

Spicing Up Your Meals When Eating Clean

Healthy food has an undeserved reputation for being boring or bland. Whole, fresh foods are actually delicious on their own, with no added seasoning. Unfortunately, many of us have been jaded by too much sodium, sugar, and additives in our food. But there are healthy ways to add flavor to clean foods. Here are some herbs and spices you can use in your daily cooking:

- **Basil:** This bright-green delicate leaf contains flavonoids that act as powerful antioxidants. It's also high in vitamins A and K and has a good amount of potassium and manganese. You can grow basil plants on a sunny windowsill throughout the year or grow it in your garden and preserve it by freezing or drying it. Use peppery and minty basil in tomato sauces, salad dressings, pesto, sandwich spreads, soups, and chicken, beef, pork, and fish dishes.
- **Marjoram:** This fragrant herb contains many phytochemicals — including terpenes, which are anti-inflammatory — lutein, and beta carotene. Plus, it has lots of vitamin C and vitamin D. Marjoram is delicious in any dish made using beef and is perfect with vegetables like tomatoes, peas, carrots, and spinach. Together with bay leaf, parsley, thyme, and tarragon, it makes *bouquet garni* to use in stews and soups.
- **Mint:** Mothers used to offer mint to kids for upset stomachs because it soothes an irritated GI tract. But did you know it may be a weapon against cancer, too? It contains a phytochemical called perillyl alcohol, which can stop the formation of some cancer cells. Mint is a good source of beta carotene, folate, and riboflavin. Use it in teas, in desserts, as part of a fruit salad or lettuce salad, or as a garnish for puddings.
- **Oregano:** Used in Italian dishes, this strong herb is a potent antioxidant with the phytochemicals lutein and beta carotene. It's a good source of iron, fiber, calcium, vitamin C, vitamin A, and omega-3 fatty acids. Who knew that spaghetti sauce could be so good for you? Add spicy and pepper oregano to salad dressings, soups, sauces, gravies, meat dishes, and pork recipes.
- **Parsley:** Do you ever wonder what's happened to all the parsley garnish that has been left on plates in restaurants over the years? If only people knew then how healthy it really is! This mild and leafy herb is an excellent source of vitamin C, iron, calcium, and potassium. Plus, it's packed with flavonoids, which are strong antioxidants, and folate, which can help reduce the risk of heart disease. Use it in

everything from salads as a leafy green to rice pilafs, grilled fish, and sauces and gravies.

- **Rosemary:** Rosemary contains terpenes, which slow down free radical development and stop inflammation. Terpenes may also block some estrogens, which cause breast cancer. Use this pungent and piney herb in soups, stews, meat, and chicken dishes. Chop some fresh rosemary to roast a chicken, cook with lamb or beef, or mix with olive oil for a dip for warm whole-wheat bread.
- **Sage:** Sage contains the flavonoid phytochemicals apigenin and luteolin and some phenolic acids that act as anti-inflammatory agents and antioxidants. Perhaps sage's most impressive effect may be against Alzheimer's disease by inhibiting the increase in AChE inhibitors. Its dusky, earthy aroma and flavor are delicious in classic turkey stuffing (as well as the turkey itself), spaghetti sauces, soups and stews, and frittatas and omelets.
- **Tarragon:** This herb tastes like licorice with a slightly sweet flavor and is delicious with chicken or fish. It's a great source of phytosterols and can reduce the stickiness of platelets in your blood. Tarragon is rich in beta carotene and potassium, too. Use it as a salad green or as part of a salad dressing or mix it with Greek yogurt to use as an appetizer dip.
- **Thyme:** This herb is a good source of vitamin K, manganese, and the monoterpene thymol, which has antibacterial properties and may help protect against tumor development. It's fresh, slightly minty, and lemony tasting, making it a great addition to everything from egg dishes to pear desserts to recipes featuring chicken and fish.
- **Cinnamon:** The aroma of cinnamon is one of the most enticing in cooking; just the smell can help improve brain function! It can also reduce blood sugar levels, LDL cholesterol, triglycerides, and overall cholesterol levels. Cinnamaldehyde, an organic compound in cinnamon (go figure!), prevents clumping of blood platelets, and other compounds in this spice are anti-inflammatory. Add cinnamon to coffee and tea, use it in desserts and curries, and sprinkle some on oatmeal for a great breakfast.
- **Cloves:** These flower buds are a great source of manganese and omega-3 fatty acids. They contain eugenol, which helps reduce toxicity from pollutants and prevent joint inflammation, and the flavonoids kaempferol and rhamnetin, which act as antioxidants. Cloves are a great addition to hot tea and coffee as well as many dessert recipes, including fruit compote and apple desserts.

- **Cumin:** This spice is rich in antioxidants, which may help reduce the risk of cancer. It also has iron and manganese, which help keep your immune system strong and healthy. Add cumin to Middle Eastern recipes, rice pilafs, stir-fried vegetables, and Tex-Mex dishes.
- **Nutmeg:** Nutmeg is rich in calcium, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus, and vitamins A and C. It can help reduce blood pressure, acts as an antioxidant, and has antifungal properties. The lacy covering on nutmeg is used to make mace. Keep a whole nutmeg in a tiny jar along with a mini rasp to grate it fresh into dishes with spinach, add it to hot tea, use it in curry powder, and add it to rice pudding and other desserts.
- **Turmeric:** This spice is one of the healthiest foods on the planet. Curcumin, a phytochemical in turmeric, can stop cancer cells from reproducing and spreading, slow Alzheimer's disease progression, and help control weight. In fact, researchers are currently studying curcumin as a cancer fighter, painkiller, and antiseptic. Turmeric gives foods a pretty yellow color and is an inexpensive substitute for saffron. Use it in Indian foods, egg salads, sauces, tea, and fish and chicken recipes.

But be careful when purchasing turmeric: Some brands, especially those made and packaged in other countries, can be high in lead, a toxic metal. Look for turmeric produced in the United States, and buy it from a reputable retailer.