17 INDIAN SPICES A TO Z

OUR SPICE GUIDE TO YOUR INDIAN COOKING

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Indian cooking doesn’t have to be too complicated, too time consuming or too spicy!
Spices have been used in the Indian and Chinese traditions for thousands of years in cooking and medicine. They are essentially “wonder foods” that are a therapeutic and flavourful way to supporting a healthy lifestyle, and have been the basis of Ayurvedic nutrition and medicine for 5000 years.

For the novice, one of the key deterrents to Indian cooking is the unfamiliarity with countless spices and how to use them. I hope to de-mystify this perception by sharing some simple basics about Indian spices. In addition, I thought it would be beneficial to share some knowledge about the history, many health benefits and nutritional properties of various spices.

First of all, I should point out that although there is a long list of spices discussed in the following pages, you do not need to run out and purchase all of them before getting started on your culinary adventure. There are countless curried dishes that can be made using 4 basic spices — cayenne or chili powder, ground turmeric, garam masala, and whole cumin.

Secondly, I want to clear up any confusion between “masala” and “garam masala”. Quite often, people unfamiliar with Indian cooking get confused between the two. This is understandable because the word masala can have two meanings, which Indians tend to use interchangeably. The distinction between them is that garam masala is a ground spice blend, whereas masala refers to the “wet” base for your curry dish. It is made by caramelizing onion, garlic, ginger, and tomato with spices, or a variation of these ingredients. Garam masala could be one of the spices which are added to the masala base mixture. It is a “warming” blend of ground spices such as coriander, cumin, cardamom, black pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg. The combination of spices may vary from region to region. Based on the ancient tradition and principles of Ayurvedic Nutrition, garam masala is a well-balanced spice mixture, which enhances flavour and is beneficial for overall health. Having garam masala in your spice cabinet eliminates the need for many individual spices.

And lastly, before we get into the list of different spices, a few words about curry. In western cultures, there tends to be some confusion about the definition of curry. The word “curry” was invented by British colonialists in the 18th century. It is most likely a bastardization of the Indian word kari which means sauce. But in general use it has taken on several different meanings, and often all Indian dishes get labeled incorrectly as curry. Curry can refer to a richly spiced, saucy dish cooked across many cultures and parts of the world or it can be a spice or spice mixture called “curry powder. To complicate matters further, there is also a curry plant that produces curry leaves. Curry leaves are sometimes used in Indian cuisine but most curries do not call for curry leaves. Curry spice blends, similar to garam masala, usually vary depending on a particular region. Curries are most commonly associated with savoury meat dishes like butter chicken and lamb curry, or vegetable dishes like chana masala (chick pea curry) and matter paneer (peas & potatoes curry), to name just a few.
Here is an alphabetical list of 17 spices used in Indian cuisine

1. Ajwain (Carom Seeds)

Ajwain is my personal mantra whenever I have an upset stomach because it is well known for its bloating, gas, and even constipation relief benefits. These seeds are flavourful yet strongly pungent. You can chew the seeds for potency or boil a teaspoon or so in water to drink as an herbal tea. The active enzymes in ajwain helps in boosting our digestive functions by facilitating the release of gastric juices.

Ajwain seeds contain the essential oil thymol, which has local anesthetic, antiseptic and antibacterial properties.

These tiny seeds are closely related to caraway and cumin. The flavour resembles thyme, with pepper and oregano overtones. It is very popular in North Indian cuisine, especially in starchy foods like pastries, snacks, breads and parathas.
2. Anise / Aniseed

Belongs to the *Apiaceae* family. It is native to the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. It is a perennial herbal plant which grows seed-bearing flowers similar to fennel. It also has very similar culinary uses, nutritional properties, and health benefits as fennel. See *Fennel on page 13*.

**Star Anise** – Is a spicy fruit obtained from an evergreen tree native to southwest China. The fruit is shaped like a star, which turns rust-red in colour when ripened, and encases amber coloured seeds inside the husk. Star anise is one of the most important spices in Chinese and Indian cuisine to flavour savoury and sweet dishes, and is also used in medicinal teas to help relieve inflammation from arthritis and other rheumatoid diseases.
3. Cardamom (black)

Native to India, cardamom is a large leafy plant that flourishes in the country’s tropical climate. Green and black cardamom are from the same plant family. Black cardamom is often seen as an inferior cousin to the green pods. This is certainly not the case. Black cardamom is harvested much later than its green counterpart and its flavour is distinctively different from the green variety. The pods of this seed are much larger and have a camphor-like smell and an earthy, smoky taste that is due to how they are dried. Black cardamom is commonly used in Indian dishes that requires a more pungent flavour as in daal, tandoori dishes, heavy meats, and is one of the main components of garam masala. The seeds and pods can be used whole or as a spice. They are also great for respiratory issues and digestion, not to mention a natural mouth freshener.

4. Cardamom (green)

Once prized for its medicinal benefits, green cardamom is now typically used, especially in Punjabi or northern Indian cuisine, as a spice to add flavour to foods. It is the main ingredient in spiced chai and commonly used to flavour sweet dishes. Seeds are small and shaped like a spindle, which makes them easy to identify, and are usually kept in the pods; when exposed to air or ground into powder, they tend to lose flavour fairly quickly. It is one of the most expensive spices by weight, but a little bit goes a long way. Used for its medicinal properties, green cardamom can aid in digestion, treat depression and be used for tooth and gum care as well as a breath freshener. A study from the September 2012 issue of the British Journal of Nutrition, found that cardamom regulates gene activity in skin cancer cells and reduces the activity of genes linked to cancer growth. It also offers a number of nutritional benefits, including essential minerals (iron, manganese) and fibre.
5. Cayenne

This fiery spice is closely related to bell peppers, paprika and jalapenos and is cultivated from the *capsicum annuum* family of peppers. The *cayenne* is a small, red chili pepper that is typically eaten either dried or ground, and is incredibly spicy in its natural form. Although inherently hot and intolerable even in small amounts, cayenne is one of the most health-benefiting spices packed with minerals, vitamins and certain phyto-nutrients. It is no wonder this wonderful spice has found a place in modern as well as in traditional medicines for its disease preventing and health promoting properties.

Cayenne peppers are loaded with high levels of vitamins and minerals (vitamin A, C, B6; iron, riboflavin, niacin, potassium, copper, zinc, manganese, magnesium and selenium). Cayenne contains a health benefiting alkaloid compound, *capsaicin*, which gives it the strong spicy pungent character. Early laboratory studies on experimental mammals suggest that capsaicin has antibacterial, anti-carcinogenic, anti-inflammatory, analgesic and anti-diabetic properties. Studies have been done which indicate that capsaicin may have beneficial effects on preventing and healing ulcers. It may also boost metabolism and help with weight loss by impacting appetite and calorie intake.

With a 5000 year old Ayurveda history influencing nutrition and balance, it is no wonder that cayenne is used in practically all savoury Indian dishes!
6. Chili powder

Similar to cayenne, chili powder is made by crushing and pulverizing the dried fruit and is often used in a number of Indian dishes like curry, tandoori and savoury meat dishes. Chili plants are native to Central America, but were introduced to other countries during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The heat and intensity of chili powder largely depends on the types of peppers used, which can range from mild and sort of sweet to very hot and spicy. Chili powder can aid in digestion, boost energy and metabolism, strengthen the immune system and reduce cholesterol.
7. Cinnamon

This unique spice originates from Sri Lanka and comes from the inner bark of several trees within the *cinnamomum genus*. It was imported to Egypt around 2000 BC and was referenced in the Hebrew Bible as an anointing oil and fragrance.

Although many varieties exist, the Sri Lankan variety is regarded as “true cinnamon”. The flavour comes from an essential oil, **eugenol** that comprises only up to 1% of cinnamon’s makeup. The whole bark is used in Indian cooking in both savoury and sweet dishes. The bark is an excellent source of minerals like potassium, calcium, manganese, iron, zinc, and magnesium and contains very good amounts of vitamin A and niacin.

The active properties in cinnamon are known to have antioxidant, anti-diabetic, anti-septic, local anesthetic, anti-inflammatory, rubefacient (warming and soothing), carminative and anti-flatulent properties. **Cinnamon is loaded with powerful polyphenol antioxidants which help the body to remove harmful free radicals.** It also helps to balance blood sugar by stimulating insulin receptors, giving them a stronger affinity for the blood-sugar lowering hormone. In response, the body needs to produce less insulin in order to create the desired effect. This creates less pancreatic stress, improved metabolic rate, and decreased inflammation.
8. Cloves

Cloves are one of the highly prized spices, widely recognized all over the world for their medicinal and culinary qualities. They are actually the “flower buds” from an evergreen rain-forest tree native to Indonesia. These tiny buds are a powerhouse when it comes to nutrition and natural health.

Often used in Ayurvedic medicine, cloves are anti-fungal, antibacterial, antiseptic and analgesic. They are packed with antioxidants, and are a good source of essential vitamins and minerals (especially manganese). The sweet aroma of cloves is due to an essential oil, eugenol, which has local anesthetic and antiseptic properties. Hence, it’s usefulness in dental care and treatment procedures. Cloves are a natural pain killer and also attack germs. You can temporarily alleviate the pain of a toothache by dabbing a little clove oil on a cotton ball and placing it on the sore tooth or gum. It can also be used to massage sore muscles.

This popular spice has been used in many dishes in Asian and Chinese cuisine since ancient times. Some Indian and Middle East vegetarian as well as meat and rice dishes use cloves in their preparation. Cloves, along with cinnamon and cardamom, are the key ingredients in spiced chai. Due to their potency, cloves should be used only in small quantity.
9. Coriander

Also known as cilantro in its fresh form, coriander is native to several regions throughout the world such as southern Europe, North Africa and Southeast Asia. It is often used alone or combined with other spices to flavour many types of dishes. Its seeds have been in use since ancient times in cooking as well as an ingredient in various traditional medicines.

Coriander seeds contain many plant-derived chemical compounds that together are known to have digestive, carminative and anti-flatulent properties. The seeds are an excellent source of minerals like iron, copper, calcium, potassium, manganese, zinc and magnesium as well as an ample amount of vitamin C and B-complex vitamins such as thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin. Along with dill and fennel, coriander seeds are being used as a carminative and digestive agent in various gripe water preparations. For use in Indian cooking coriander is a key ingredient in garam masala. Dried coriander seeds are usually lightly roasted to enhance flavour and release essential oils in the seeds.
10. Cumin

Scientifically known as *Cuminum cyminum*, it is a small herbaceous plant also belonging to the *Apaiceae* family. It is widely popular for its distinctive aroma and is a commonly found ingredient in Indian and many other types of cuisine. Black cumin, or *shahi jeera*, is a related variety of regular cumin. The active properties of cumin improve gut motility and help in digestion by augmenting gastrointestinal enzyme secretions. It is an excellent source of essential vitamins (B-complex, A, C and E) and minerals (iron, copper, calcium, potassium, manganese, selenium, zinc and magnesium). Cumin seeds are also rich in many flavonoid phenolic antioxidants such as carotenoids, zeaxanthin, and lutein.

Cumin is one of the most commonly used spices in Indian cooking as a condiment and flavouring base in meat and vegetable curries, daal, rice pilaf/pulao, samosas, etc. The seeds are usually lightly roasted to enhance the flavour of a dish. It is also ground and used as a powder and is a key component of garam masala.
11. Fennel

A perennial herb plant belonging to a broad family of herbs and spices, which also include caraway, dill, anise and cumin. Both the leaves and seeds are used for medicinal and culinary purposes and the bulb can be used as a vegetable. Dried fennel seed is widely used in the culinary traditions of countries such as India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, southern Europe and the Middle East. It has a sweet licorice flavour, and the dried seeds will be from green to golden in colour when ready to use.

Fennel seeds contain numerous flavonoid antioxidants that offer protection from cancers, infection, aging and degenerative neurological diseases. They are a concentrated source of minerals like copper, iron, calcium, potassium, manganese, selenium, zinc, and magnesium, as well as many essential vitamins such as vitamin A, C, E, and B-complex vitamins.

Fennel has long been used to aid in digestion and relax spasms, to relieve coughs, bronchitis, hypertension, high blood pressure, colic pain in newborn babies, and as a massage oil to reduce joint pain. In India fennel is used in breath fresheners, herbal teas and in a special homemade nutritional food supplement given to breastfeeding mothers to increase breast milk secretion. Its culinary uses are as a condiment and flavouring base for savoury and sweet dishes.
12. Fenugreek

A spice whose origins can be traced back to 4000 BC, fenugreek is native to the sub-Himalayan plains of the Indian subcontinent. Similar to coriander, both the greens and seeds are used extensively in Indian and Pakistani cooking. The seeds possess a strong aroma and bitter taste and should be dry roasted to mellow their flavour. Fenugreek seeds are rich in minerals, vitamins and phytonutrients as well as soluble dietary fibre. If used regularly, fenugreek may help control cholesterol, triglyceride, as well as high blood sugar levels in diabetics. It has also been used in traditional medicine as a laxative, digestive, and as a remedy for cough and bronchitis.
13. Garam masala

Garam means hot and masala means mixture. It is hot in the sense that it is a “warming” blend of spices such as black and green cardamom, coriander, cinnamon, cloves, peppercorns, and cumin ground into a convenient mix which is available at all Indian supermarkets.

The combination of spices that make up garam masala generally vary by region. It is used in many savoury dishes such as different types of daal, meat and vegetable curries, samosas, pakoras and other appetizers. Each spice has its individual health benefits, and together you reap a multitude of benefits all in one mix!
14. Ginger

**Ginger** is a common ingredient in Indian and Asian cuisine. It is actually part of the plant family that includes turmeric and cardamom. From ancient India and China to Greece and Rome, the rhizome (root) of ginger has been revered as a culinary and medicinal spice. Of the many chemical components found in ginger root, the therapeutic benefits come from **gingerols**, the oily resin from the root that acts as a highly potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory agent.

One of the top health benefits of ginger is its use as an effective digestive aid and natural remedy for nausea and constipation. It relaxes the smooth muscle in your gut lining and helps food move along throughout the system. According to Ayurvedic medicine, ginger can help break down the accumulation of toxins in your organs, boost immunity and cleanse the lymphatic system. It has been used for centuries to reduce inflammation and treat inflammatory conditions. Ginger is also known to have anti-pain, anti-fungal and anti-blood-clotting abilities.

Ginger is a staple condiment in every Indian kitchen. Along with onion and garlic, ginger root is used in making the masala base, which is essential for preparing many dishes. Even pickled ginger is quite common in a traditional Indian household. Ginger powder can also be used in making curries. I love making masala chai with a bit of chopped or grated ginger. It is not only tasty but also very soothing on the stomach.
15. Peppercorns

Often referred to as the “king of spice”, black pepper has been used in cooking since ancient times. It was also sometimes used in mummification techniques and embalming. The peppercorn plant is native to the tropical evergreen rain forest of Kerala, in southern India. Black peppercorns are the dried product of a flowering vine called *piper nigrum*, and a much used ingredient in not only Indian cuisine but food all around the world. Black peppercorns have a strong pungent flavour that comes from the existence of volatile oils such as *piperine*. The active properties of piperine is believed to increase gut motility and digestion by increasing gastro-intestinal enzyme secretions. Black pepper can also help to stop the bleeding of a cut when applied topically.

Peppercorns are a good source of minerals like potassium, calcium, zinc, manganese, iron and magnesium as well as vitamin A, C, and B-complex. They are also rich in flavonoid polyphenolic antioxidants, which help the body to remove harmful free radicals and help protect from cancer and other diseases.

While black peppercorn is the most traded spice in the world and commonly used in kitchens worldwide, peppercorns also come in other colors like green, white and pink and are incredibly flavourful. White peppercorns have been soaked to remove the blackened shell, increasing intensity and aroma. Green peppercorns are picked while the berries are still unripe and green, producing a milder taste. Pink, or sichaun, peppercorns are actually the berry of the mountain ash tree and contain a sharp, sweet flavour unlike traditional peppercorns.
16. Saffron

Also called *kesar* in Indian cuisine, saffron is one of the most exotic and highly prized spices known since antiquity for its colour, flavour and medicinal properties. It is made from the stigma, or threadlike fibers, inside of the crocus plant. The fibres contain an essential volatile oil, known as *safranal*, which gives saffron its pleasant flavour. A key non-volatile active property in saffron is *a-crocin*, a carotenoid compound which gives the fibres their golden-yellow colour. Saffron is rich in many vital vitamins, including vitamin A, C, folic acid, riboflavin, and niacin, as well as minerals like copper, potassium, calcium, manganese, iron, selenium, zinc and magnesium. The active components in saffron have many therapeutic applications in traditional medicine as an antiseptic, antidepressant, antioxidant, digestive and anti-convulsant.

When used in the kitchen, a little pinch goes a long way. A whole stigma can be added directly to the preparations, or a pinch of threads is added to a cup of hot water to steep for a few minutes before adding to a recipe. It can also be ground into powder and combined with water to make a paste for both savoury and sweet dishes. Rice biryani (savoury) and halva (sweet) are two very popular Indian dishes that are made with saffron.
17. Turmeric

The scientific name for turmeric is *curcuma longa*, and actually belongs to the ginger family of root herbs. It is native to the sub-Himalayan region and is now widely grown in many tropical and sub-tropical regions as an important commercial crop. It has been used since antiquity in Chinese and Indian traditional medicine for its well-known anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and anti-cancer properties.

*Curcumin*, a polyphenolic compound, is the principal pigment that imparts the deep orange colour to the turmeric root. Scientific studies suggest that curcumin may have anti-tumor, anti-inflammatory, anti-arthritic, anti-ischemic and antioxidant properties. **It should be noted that black pepper enhances the absorption and bio-availability of curcumin by as much as 2000%**.

Turmeric is a very rich source of many essential vitamins (vitamin B6, C, E) and minerals (iron, potassium, manganese, zinc, copper, magnesium and calcium). Just a few grams of turmeric per day in the form of powder, crushed root or fresh root can provide sufficient nutrients to offer protection against inflammation, which is becoming more and more recognized as the underlying cause of a significant number of diseases. Turmeric is also used as a topical treatment for healing skin inflammation, infected wounds, and ringworm.

Turmeric is an essential spice in Indian cooking. It is used as a powder to flavour daals and curries, and as a paste to marinate fish, chicken and meat. It is ground together with other spices, curry leaves, and chili peppers to make “curry powder”. Turmeric is also a natural food preservative!
There you have it! Now you know a little bit more about the culinary and medicinal uses, as well as the tremendous nutritional value of many of the spices our beautiful planet has to offer. And due to its vast use of spices, inviting Indian cooking into your kitchen offers an abundance of flavour and health benefits.

For more information on vegetarian and Indian cooking as well as a large selection of healthy recipes please visit our website and my Facebook page.