



Spice is the Variety of Life

Written by Jill Grunewald and published in tastebud magazine, Mar. 2008

tastebud

With a rich and mystical history, it's no wonder that, for many of us, just saying the word "spice" conjures thoughts of exotic and faraway lands. The culinary use of spices originated on the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia and has been a prominent ingredient of human history since.

Spices imported from plantations in Asia and Africa, especially black pepper, ginger, cumin, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cloves, were among the most opulent products available in the Middle Ages. Absent the vast network of trade transportation that we have today, acquiring these goods from such relatively distant lands made them extremely costly. From the 8th until the 15th century, the Republic of Venice and the neighboring Italian city-states had a monopoly on the spice trade with the Middle East. This trade made the region phenomenally wealthy.

Nowadays, our love affair with spices continues and fortunately, we don't have to wait for the next spice vessel to reach the shore. With specialty shops dedicated solely to these culinary and healing marvels and rich and colorful jars crowding shelves at the supermarket, we now have the wonderful spices of the world at our fingertips.

The most popular spices include garlic, ginger, turmeric, oregano, and cinnamon. However others common in the carousel spice rack are: saffron, licorice, coriander, cumin, cardamom, nutmeg, vanilla, black pepper, cloves, star anise, sumac, paprika, dill, fenugreek, and mustard grains.

The basic classifications of spices and some examples of each are:

- roots or bulbs of specific plants (ginger and garlic)
- ripened fruits or seeds (dill, pepper, mustard, and fennel)

Spices are packed with disease-fighting compounds and although unproven and largely uninvestigated by modern Western medicine, the nutritional value of spices continues to intrigue and benefit those willing to explore their unique properties. According to Tieraona Low Dog, M.D., educational director of the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona, "Aromatic and flavorful herbs and spices are an important part of our sensual and cultural world and should be enjoyed as such. The fact that so many of these botanicals have powerful medicinal properties only makes them more valuable as foods, and their potential as healing agents should add to our enjoyment."

Scientists continue to toil away in their labs isolating the active and nourishing chemicals and compounds found in whole foods, as they do with spices' valuable and beneficial properties. However just as with food, these compounds should be enjoyed in their whole, natural state. "Modern science cannot replicate in a pill the vast array of phytochemicals found in plants," Dr. Low Dog said. "Use them whole. As a cook, herbalist, physician, and consumer I can tell you that there are a lot of reasons to season your food. Just as you want variety in the foods you eat, you should strive for variety in the spices and herbs you use to flavor your food as they offer a range of health promoting properties."

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



If stimulating and awakening your senses and turning your body on to the health-giving benefits of spices interest you, read on:

- **Ginger** has a pleasant warming effect and also aids with aches and pains, especially neuralgic and arthritic pain. Ginger helps break down high-protein foods. It's also soothing for nausea, motion sickness, morning sickness, menstrual cramps, and bronchitis.
- **Cayenne** and other peppers stimulate perspiration, which turns on the body's natural cooling system. This diaphoretic (sweating) property also makes it good for the common cold.
- **Chili peppers** help ease neuralgic and arthritic pain.
- **Turmeric** aids with minor aches and pains, protects the liver, lowers bad cholesterol, reduces inflammation, is as powerful antioxidant, aids in digestion, and appears to protect against gastrointestinal cancers.
- **Clove oil** is a natural oral anesthetic and in studies proved to work just as well as topical benzocaine. Cloves also promote energy circulation and increased metabolism and have anti-parasitic properties.
- **Anise** is warming, promotes kidney and liver function, and relieves intestinal gas.
- **Fennel** is a centuries-old remedy for colicky babies. It too is warming and promotes energy circulation and increased metabolism. It promotes kidney and liver function.
- **Garlic** may help protect against gastrointestinal cancers and is great for the common cold.
- **Black pepper** is an anti-bacterial and protects DNA, making it a possible weapon against cancer. It also promotes kidney function.
- **Nutmeg** lifts mood.
- **Cinnamon** reduces blood sugar, is a possible powerful weapon against diabetes, and eases an upset stomach.
- **Coriander** promotes kidney and liver function. Coriander and cumin together diminishes intestinal gas.
- **Cumin** is warming and promotes energy circulation and increased metabolism.
- **Fenugreek** reduces phlegm, is energizing and harmonizing, and promotes kidney function.

* * *