



OUR HEALTH MOVEMENT

Know Your *Spices*

A little cabinet of ancient wisdom, gathered from the guides at Our Health Movement. How to use everyday spices, and the traditional and modern thinking behind each.

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The spice cabinet

For thousands of years, the spices in your kitchen were the pharmacy. Warming, cooling, digestive, calming, each one was chosen with intention. This little booklet gathers them together: how to cook with them, and the traditional and modern wisdom behind each.

Start anywhere. Toast a few seeds, warm some milk with turmeric and pepper, or simply notice how a spice makes you feel. That is the whole practice.

A note on doses. These guides celebrate spices as food, the amounts you would cook with. Concentrated extracts and supplements are a different matter and can interact with medications, so check with your practitioner before taking them. Nothing here is medical advice.

Turmeric

Warming · pungent & bitter · kindles digestion · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) has been used in India for thousands of years as both food and medicine. Its active pigment, **curcumin**, is what modern research keeps circling back to for its **anti-inflammatory and antioxidant** activity. In Ayurveda it's prized for kindling *agni* (digestion), supporting the liver, and its warming, drying quality.

Get more from it

- **Pair with black pepper.** Piperine, the compound that makes pepper sharp, can dramatically increase how much curcumin your body absorbs. A pinch is all it takes.
- **Add a little fat.** Curcumin is fat-soluble, so turmeric does its best work cooked in oil, ghee or a milk of some kind.
- **Warm it.** Gently heating turmeric deepens both flavour and, traditionally, its benefits.

Bring it into the day

- **Golden milk (haldi doodh).** Warm milk (dairy or plant), ¼ tsp turmeric, a pinch of black pepper, a little cinnamon and ginger, and honey to taste. A classic bedtime cup.
- **Everyday dal & soups.** A teaspoon stirred in early gives colour, earthiness and a gentle bitterness that rounds out lentils and vegetables.
- **Roast vegetables.** Toss cauliflower or root veg with oil, turmeric, cumin and salt before roasting.

Good to know

Turmeric stains everything it touches (boards, cloth, fingertips), so work with care. As a concentrated supplement it can interact with blood-thinning medication and isn't recommended in high doses during pregnancy; as a **culinary spice** it's enjoyed freely in kitchens the world over. When in doubt, ask your practitioner.

Ginger

Warming · pungent · moves & settles · In season: Autumn · Winter

Why it earns its place

Few foods are as widely revered as ginger (*Zingiber officinale*). Ayurveda calls it *vishwabhesaj*, "the universal medicine." TCM uses fresh ginger to warm the middle and dispel cold. Modern study centres on its **gingerols**, compounds behind its warmth and its well-documented ability to **calm nausea and support digestion**.

Fresh vs. dried: they're different tools

- **Fresh ginger** is bright, juicy and moving, best for cooling-season colds, circulation and cooking.
- **Dried (ground) ginger** is hotter and more concentrated, warming from the inside, and a staple of baking and spice blends.

Bring it into the day

- **Morning ginger tea.** A few slices of fresh root simmered in water for 10 minutes, with lemon and honey, a gentle way to wake up digestion.
- **Stir-fries & broths.** Grate it in at the start to warm the whole dish; a classic partner to garlic and spring onion in TCM-style cooking.
- **Travel & queasy days.** Ginger's reputation for settling the stomach, including motion and morning sickness, is one of the better-supported in the spice world.

Good to know

Ginger is warming and moving, so very large amounts can feel intense if you already run hot or have reflux. In concentrated or supplement form it can interact with blood-thinning medication, so it's worth a word with your practitioner if that's you.

Cinnamon

Warming · sweet & pungent · grounding · In season: Autumn · Winter

Why it earns its place

Cinnamon is warmth you can taste. In Ayurveda and TCM it's used to warm the body, support circulation and settle digestion. Its best-known modern claim is a gentle role in **steadying blood-sugar levels** after meals, a reason it pairs so naturally with sweet foods.

Ceylon vs. cassia: worth knowing

- **Ceylon** ("true" cinnamon) is lighter, more delicate, and low in *coumarin*.
- **Cassia** is the darker, cheaper, stronger cinnamon most common in supermarkets, but it's higher in coumarin, which in large daily amounts isn't ideal for the liver.

For everyday sprinkling, either is fine. If you use cinnamon heavily, **choose Ceylon**.

Bring it into the day

- **Porridge & fruit.** A dash over oats, stewed apple or pear turns breakfast into something that feels like a treat, and blunts the sugar spike.
- **Warming drinks.** A stick simmered into tea, cocoa or golden milk.
- **Savoury too.** A quiet backbone in Middle Eastern and Indian stews, tagines and spice blends like garam masala.

Good to know

As a spice, cinnamon is a delight. As a concentrated daily supplement (especially cassia), moderation matters because of coumarin. Enjoy it the way kitchens always have: generously, but as seasoning.

Cardamom

Warming · pungent & sweet · lightening · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Cardamom is prized across Ayurveda, TCM and Middle Eastern medicine for its bright, aromatic warmth. Ayurveda considers it *tridoshic*, balancing to all constitutions in moderation, and reaches for it to lift heaviness, freshen the breath and ease bloating. It's warming without being harsh, which makes it unusually versatile.

Green vs. black

- **Green cardamom** is the familiar sweet, floral pod, for chai, baking and desserts.
- **Black cardamom** is smoky and bold, a savoury spice for stews, dals and rice.

Buy **whole pods** where you can; ground cardamom loses its fragrance quickly.

Bring it into the day

- **Masala chai.** Crush 2-3 green pods into simmering tea with ginger, cinnamon and cloves, the classic after-meal digestive.
- **Coffee, the Arabic way.** A pod or a pinch in the pot lifts and softens coffee's edge.
- **Rice & sweets.** Add a pod to basmati as it cooks, or a pinch to rice pudding, stewed fruit or baking.

Good to know

A little goes a long way, cardamom is intense, and one or two pods is usually plenty for a pot. It's gentle and widely enjoyed as a spice; as always, concentrated extracts are a different matter from the pinch in your chai.

Cumin

Warming · pungent · kindles digestion · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Cumin (*jeera*) is one of the most-used spices in Ayurvedic cooking, prized for kindling *agni*, the digestive fire, and for easing bloating and heaviness after meals. Warm, earthy and a little nutty, it forms the base of countless spice blends. Modern study looks at its role in digestion and blood-sugar balance.

Get the most from it

- **Toast it first.** Dry-roasting whole cumin seeds until fragrant deepens the flavour and, traditionally, its digestive power.
- **Whole vs. ground.** Whole seeds bloom in hot oil at the start of cooking; ground cumin stirs in later.
- **Its natural partners.** Classic alongside coriander and turmeric in everyday dals and curries.

Bring it into the day

- **Jeera water.** A teaspoon of cumin seeds simmered in water and sipped warm, a simple after-meal digestive.
- **CCF tea.** Equal parts cumin, coriander and fennel seeds steeped in hot water, the classic Ayurvedic digestive blend, gentle enough to sip through the day.
- **Tempering (tadka).** Sizzle the seeds in ghee or oil to start a dal, curry or vegetable dish.
- **Rice and yoghurt.** A pinch through rice, roasted vegetables, or a cooling raita.

Good to know

Cumin is gentle and enjoyed daily across the world as food. As always, concentrated supplements are a different matter from the spice, so check with your practitioner before taking them.

Black Pepper

Warming · pungent · stimulating · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Black pepper (*kali mirch*) is one of the oldest traded spices, valued in Ayurveda for stimulating digestion and clearing cold and damp from the body. Its bite comes from **piperine**, which modern research shows can dramatically increase how much your body absorbs from other foods, most famously the curcumin in turmeric.

Get the most from it

- **Grind it fresh.** Pepper's aromatic oils fade quickly once ground, so a mill beats a pre-ground pot.
- **Add it late.** Piperine is delicate, so a final grind toward the end of cooking keeps its punch.
- **Team it with turmeric.** Even a pinch alongside turmeric meaningfully boosts absorption.

Bring it into the day

- **The classic trio.** Turmeric, black pepper and a little fat, in warm milk or a curry.
- **Everyday finishing.** Over eggs, soups, salads and roasted vegetables.
- **Trikatu.** In Ayurveda, pepper joins long pepper and ginger in this warming digestive blend.

Dishes to try

All vegetarian or vegan, and all built around pepper rather than hiding it.

- **Black pepper rasam (milagu rasam).** A thin, peppery South Indian broth of tamarind, tomato, crushed pepper and cumin, tempered with mustard seeds and curry leaves and sipped with rice. The classic thing to reach for at the first sign of a cold. Naturally vegan.
- **Cacio e pepe.** The Roman pasta built on almost nothing but pepper and cheese, proof that black pepper can be the whole point of a dish rather than a finishing touch. Vegetarian, and easily made vegan with a plant-based hard cheese.
- **Milagu kuzhambu.** A dark, deeply savoury South Indian tamarind gravy heavy with black pepper, spooned over rice, warming and comforting. Naturally vegan.

Good to know

As a kitchen spice, pepper is enjoyed freely. In large medicinal or supplement doses, piperine can change how the body processes certain medications, so check with your practitioner if that applies to you.

Fennel

Cooling · sweet · settling · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Fennel (*saunf*) is the gentle, sweet, cooling member of the spice box. Ayurveda considers it balancing to all three doshas and one of the best spices for calm digestion, easing bloating and cramping without heating the body. It's exactly why a little dish of fennel seeds appears at the end of an Indian meal.

Its sweetness comes from *anethole*, the aromatic compound behind fennel's mild liquorice note, which both traditional systems and modern study connect to its carminative, or gas relieving, action: it helps relax the gut and release the trapped wind behind bloating and cramping. Because it cools rather than heats, fennel is the spice Ayurveda reaches for with acidity, heartburn and heat in the body, where warmer spices can aggravate. It gently freshens the breath, is a mild diuretic, and has long been offered to nursing mothers to support digestion and milk flow. Fennel is also a small source of fibre, vitamin C and minerals like potassium.

Get the most from it

- **Toast lightly.** A brief dry-roast brings out fennel's natural sweetness.
- **Seeds and bulb.** The seeds are the spice; the crisp bulb is a lovely cooling vegetable, raw or roasted.
- **Balance the heat.** Pair with warming spices like ginger to round out a blend.

Bring it into the day

- **After-meal seeds.** Chew a pinch of seeds, plain or toasted, to freshen the breath and settle the stomach.
- **Fennel tea.** Seeds steeped in hot water, calming for bloating and a restless tummy.
- **CCF tea.** Equal parts cumin, coriander and fennel seeds steeped in hot water, a classic Ayurvedic blend for calm, steady digestion.
- **In cooking.** Wonderful with roasted vegetables and potatoes, folded into breads, or stirred through lentils and dals.

Good to know

Fennel is gentle and widely enjoyed. Concentrated fennel extracts are much stronger and, as with any supplement, worth checking with your practitioner, particularly during pregnancy.

Mustard

Warming · pungent · stimulating · In season: Winter

Why it earns its place

Few spices are as versatile as mustard. Warming and sharply pungent, it turns up as seeds, as oil, and as leafy greens, and each part carries its own character. It's a winter crop, and across northern and eastern India the cold months bring both the seeds and the greens into their own.

Also known as: Sarson (Hindi and Punjabi), Rai (Gujarati and Marathi), Sarshapa (Sanskrit), Shorshe (Bengali) and Sorisha (Odia).

The many forms, and keeping them

- **Black and brown mustard seeds** are the pungent, everyday cooking seed of much of India.
- **Yellow mustard seeds** are milder, and the base of many pastes and pickles.
- **Mustard oil** is golden, sharp and warming, a defining flavour of Bengali and North Indian cooking.
- **Mustard greens** become the iconic *Sarson ka Saag* of Punjab.

Store the seeds in an airtight jar, away from light, where they keep for many months.

Cooking with it

I love the way Bengali cooking leans on mustard to build depth of flavour. Where much of India reaches for whole and ground spices, Bengali kitchens often work with **spice pastes**, and a ground mustard-seed paste is one of the classics. It coats vegetables evenly and gently, wrapping each piece in flavour without the constant stirring that can knock delicate vegetables about as they cook. Fried whole in hot oil the seeds turn nutty and pop; ground raw, they turn fierce and bright.

Traditional dishes to try

- **Sarson ka Saag** (Punjab), slow-cooked mustard greens, classically with makki di roti.
- **Kasundi** (Bengal), a pungent fermented mustard relish.
- **Shorshe aloo** (Bengal), potatoes in a bright mustard-seed sauce.

Good to know

Mustard is warming and pungent, so a little goes a long way, and raw mustard paste is especially fiery. Enjoyed as food it's a joy; as with any spice, concentrated extracts are a different matter.

Bay Leaves

Warming · aromatic · aids digestion · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Bay leaves work in the background, but you notice when they're missing. Added whole to a simmering pot, they lend a soft, sweetly aromatic warmth that rounds out rice, dals and slow-cooked dishes. In Ayurveda they're valued for gently supporting digestion.

Also known as: Tej Patta (Hindi), Tamalapatra (Sanskrit).

Indian vs. Mediterranean bay

Worth knowing: the "bay leaf" of Indian cooking, *tej patta*, comes from the cassia (cinnamon) family and smells warmly of cinnamon and clove. The Mediterranean bay of a European stew or ragu is a different leaf altogether, more herbal and eucalyptus-like. Recipes usually mean one or the other, so it's worth a glance at which.

Choosing, keeping & using

- **Buy whole, dried leaves**, and store them airtight and away from light; whole leaves hold their aroma far longer than crushed.
- **Add them whole and early**, so they have time to infuse the dish.
- **Remove before serving.** Bay leaves flavour the pot, they aren't meant to be eaten, so fish them out at the end.

Traditional dishes to try

- **Pulao and biryani**, where a leaf or two perfumes the rice.
- **Dal and slow-cooked curries**, infused from the start.
- **Garam masala**, the classic warming blend, which often includes tej patta.

Good to know

The whole leaf stays tough and sharp-edged, so always take it out before serving. As a kitchen aromatic it's gentle and lovely; concentrated bay leaf oil is a different, far stronger thing.

Curry Leaves

Aromatic · digestive · nourishing · In season: All

Why it earns its place

Curry leaves are one of those ingredients that quietly define a whole cuisine. Tossed fresh into hot oil, they crackle and release a warm, citrus-nutty aroma that is the signature of South Indian home cooking. Traditionally they're valued for supporting digestion, and even for hair and skin.

Also known as: Kadi Patta or Meetha Neem (Hindi), Kariveppilai (Tamil), Karivepaku (Telugu), Surabhinimba (Sanskrit).

Fresh is everything

- **Use them fresh.** Fresh curry leaves are fragrant and glossy; dried ones lose most of their magic.
- **Keep them well.** Store fresh sprigs wrapped in the fridge, or freeze them, and they will keep for weeks.
- **A note on the name.** Curry leaves have nothing to do with "curry powder", they are the leaf of a specific tree (*Murraya koenigii*).

Cooking with them

Their home is the *tadka*, or tempering: a spoon of hot oil or ghee, a scatter of mustard seeds, and a handful of curry leaves thrown in to sizzle for a few seconds before the lot is stirred through a dish. That single step carries dals, sambar, rasam, chutneys and stir-fried vegetables. Unlike bay leaves, curry leaves are soft enough to eat and are usually left in.

Traditional dishes to try

- **Sambar and rasam**, the comforting soups of a South Indian meal.
- **Coconut chutney and lemon rice**, both lifted by a curry-leaf tempering.
- **Poriyal**, simple stir-fried vegetables finished with mustard seeds and curry leaves.

Good to know

Curry leaves are gentle, edible and enjoyed daily across South India. Fresh is far better than dried, so if you spot a sprig, grab it, they freeze beautifully.



*Health is made in our kitchens and our
playgrounds, seasonal, unhurried, and
deeply connected to the natural world.*

Shared for education and inspiration, drawing on traditional practices and their modern study. Not medical advice, and not a substitute for care from a qualified practitioner. Please check with your doctor before making changes, especially if you are pregnant, nursing, taking medication or managing a health condition.

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