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Herb Blends and How To Use Them

By Mary Hanna

Sometimes you just get tired of using the same old recipe that tastes the same time after time. But

we are all so busy we are looking for easy ways to spice up are repertoire. One way that many cooks forget is to use blends of herbs to add subtle flavor distinctions. The French have been doing this forever.

The French never use just one herb in there dishes but rather a blend of herbs that they call a "bouquets garni". Don't be put off by that fancy name, it simply means a bouquet of herbs. The blend of herbs adds subtle but distinct flavors to every dish you prepare. The trick is to get the right blend for so no one herb dominates the dish. You want the flavors to be delicate.

With just a few herb bouquets you can change the taste of a recipe instantly. Now, old recipes have added spark and will get you plenty of "This is Greats". Your aim here is to create a complex flavor that is balanced making each guest want to instantly take another bite. Of course there is different garni for each recipe. You want to achieve the right herbs and spices that compliment each other. You want to use the right relationship between quantities of each herb you are using.

For meat based casseroles, stews, stocks and soup, the old tried and true garni of parsley, thyme and bay leaf still apply. But go one step further and add a twist of citrus (lime, lemon, or orange) for a little zip. The formula for this garni is 3 sprigs of parsley, 1 sprig of thyme and 1 bay leaf. Get a piece of cooking string and tie the bundle together. Viola, just add the bundle to your dish and remove it before serving. Please use fresh herbs, they're so much better. If you have to use dried, sprinkle the herbs into a patch of cheesecloth and tie the cloth together with the string. .Fine Herbes and Herbes de Provence are to other bouquets that the French use in their cooking.

You can buy these at the grocery store or a gourmet shop but why not make your own. Finely chop fresh oregano, thyme, marjoram, savory, and marjoram for Herbes de Provence. Add one tablespoon of each to your dish. This combination can also be used in salads, meat dishes and vegetables.

The English version of Herbes de Provence is sage, rosemary, marjoram, Italian parsley chives, tarragon and thyme. Mix them all together and use on lamb, pork or in stuffing.

Herb Blends and How To Use Them

For Fine Herbes, mix together chopped parsley, tarragon, chives and chervil. Experiment with the quantities. Be adventurous! Keep careful notes when you are experimenting so that you can duplicate the successes and toss the disasters. Remember that creating beautiful tasty dishes is a more of a craft than an art.

You will need to identify the flavor and strength of each herb so that you can group them into either mild or robust. Examples of mild herbs are basil, bay leaf, chervil dill, and marjoram. These herbs combine well with most other herbs and their flavors become milder during the cooking process. With mild herbs you can use larger amounts and with more variation. They can also be used in salads and other dishes where the leaves are not cooked or briefly cooked.

Your robust herbs stand up to cooking. Often, they are used for braised or roasted meat or domestic fowl, soups, stews and even grilled foods. You will have work on the recipe since sometime the herbs

alter subtly during the cooking process. They will either become more muted or in some cases intensify. They can always be combined with the mild herbs. Robust herbs include sorrel, rosemary, garlic, oregano, sage, tarragon and thyme.

Another cool easy to use fresh herbs is to flavor oil or vinegar with a blend of either mild or robust herbs. You will need pretty glass jars (preferable dark) and a tight seal. Simply put your combination of herbs in the jar, add the oil or vinegar, seal and let it sit for several weeks. Oils should be stored in the refrigerator. The herbs will add a subtle flavor to the liquid and will be delicious in a variety of ways.

You can make really healthy tinctures with fresh herbs. But I would urge you to master the cooking with herbs before you branch out to other areas. By know exactly how each herb flavors each dish you will instinctually know what to use in tinctures.

Again be adventurous, mix and match, keep trying new things and keep notes so your successes can be repeated. After you have mastered cooking with herbs, who knows? Maybe you will start an herb garden so you will always have fresh delicious herbs on hand.

Here's to Good Cooking!

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Herbal Teas – Tasty Or Toxic?

By Doug Smith

Have you visited the tea section of your local grocery store lately? If so, you've seen the dizzying array of herbal tea blends, brands and flavors. There's no doubt that herbal teas are a huge commercial success, and they've been enjoyed for centuries. Many tea lovers buy them for their smell and taste. Others expect herbal teas to be a healthier alternative for other caffeine-containing beverages. Some buy them strictly for the medicinal benefits or effects on the packages.

These claimed medical effects can include calming, soothing, and relaxing. On the other hand, other high-caffeine tea blends may promise increased energy and concentration. Green tea remains a top-seller for its legendary health effects. Is there a dark side to the booming herbal tea business?

Reading The Tea Leaves

In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has the responsibility to evaluate foodstuffs and medications sold to the public. Herbal teas receive very little regulation. Generally, herbal teas fall into a gray area between foods and drugs. Traditionally, the FDA has considered herbal teas taken only for taste and aroma to be classified as foods. Another FDA "rule of thumb" has been that any herb that is safe for consumption in food is therefore assumed to be safe when taken as a tea. However, the FDA has been taking a closer look at herbal teas and their effects.

Are Herbal Teas Toxic?

That's a difficult question to answer, as the FDA is learning. The large majority of commercial herbal tea blends contain multiple ingredients in relatively small concentrations. These teas are quite safe to drink when used according to the product instructions. Problems arise, however, when people prepare their own herbal teas, deliberately concentrate commercial blends, have an allergic reaction to the tea ingredients, or the tea is incompatible with prescription medications.

What's The Problem?

The problem is one of consumer awareness. Many plants and herbs used in teas have specific and measurable medical properties. Caffeine is one of the best examples. It is a naturally occurring ingredient in both tea and coffee plants. Problems are possible when uninformed persons attempt to medicate themselves with teas.

Some Examples

- * Chamomile is reported by some to be both a relaxant and a digestive aid. The chamomile plant is a member of the same plant family as ragweed, asters and chrysanthemums. People allergic to those plants should be cautious of chamomile tea.
- * Comfrey tea has been associated with two reported cases of liver disease in the U.S. In one case, the patient abused the herb by drinking nearly a dozen cups of comfrey tea daily as well as consuming many comfrey pills. This extreme herbal dosage continued for over a year, resulting in the liver ailment.
- * Lobelia tea can cause vomiting, breathing problems, convulsions, and lead to coma and death when used in large amounts.
- * Aromatic sassafras tea in large amounts has caused cancer in lab rats. Oil of sassafras and safrole are the major chemical components of the sassafras oil. These components were banned from root beer decades ago. Although sassafras bark is banned from all food use, extract that contains no safrole is allowed.

Should You Be Scared?

Commercial herbal tea vendors would never willingly endanger you, their customer. Commercially available herbal tea blends are expected to be very safe to drink when prepared according to their directions. Similar to drugs, problems with herbs arise when they are abused or taken in extreme concentrations.

These herbs, even those in commercial herbal teas, can have medicinal effects. Therefore you should always talk to your doctor before using herbal preparations, especially if you use prescription medication. Even if you are not on medication, stop any herb use immediately if you experience unusual symptoms. The symptoms may be an allergy to the herb, or something totally unrelated to the herb. Only your doctor can tell you for sure.

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ingredients to cure common but embarrassing conditions.

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