle (thankfully, without the trotter!). Participants must bring a very sharp fillet knife and a large plastic container to transport their ham.

"And you also might want to bring some Band-Aids," David told me with a chuckle when I signed up, for accidental finger nicks or cuts during the deboning process. "You do have to be careful, and we emphasize that."

He also stressed that students need a cool (45 degrees) and dry place to cure the ham for a six-week period after the initial session. It needs to be away from fumes or odors such as car exhaust. After six weeks, the ham can hang in any area that has a temperature of 60-70 degrees.

While making prosciutto is easier than you might think, even for a novice, you do have to be fairly comfortable with a knife. Patience is also essential, as the meat must be carved slowly and deliberately.

My first mistake was bringing the wrong knife (a boning knife ordered on Amazon) to the initial class on Jan. 23, 2021. That made it a challenge to trim the ham to remove the hip bone, expose some meat and create a ridge to contain the cure.



Alexandra Wimley/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

Instructor Mike Masciantonio, of the American Italian Club in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, demonstrates to attendees how to remove the bone from a pig leg during a prosciutto-making class, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021, at the club.

Luckily, I was at a table with some practiced hands, including those of Fernando Fiumara of Raccoon Township, who's been making prosciutto for about 20 years. He not only lent me his boning knife but did much of the carving with/for me. He stuck his finger into the ball-and-socket joint that connects the aitchbone to the leg bone, wiggled it around and carefully cut through the tendon to separate it from the meat. "You want to make as few cuts as possible," he kept reminding me. Every time you make a cut, that's somewhere salt has to make its way into.

Then we prepped our hams for the curing process by trimming back the skin to expose some of the meat, after which we were sent on our merry ways with a curing mix of sugar and salt and instructions on how to apply it (three times) over the next few weeks. (The salt draws out the moisture.)

I then pressed it for 21 days between two plastic cutting boards, weighed down with a cinder block, to mold the ham into the familiar oblong shape you see at a deli.

Though I fretted over whether my ham was getting flat enough, at least I had the perfect place for the curing and pressing process: an unheated office in what was once our garage.

Mold = gold

Our second class on March 13 was short and sweet: Preparing our flattened hams for hanging.

After spraying the pressed ham with red wine to clean off any mold and make it sticky, we covered the exposed meat — as well

as every nook and cranny — with a pungent mix of black and red pepper flakes. It's not so much for flavor as a bug deterrent. Should a fly lay eggs on your ham, well, you're going to get maggots. As Masciantonio put it, "Nature is a son of a gun!"

"You want to make sure to get all the entry points," he instructed, especially around the ball joint and the creases.

As we patted the spicy blend on with gloved hands, he recalled how one unlucky student's prosciutto fell prey to a mouse that ate it from the inside out. "So pack that up real good." Yikes, and no kidding.

Afterwards, we whittled a hole through the shank with a screwdriver for the hanging string, pulled one through and held our hams in the air to test if the string could handle the weight. As the meat air-dries, it will eventually become tender.

Then came a litany of instructions. The ham was to be hung in a room between 50 and 60 degrees with at least 60% humidity. A sticky fly trap would quell any worries about maggots. And the white fluffy mold that would soon start growing on it? Not to worry.

"Your ham isn't going to look very appetizing during the aging process," Masciantonio said, "but if you don't have the mold, you don't get the gold!"

As I headed out the door with my pressed, peppered ham and an extra container of pepper mix to replace any that might fall off during the aging process, I couldn't help but wonder: What had I gotten myself into?