

FEATURED INGREDIENT: FENNEL

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When selecting ingredients for healthy Mediterranean-style cooking, fennel absolutely should be in the mix. It's often passed over by home cooks in America - it looks a bit funny, may feel slightly intimidating, and what do you do with it? If you've not used it, I encourage you to give it a try. It's arguably easier to work with than the mighty and popular kale and is very versatile.

WHAT IS FENNEL?

Fennel is a long-historied Mediterranean plant that belongs to the carrot family, strangely enough, although it is not a root vegetable. When grown in the wild, it is often thought of as a hearty, prolific weed. Cultivated plants can grow to 8 feet tall with long, hollow stems. And talk about being a multi-tasker, fennel is considered a vegetable, herb and a spice!

Commonly used in Italian, Middle Eastern, and Indian cuisine, fennel's universal appeal extends from countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea to many other areas around the world. Fennel has been popular in American restaurants for a number of years and is increasingly finding its way into home kitchens.

This unassuming superfood is low in calories and nutrient-dense, providing high amounts of dietary fiber, potassium, vitamins A, C, B6, iron, and magnesium along with many other vitamins and minerals. Those nutrients support bone and heart health, help lower blood pressure and inflammation, increase immunity and the absorption of iron. Fennel has long been used in ancient, natural medicine and the practice continues today.

SELECT

Look for the freshest and sweetest fennel during cool weather months at farmers markets - late fall to early spring. It is also available at grocery stores year-round.

Sold with the stalks and fronds attached or removed, choose bulbs that are firm, tightly packed, feel heavy and have a creamy white or pale green color on the outside. Avoid bulbs or stalks that are wilted or limp, heavily browned or bruised, or have loose or split layers. A stalk with flowering buds is overripe.

STORE

Loosely wrap raw fennel bulbs and fronds in plastic or a cloth dish towel and store in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. For best results, plan to use it within one week. If the outer layer of the bulb begins to brown, simply trim it with a vegetable peeler or paring knife. The inner layers generally remain fresh and crisp.

For instructions on blanching and freezing fennel, see [How to Freeze Fennel Bulbs](#) by Soil Born Farms and [How to Freeze Fennel](#) by Leaf TV.

USE

Every part of the fennel plant is edible from the bulb that grows above ground to the feathery fronds that look similar to dill, as well as the blossoms and seeds. Crisp and delicious when served raw, fennel grows sweeter and tender when cooked. The dried seeds produce stronger anise or licorice-like flavors than the raw or cooked bulb. The feathery fronds serve nicely as herbs in any application.

Crunchy raw fennel can be sliced or shaved for an eye-appealing presentation in salads, or marinated and pickled with other vegetables. Cut into wedges, sliced or diced, cooked fennel maintains its unique flavor while taking on a softer, more caramelized tone that adds another layer of flavor to recipes.

The best cooking methods for fennel include sauteing, braising, roasting or even grilling. Serve roasted or grilled wedges as a side dish with a spritz of lemon and sprinkle of sea salt and ground black pepper. Or add sauteed slices or small diced pieces to pasta, casseroles or whole-grain dishes. The stalks and fronds can be chopped or diced and added to soups, stews or stocks.

Fennel pairs especially well with apples, citrus, tomatoes, leafy greens, red or green cabbage, nuts, creamy dressings, vinaigrettes, chicken, pork, fish and seafood, cauliflower, beans and other legumes.

Add it to -

- any type of salad - mixed green, vegetable, potato, coleslaw, pasta, legume, whole grain
- sandwiches and wraps
- roasted or grilled chicken, fish or seafood
- braised pork, chicken or beef
- soups, stews and casseroles
- winter fruit compotes or apple galettes
- crudité platters

For information about cutting and use of fennel, check out -

- [How to Cut Fennel](#) from Serious Eats
- [Top 5 Ways to Use Fennel Stalks and Fronds](#) from the Kitchn
- [11 Ways to Use Fennel](#) from Food & Wine.