

Spice it up: Salt alternatives



Many of us are cooking more than usual at the moment. Herbs and spices can liven up your food and add variety, and are better for your heart health than salt.

Salt can seem like an easy way to add flavour, but over time it can lead to raised blood pressure and an increased risk of heart and circulatory diseases.

Using herbs and spices is a great way to make use of your store cupboard (and your garden, if you grow your own herbs). If you haven't been able to go shopping as much as usual, different herbs and spices can help to take similar ingredients in a whole new direction for different meals.

Soon you'll be mastering the flavours of the Mediterranean, North Africa, India and beyond.

Mint

Taste: A bright and refreshing herb that works in sweet and savoury dishes.

Preparation: Use fresh leaves if you can. Mint is easy to grow on the windowsill or in the garden (keep in a pot as it will spread).

Uses: Great in salads, on pasta or in couscous. It's tasty with carrots, peas or broad beans.



Rosemary

Taste: An aromatic herb with a pine-like fragrance. Use sparingly; it can overpower other flavours.

Preparation: Roast whole sprigs with root vegetables (carrot, parsnip, sweet potato). If using dried rosemary, crush it first.

Uses: Add to roast or grilled meats, bread, homemade pizza, tomato sauce, beans, potatoes or egg dishes. Consider growing some rosemary; it's a hardy plant and does well outside



Nutmeg

Taste: Sweet and pungent flavour. Works well in baked foods with cinnamon and cloves.

Preparation: Freshly grated nutmeg has a much better flavour than ground.

Uses: Add nutmeg with black pepper to homemade white and cheese sauces. It also adds warmth and flavour to homemade potato, cabbage and cauliflower soups.



Basil

Taste: Sweet and peppery.

Preparation: Fresh basil retains more flavour and aroma than dried. Basil plants usually grow well on windowsills. As you pick the leaves, more will grow.

Uses: Perfect for pesto, marinades, dressings, sauces, sandwiches, soups and salads. Basil is traditionally used in Mediterranean cooking, in tomato-based pasta sauces, pizzas and bolognese. Use lemon, Thai and holy basil in South Asian and Thai dishes



Cardamon

Taste: A warm, aromatic spice.

Preparation: Add whole cardamom pods to your dishes or use the seeds inside, either whole or ground.

Uses: Commonly added to Asian spice mixes and curry pastes. Cardamom also works well in baked goods and sweet breads, with cloves and cinnamon, for a taste of Scandinavia



Chilli/Cayenne

Taste: Chillis vary quite a lot in strength, so add a little at first and taste your dish. Cayenne is a specific type of chilli.

Preparation: Chilli can be bought whole (fresh or dried), as dried flakes, powder, or as hot sauce. Chilli sauce may be high in salt (or sugar in the case of sweet chilli sauce), so stick to powder, flakes or whole chillies.

Uses: It works well in most dishes, including vegetable or seafood stews or vegetable soup. Add a pinch of chilli with a little mustard to spice up a cheese sauce, helping you use less cheese. Combine with cumin, coriander seeds and turmeric to give foods an Indian twist.



Cinnamon

Taste: Mostly used in sweet treats like cake and apple crumble, but works with savoury dishes too.

Preparation: Sold as cinnamon sticks (grate or add whole to dishes like curries or stews) or ground.

Uses: Cinnamon is an important spice in Turkish and Middle Eastern cooking, where it is used to flavour chicken and lamb dishes. Use it to deepen the flavour of cottage pie, curries, tagines, casseroles, roast vegetables, bolognese sauce or stewed fruit.



Chives

Taste: Onion-like but less powerful.

Preparation: Snip the stems into food using a clean pair of scissors. Add to hot dishes at the last minute, as heat destroys its flavour.

Uses: Great in mashed potato, casseroles, salads, baked potatoes, low-fat cream cheese, fish and poultry. Chive flowers are edible and look good too.



Coriander

Taste: Coriander leaves have a distinct earthy and lemony flavour, while coriander seeds have a warm, spicy, citrus flavour when crushed.

Preparation: Use coriander leaves raw or add to foods at the end of cooking. Coriander seeds are commonly used in Indian dishes. Fry them in a dry pan and add them whole or crushed.

Uses: Add coriander leaves to salads, soups (eg carrot and coriander soup), salsas, curries and fish and chicken dishes, or combine it with lime and chilli in stir fries.



Dill

Taste: Dill has a strong taste, often compared to fennel, star anise and celery.

Preparation: Use fresh rather than dried if possible – use the leaves only and discard the stem.

Uses: Popular in Russian, Eastern European, Greek and Scandinavian cooking, dill is a welcome addition to cottage cheese, low-fat cream cheese, omelettes, seafood, steak, and potato **salad and cucumber dishes**. Try adding dill to broad beans and rice and serve with koftas (made from lean minced meat), as found in Iranian cooking.



Cumin

Taste: Earthy and smoky.

Preparation: Fresh cumin seeds, dry roasted and then ground, provide a richer flavour than cumin powder.

Uses: After black pepper, cumin is the most-used spice worldwide. It is flavoursome without too much spiciness. Cumin goes with practically any dish but particularly with lamb, game, beans and rice. Combine with oregano and chilli for a Mexican twist, or with cardamom, coriander and turmeric for a taste of India.



Oregano

Taste: Oregano has a warm, aromatic, slightly bitter taste and a potent aroma.

Preparation: Fresh oregano leaves can be chopped into foods or added whole.

Uses: Popular in Greek and Mediterranean cooking. Use it to marinate meats, poultry and seafood before grilling, in egg dishes, breads, casseroles and salads. It's also great in spaghetti bolognese and tomato salsas. Marjoram is a good oregano substitute, but tastes milder.



Paprika

Taste: Paprika is milder and sweeter than cayenne pepper.

Preparation: Available as a red powder made from ground sweet and hot dried peppers.

Uses: For a Hungarian twist, team paprika with caraway, coriander, cinnamon and dill. Combine with garlic for a Spanish flavour. Paprika goes well with lamb, chicken and fish dishes, on baked sweet potato wedges, or in beans or scrambled egg.



Parsley





Taste: Has a mildly bitter, grassy flavour that does not overwhelm the other ingredients.

Preparation: Flat-leaf parsley is favoured by chefs; it withstands heat well and is very flavoursome. Curly parsley is used for decorative garnishing.

Uses: Goes with roast lamb, grilled steak, fish, chicken, veg, potato dishes, omelettes, stuffing, soft cheeses, marinades, dressings, sauces and soups.

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<p>Saffron</p> <p>Taste: A floral, sweet, honey-like flavour.</p> <p>Preparation: The most expensive spice, a little really does go a long way - too much saffron in a dish can make it taste bitter.</p> <p>Uses: Works best in paella, bouillabaise or risotto. Can also be used in baking, or added to a tomato sauce.</p>	
<p>Sage</p> <p>Taste: From the Mediterranean coast, sage is like rosemary, with more lemon and eucalyptus.</p> <p>Preparation: Best used fresh and in small amounts. Unlike some herbs, sage does not lose its flavour with prolonged cooking.</p> <p>Uses: Sage is traditional in Italian and French cooking, added to meats, poultry and stuffing, and is often chopped and stirred into pasta and gnocchi.</p>	
<p>Tarragon</p> <p>Taste: Adds a distinctive, bittersweet liquorice-like flavour to foods, and has an aroma similar to star anise.</p> <p>Preparation: Tarragon should be added near the end of cooking time, as heat reduces its flavour.</p> <p>Uses: Native to Siberia and western Asia, tarragon is a key herb in French cooking. It goes well with poultry, fish, egg dishes, beef and vegetable soups. It can also be added to salad dressings.</p>	
<p>Turmeric</p> <p>Taste: Has a distinctive yellow colour so is sometimes used as a cheaper alternative to saffron, although it tastes quite different.</p> <p>Preparation: Turmeric is an ingredient of curry powder and is in many South Asian dishes.</p> <p>Uses: For a hint of North Africa, use turmeric with ginger in meat and vegetable dishes, or flavour rice with it. A little turmeric goes a long way; as it cooks, its flavour intensifies.</p>	

Thyme

Taste: A strong earthy, slightly minty flavour with a subtle aroma. Lemon thyme is another variety and goes well in soups and vegetable dishes.

Preparation: Depending on the variety you're using, thyme can be finely chopped or added as a whole sprig. Unlike most herbs, thyme needs a long cooking time to release its full flavour.

Uses: Add whole sprigs to slow-cooked meals and casseroles and remove at the end. Thyme works well with other herbs like rosemary, parsley, sage, savoury and oregano, and is used in bouquet garnish. It can flavour most meats, including chicken and game (as a marinade or in a sauce) and is a tasty addition to roast vegetables. Tuck sprigs inside a chicken, along with fresh lemon, before roasting. Pair thyme with paprika, oregano and cayenne pepper for Cajun cuisine, and with cinnamon, nutmeg and cayenne pepper for Caribbean meals.

