

Food for Thought

Confronting the spice rack at a supermarket can be very confusing, especially if you're a novice cook. With hundreds of seasonings to choose from, which ones will you find most useful? Is it better to rely on spice blends, such as fines herbes or seasoned pepper, or should you buy each spice or herb separately? You may also ask if they are they worth the price?

Using spices and herbs with confidence is important. They are the key to more interesting menus; they can help the cook economize by enlivening simple, basic foods, and they are vital for enhancing diet dishes. But, when many of their names and uses remain a mystery, it is difficult to choose wisely.

Confidence comes with familiarity, so we hope to take the mystery out of cooking with spices and herbs. Here is some information about a few varieties and, since you'll get to know any spice or herb best by cooking with it, we have included a few tested recipes.

Allspice is the fruit of an evergreen tree, native to the Caribbean and Central America. It is available both whole and ground and is used in desserts (cakes, cookies and fruit pies), sweet vegetable dishes (squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, eggplant and tomatoes), ham and many sausages.

Basil or Sweet Basil is a fast-growing annual with shiny, green leaves. It requires sun but will grow to two feet quickly, even in our relatively cool northwest growing season. Bunches of fresh basil can be purchased during the summer; the dried leaves are available year around. Basil goes well with most vegetables, especially tomatoes, green beans, broccoli, eggplant, peas, zucchini and spinach. If you buy or grow fresh basil, handle it gently because the leaves bruise easily. The best way to preserve a supply of the fresh herb is to freeze it, either in pesto (blended with olive oil and Parmesan cheese) or simply blended with olive oil.

Bay leaves are a staple in hearty meat or fish dishes. Most commercial sweet bay or laurel leaves come from a small evergreen tree native to the Mediterranean region but, if you live in the right area, you can pick your own. Leaves of the California bay laurel and Oregon myrtle are longer and more pungent than the Mediterranean bay, but they can be picked fresh and dried, then stored in an airtight container. Because they can be overwhelming, when learning to use bay leaves, start with a single leaf. Use only dried leaves.

Caraway is a biennial herb with lacy foliage resembling carrot leaves. It is grown (mostly in the Netherlands) for its seeds, which ripen after the plant dies. Caraway has a slight licorice flavor and is used in cheeses, some rye bread, cabbage and cucumber salads, and hearty meat dishes.

Cardamom, a perennial belonging to the ginger family, is pungent but considerably more subtle than ginger. It is used extensively in India and has been a favorite in Scandinavia since early Vikings brought it home from Constantinople. Cardamom is used all kinds of pastries, coffee cakes and cookies, as well as in Swedish meat balls, pork and poultry.

CHEESE-CARAWAY APPETIZERS

Made in the same manner as refrigerator cookies, these tender cheese pastries are convenient to use.

- 1/2 cup butter
- 1/2 cup shredded sharp Cheddar cheese
- 1/2 cup crumbled blue-veined cheese, any kind
- 2 cups all-purpose flour, unsifted
- 1-1/2 tsp caraway seed
- 1 cove garlic, minced
- 2 tbs chopped chives, fresh or frozen

With an electric mixer, beat the butter Cheddar cheese and blue-veined cheese until smoothly blended. Stir in flour, caraway, garlic and chives.

Shape mixture into a log about 20 inches long and 1-1/2 inches in diameter. Wrap in waxed paper and chill until firm. (Wrap airtight to freeze.)

To bake, preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cut off 1/4-inch thick slices of dough and place slightly apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes or until lightly browned around edges.

Serve warm or cooled.
Yield about 7 dozen.

LENTIL AND HAM SOUP

This hearty soup creates some interesting sweet, spicy flavors.

- 3-1/2 to 4 lbs ham hocks, cut in 2" slices
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tsp Italian seasoning or oregano leaves
- 1 tsp whole, mixed pickling spices
- 1/4 tsp pepper

- 1 medium onion chopped
- 1-1/2 cups lentils
- 6 small peeled potatoes, chunked, or 2 cups carrot chunks
- 12-16 pitted whole prunes
- Chopped parsley

Put ham hocks into a large pot, cover with water, bring to boiling, then drain and discard liquid. Return ham to pot, add 12 cups water, bay leaf, Italian herbs, pickling spice, pepper and onion.

Simmer for about 2 hours or until ham begins to come away from bones. Pour through wire strainer and discard seasonings. When cool enough to handle, return meat and broth to the pot; discard skin and bones. Skim excess fat from broth, bring to boiling again, and add lentils. Cover and simmer about 25 minutes or until tender. Garnish with parsley.

Yield 6-8 servings.

DANISH SWEET AND SOUR CABBAGE

Red cabbage needs to have something tart added to it, such as apples or vinegar, to develop the familiar rich wine color we recognize in cooked red cabbage. If cooked in plain salted water, it may turn to an unappetizing shade of blue.

- 1 medium sized red cabbage (about 2 lbs.)
- 4 tbs butter
- 1/2 cup water
- 3 tbs each cider vinegar and red currant jelly
- 1/2 tsp caraway seed

Finely shred cabbage. In a 3 or 4-quart sauce pan melt butter over medium-high heat; stir in the cabbage, water, vinegar, jelly and caraway seed.

Bring to a boil, cover and simmer gently for 1-1/2 hours, stirring occasionally. Add a little more water if cabbage cooks dry. Salt to taste and serve hot.

Yields 6 servings.

PEACH CARDAMOM DELIGHT

Here is a simple way to make a rich and delicious topping for vanilla ice cream.

- 1 can (about 1 lb.) sliced cling peaches
- 1/2 tsp ground cardamom
- 1 tsp grated lemon peel
- vanilla ice cream

Drain the syrup from the peaches into a saucepan. Turn peaches into a bowl. Bring syrup to boiling; boil a few minutes to reduce and thicken slightly. Remove from heat; stir in the cardamom and lemon peel; pour over peaches. Chill.

Spoon over ice cream.
Yields 6 servings.

Church Directory

NEHALEM VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH Gary Taylor, Pastor Grant & North Streets, Vernonia 503 429-5378 Sunday School 10:00 a.m. Morning Worship 11:00 a.m. Nursery available Wednesday Service 7:00 p.m.	ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator 960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia 503 429-8841 Mass Schedule Sunday 12:00 Noon Religious Education Sunday 10:30 a.m.	CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS Marc Farmer, Branch President 1350 E. Knott Street, Vernonia 503 429-7151 Sacrament Meeting, Sunday 10 a.m. Sunday School & Primary 11:20 a.m. Relief Society, Priesthood and Young Women, Sunday 12:10 p.m.
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