

FEATURED INGREDIENT: WARM SPICES

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Brightly colored powders toast and sizzle in a well-loved, tomato-red Dutch oven, mingling with fresh onions, garlic and ginger. Exotic scents draw those nearby to take a peek and a long, deep inhale. Smiles emerge, anticipation sets in. Aaahh, the gentle, comforting lure of warm spices!



photo: Paolo Bendandi on Unsplash

Warm spices - such as cinnamon, coriander, cardamom, ginger, and nutmeg - bring a richness of flavors to many types of cuisine. Commonly used in sweet items such as pies, cookies and custards, warm spices are equally valuable and flavorful in savory dishes such as soups, stews, cream sauces and vegetables.

Derived from the seed, dried fruit, bark or root of a plant, each spice presents a distinct flavor created by its essential oils. These oils are released when the spice is ground, crushed or grated and will lessen in intensity and deteriorate over time.

Not simply eye-catching and tantalizingly aromatic, spices also possess medicinal properties and have been used in Eastern medicine for ages. Many are known for their anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory qualities, as well as ability to assist in lowering blood pressure.

To coax the greatest flavor and intensity out of your spices, try one of these techniques.

- **Dry-roast whole** spices in a sauté pan over medium-low heat until their scent is released. Stir or toss often, careful not to burn. Cool, then grind right before use.
- **Wet-roast whole** spices in a small amount of oil, butter or ghee in a sauté pan over medium heat until their scent is released. Stir occasionally, careful not to burn. Cool, then grind right before use.
- **Toast pre-ground** spices by sprinkling directly into a heated pan with other dry ingredients such as onions garlic or other vegetables, lightly sauté for a few minutes before adding any liquid ingredients other than a small amount of oil, butter or ghee.

Some of the most commonly used warm spices include:

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| • Allspice | • Cumin |
| • Black pepper | • Garlic |
| • Cardamom | • Ginger |
| • Cayenne pepper | • Nutmeg |
| • Cinnamon | • Paprika |
| • Clove | |

But, don't pass by those that may be less familiar or called for in recipes, such as horseradish, mace, saffron, star anise, and turmeric. Each one offers such unique flavor characteristics and health benefits, it would be a shame to not make them staples in your pantry.

Here are a few that you may not be as familiar using -

HORSERADISH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranges from very warm to hot, with a light to intense peppery flavor • Contains compounds shown to resist cancer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add to soups, stews, sauces, mashed potatoes, other vegetables • Generally, only small amounts are required to add flavor (add to your own taste)
MACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made from the lacy outer coating around the nutmeg kernel • Can be purchased as “blades” or ground • Has a sweet and spicy flavor profile similar to nutmeg; yet is generally softer and fruitier • Provides fair amounts of essential oils, vitamin-A, vitamin-C, carotenes, iron, and calcium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use in baked goods, stews, meats, poultry, fish, cheese dishes, egg dishes, sauces • Pairs well with chocolate or cherries • Often used in Caribbean, Indian, Asian, Moroccan, French, Dutch and British cuisine
SAFFRON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in shades of red and yellow; red is higher quality than yellow • Slightly floral, warm flavor profile • Contains antioxidants, manganese, Vitamins B6 and C, iron and potassium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use in rice dishes, soup, stew, sauces, dressings or with vegetables • Expensive spice, yet only a small amount is needed to flavor a dish
STAR ANISE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinct licorice, fennel, basil flavor • “Chinese Star Anise” is what is sold in stores, not “Japanese Star Anise” (Japanese variety is highly toxic.) • Possess high concentrations of flavonoids and polyphenols and is considered to have anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and antimicrobial properties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use with meat, poultry, fruit, sweets and confections • Pairs well with citrus, onions, poultry, beef, cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger • Commonly used in Chinese cooking • Either use whole stars (pods) or ground star anise • Potent flavor; best used in small quantities
TURMERIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warm and earthy flavor profile with ginger-type bite and citrus notes • Contains curcumin, antioxidants, manganese, iron, fiber, vitamins B6 and C and magnesium; is considered anti-inflammatory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditionally used in stews and curries • Contemporary uses include hot and cold beverages and smoothies, breakfast items, spice rubs, soups and chilis • Quite potent, small amounts are all that is required

SELECT and STORE

- Purchase spices from a trusted, high-quality vendor. There are many brands available and some that I enjoy using include - [Penzey's](#), [Spice Islands](#), [Simply Organic](#), [Frontier Co-Op](#), and [The Spice Hunter](#).
- Look for those with "best by" dates. In general, the shelf life of spices ranges from 2 - 3 years for whole spices and up to 1 year for ground spices.
- Store spices in airtight containers out of light (in a pantry or cabinet) and away from heat and moisture.

USE

Here are a few suggestions for using warm spices to enhance both savory and sweet items -

- Add cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, turmeric, cloves, or allspice to hot beverages such as hot cocoa, tea, coffee, eggnog, cider or mulled wine
- Stir in nutmeg, saffron, horseradish or turmeric to cheese or cream sauces
- Fold mace, star anise, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, cloves or allspice into batters - French toast, quick breads, cakes
- Add turmeric, cardamom, black or cayenne pepper, cumin, garlic, ginger or cinnamon to vegetables and fruit (steamed, baked, roasted, stewed)
- Rub or sprinkle any combination on meats, fish, poultry and seafood
- Create warm spice blends to toss with snack items - nuts, popcorn, baked vegetable chips
- Stir nutmeg, turmeric, cumin, ginger, garlic, saffron or horseradish into soup, stew, chili

For further information on warm spices and their uses, check out these guides:

[The Ultimate Guide the Spices](#) by *Greatist*

[Culinary Guide](#) by *The Spice Hunter*

[Spice Guide 101 - The Ultimate List of Spices and Herbs](#) by *Raw Spice Bar*

RECIPE

"UNSTUFFED" EGGPLANT CASSEROLE

Casseroles are part of my Minnesota roots so I oftentimes take more time-consuming recipes and transform them into simpler covered dishes. Filled with healthy veggies, warm spices and whole grain, this comforting dish makes it easy to enjoy the flavors and textures of stuffed eggplant without as much fuss.