



Ask the Experts

This Week's Question:

I love dishes with big, bold flavors. Any advice you can share in regards to seasoning and flavoring dishes?

AJ's Expert Answer:

Helpful Hints for Seasoning and Flavoring

- Seasoning means to enhance the natural flavor of the food without significantly changing its flavor. Salt is the most important seasoning ingredient as it will enhance and “brighten” the natural flavors present in a dish.
- Kosher Salt or Sea Salt are the best types of salt to use for seasoning. They are both pure salt with no additional additives like iodine or anti-caking agents, both of which tend to lend a bitter or metallic taste to the salt and in turn can affect the taste of your food. Kosher salt is comprised of a flat crystal structure, which also helps it to dissolve faster, possibly decreasing the likelihood of over-salting. Add salt carefully because an item that truly has too much salt will taste salty.
- Always salt protein foods before searing, which allows it to flavor the item; after searing, the salt bounces off, resulting in a tendency to over-salt the dish. Conversely, if you want to sauté vegetables, always salt after cooking, as the salt will leech out the juices, preventing browning.
- When preparing an item whose liquid is to be reduced, never season at the beginning of the cooking process; once it has fully reduced, it will be too strong. The most important time for seasoning liquid foods is at the end of the cooking process.
- Lemon juice and other acids such as vinegar will also help to “brighten” flavors of dull and bland dishes. Lemon juice is particularly helpful if you are concerned about the sodium content of your food.
- When tasting and checking food items for proper seasonings, they should always be tasted as close to their actual intended serving temperature as possible. Cold temperatures dull flavors. Therefore a soup that is tasted and seasoned while it's cold may very well be over-seasoned by the time it is reheated to its appropriate temperature. Conversely, if something is tasted while it's hot, but is actually intended to be served cold, it may taste bland at the proper temperature unless the seasoning is bolstered to compensate for the dulling effect of cold temperatures.
- Flavoring means adding a new flavor to a food, changing or modifying the original flavor.
- Flavoring ingredients can be added at the beginning, middle, or end, depending on the cooking time, the cooking process, and the flavoring ingredients.

Cooking with Herbs

- When cooking with fresh herbs, always add the herbs at the end of the cooking process. The essential oils in fresh herbs will be destroyed by long cooking times. Adding them at the finish of a dish helps to ensure maximum flavor and aroma.
- When cooking with dry herbs, they should be added early in the cooking process. The flavor in dry herbs is derived from the essential oils, which are concentrated in the herbs after the excess moisture has been driven off in the drying process. Adding the herbs at the beginning helps to draw the oils out of the herbs and provide maximum flavor.
- Crushing dry herbs in the palm of your hand prior to adding to food will help to release the essential oils.
- Always strip fresh herbs from the stems prior to chopping for a more palatable texture.
- An easy way of adding the flavor of fresh thyme to a dish without the trouble of picking off the little leaves is to crush fresh thyme branches with the side of a chef's knife and then toss the whole branch into the preparation. Simmer, sweat, or sauté until the dish is finished and then remove the branches before serving. Bruising the herbs in this manner will help to crush the cell walls and release the essential oils.
- Use a sharp chef's knife to chop herbs rather than a food processor. Food processor blades are typically not sharp enough to cleanly cut the herbs without tearing them and causing them to oxidize and turn black.



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- Italian parsley (also known as flat leaf parsley) is the best type to use when cooking because of its distinctive flavor. Curly parsley is better for garnishing due to its attractive curly edges.
- If some friends and family members don't care for the taste of cilantro and others do, substitute Italian parsley for half of the cilantro in a recipe.
- Oregano and marjoram are "kissing cousins" and can be substituted for one another in recipes. Generally speaking, oregano tends to be a little stronger in flavor and marjoram a bit more mild. Consider this when substituting one for another.
- Treat fresh-cut basil from the garden or farmer's market like a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers: Make a new cut at the end of the stems and then place in a glass or vase of water and set on the kitchen counter. It will remain fresher longer and add a nice aroma to your kitchen.
- Create your own ready-made "seasoning cubes" for soups, stews, and grains by placing chopped or minced fresh herbs in the compartments of ice cube trays and add enough water or chicken stock to just cover. Freeze until solid and then remove from the trays and re-package in self-sealing plastic bags.
- Mix favorite combinations of herbs and other seasoning elements with softened butter to create uniquely flavored butters that can be used to flavor and season pasta, rice and grains, meat, poultry, and fish. Roll butter into logs in plastic wrap and store in the refrigerator for up to a week, or in the freezer if keeping longer than one week.
- When considering what types of herb garnishes to use, try using sprigs of herbs that "mirror" what was actually used to flavor the dish so that guests have some idea of what flavors to expect.

Lavender: "Official Herb of 1999" – International Herb Association

An ancient herb, lavender has been prized throughout history for its many useful properties. The name "lavender" is derived from the Latin term *lavare*, which means "to wash." The ancient Greeks and Romans were known to use it in their baths and for washing linens. During the Middle Ages it was used to strew about homes and castles to fragrance and perfume the dwellings of the time. Although native to the Mediterranean where it grows wild in France, Spain, Italy, and Corsica, it was taken by the Romans to the British Isles, where it still thrives today. It is particularly interesting to note that lavender was a favorite herb of Queen Elizabeth I, and the palace gardeners were required to have lavender flowers available at all times so that the Court chefs could make lavender conserve (a mixture of lavender flowers and sugar) and a drink made of lavender flowers, boiling water, and honey that was known as Sweet Lavender Tisane. In addition to its well-known perfume applications, it is also a useful and interesting culinary herb. English Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*, *Lavandula vera*, or *Lavandula officinalis*) is considered to be the best for both perfume as well as culinary uses.

While many people realize that the flower buds are edible, fewer know that the leaves and branches are also used in cooking. Dried branches of lavender can be tossed on hot coals while grilling to add a unique "perfumey" quality to cooked meat.

The flavor of lavender can be infused into liquid preparations (ice cream, sorbets, sauces) by heating the desired liquid with dried or fresh lavender blossoms until the liquid simmers. Remove from heat and pour into a bowl and cover, or simply cover the pan with plastic wrap and set aside. Strain flower blossoms from liquid prior to finishing the preparation if the flowers themselves are not wanted in the finished item.

If fresh lavender is not available, use dry lavender blossoms (available at health food stores).

Lavender is often used to make jelly, honey, tea, and ice cream.

Lavender exhibits a sweet perfumed flavor with lemon-like overtones. It works particularly well as a seasoning for grilled or roasted lamb.