

Spice, spice baby

When we're a little under the weather, most of us head for the bathroom cupboard, where any number of pills and potions are available to help us feel better. In most cases, though, these medications only help to ease unpleasant symptoms, rather than addressing their cause. 'What we should really be doing is heading to the supermarket,' says Cape Town-based nutritional therapist Hannah Kaye.

Recent studies suggest that when it comes to cuisine, stepping up the flavour can be as good for your health as it is tasty for your palate. Some spices, particularly hot ones, contain phytochemicals that may help ward off cell damage associated with chronic diseases. 'Spices are well documented throughout history, and more recently in scientific literature, for their medicinal effects,' says Kaye. 'Incorporating them into our diet on a daily basis could go a long way towards reducing our chances of developing chronic diseases and, in many cases, the severity of symptoms associated with those diseases.'

'Flavouring your food with spices is also a good way to reduce your salt intake,' says Cape Town-based nutritional therapist Andrea Jenkins.

'Try to use only non-irradiated, organic products if possible. Spices are often irradiated in order to kill bacteria – unfortunately, this reduces the health benefits as well as the flavour.'

The three healthiest spices are ones you'll already be familiar with: turmeric, ginger and cinnamon. 'Half a teaspoon of cinnamon per day can boost the effectiveness of insulin and balance blood sugar levels – which makes it a good choice for diabetics,' says Jenkins. 'It also helps to lower your cholesterol levels and aid digestion.' Sprinkle a little on your morning bowl of oatmeal, combine it with low-fat yoghurt or stir into your morning cup of coffee.

Zesty and pungent, ginger is your stomach's friend: it provides relief from symptoms such as nausea and vomiting, and can help to quell motion sickness. 'Recent research has also shown ginger to reduce cholesterol, act as an anti-inflammatory, as well as exhibit both antimicrobial and antiparasitic effects,' says Kaye. 'Having a cup of hot water in the morning with lemon and ginger makes a great gut and liver tonic.'

The distinctive yellow pigment in turmeric – curcumin – is what gives it its health-

Spices add intense flavour to almost any dish, and possess powerful health-boosting properties. It's easy to use them in your everyday cooking.

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

boosting powers. 'It is an excellent anti-inflammatory, has significant antioxidant activity, and has recently been shown to possess anti-cancer effects,' says Kaye. Turmeric has a mild flavour, and can easily be added to rice dishes, stews, soups, sauces and toppings.

Taste test

There are many more spices with similarly effective health benefits.

Cardamom: a potent anti-inflammatory, this spice also improves digestion and stimulates metabolism. Add to curries (it is one of the main ingredients in garam masala) or use to flavour rice pudding or coffee.

Chilli: red chillies contain high amounts of vitamin C and carotene, and have an anti-inflammatory effect, making them a good choice to help keep colds and flu at bay.

Paprika: made from dried red bell peppers, paprika is valued for its high vitamin A, C, E and K content. Add to chicken, potato and seafood dishes (particularly paella), and cheese sauce.

Clove: this spice adds calcium, magnesium, potassium, vitamin A and C to your food, and also offers antibacterial qualities. Add to meat and dessert dishes in small quantities.

Mustard seeds: a good source of calcium, iron and protein, these seeds also boast omega-3 fatty acids. Roast lightly and add

TOP TIP
Storing cayenne pepper, chilli powder and paprika in the fridge will help them to retain their colour for longer.



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Vegetable curry



to salad dressings, chicken dishes or potato salad.

Cumin: full of iron and manganese, cumin is believed to benefit the digestive system and possess anti-carcinogenic properties. Roast lightly and add to chicken, legume (lentils, chickpeas, beans) and curry dishes.

Fennel seeds: a digestive aid, fennel seeds are believed to relieve heartburn, reduce water retention and ease hypertension. Add to pork dishes, bread or savoury biscuits, curries and cucumber salad.

Coriander seeds: animal research studies have confirmed that coriander seeds help to control blood sugar and lower cholesterol. Add to curries, salad dressings, soups, marinades and meat dishes.

VEGETABLE CURRY

SERVES 4

Ingredients

4 large aubergines, thickly chopped
2 tbsp olive or canola oil
2 onions, peeled and roughly chopped
2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
1 finger-length piece fresh root ginger, peeled and finely chopped
8 cardamom pods
2 pinches dried chilli flakes
2 tsp ground turmeric
2 tsp cumin seeds
8 medium tomatoes, roughly chopped
salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
natural yoghurt, to taste
1 handful fresh coriander, roughly chopped
2 handful fresh mint leaves, chopped

Method

1. Place the aubergine slices into a colander set over a bowl. Sprinkle with salt and leave for 30 minutes to draw the moisture out from the aubergine.
2. Meanwhile, add the oil with the onions, garlic and ginger to a large



Cardamom Honey Chicken

pan over a medium heat. Cover with a lid, lower the heat and cook for 20 minutes or so, until the onions have softened.

3. Crush the cardamom pods, extract the black seeds and lightly crush them in a mortar with a pestle. Add them to the same pan, along with the chilli flakes, turmeric and cumin seeds, and stir to lightly toast the spices (discard the empty cardamom pods). Add the chopped tomatoes to the pan, pour in enough water to cover the vegetables, and season well with salt and freshly ground black

pepper. Bring to a simmer, then cover and leave to cook.

4. Rinse the salt off the aubergine and brown the pieces lightly on a hot griddle, working in batches if necessary.
5. Add the griddled aubergine slices to the pan with the onions, tomatoes and spices, cover and simmer until the aubergine is very soft, about 25 minutes. Taste the curry and adjust the seasoning.
6. Mix the coriander and mint into the yoghurt. Serve the curry with brown rice and dollops of yoghurt.



CARDAMOM HONEY CHICKEN

SERVES 4 TO 6

Ingredients

4 tbsp honey
2 tbsp sherry
1 tsp ground cardamom seeds
1 tsp ground peppercorns
6 chicken breasts
2 tbsp olive oil
1 lemon, thinly sliced
salt and pepper
toasted sesame seeds, for sprinkling

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C. In a saucepan, warm the honey, stir in the sherry, cardamom and peppercorns. Place the marinade and chicken in a large bowl, and stir to coat. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes.
2. Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan at medium-high heat. Sear the chicken breasts, skin side down, until golden.
3. Place the lemon slices in a roasting pan. Lay chicken pieces on top and brush with the marinade. Season with salt and pepper. Place in the oven and bake until done, about 20 minutes. Remove from oven and let rest for 10 minutes before serving. Use drippings from the pan for gravy. Sprinkle the sesame seeds over the chicken and serve with baked sweet potato wedges and a side salad of baby spinach.

SPICY LAMB WITH HERBY COUSCOUS AND APRICOT SALSA

SERVES 4

Ingredients

For the lamb:
4 lamb steaks, cut into cubes
3 tbsp olive oil
2 tsp coriander seeds
2 tsp cumin seeds
2 tsp dried chilli flakes



Spicy lamb with herby couscous and apricot salsa

salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

For the couscous:

2 tbsp olive oil
4 tsp chopped fresh dill
4 tsp chopped fresh parsley
2 cups couscous, cooked according to packet instructions
salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 can apricots, drained and roughly chopped
1 medium red onion, drained and roughly chopped

Method

1. Place the lamb and oil into a bowl and mix well.

2. In a pestle and mortar, grind together the coriander, cumin and chilli flakes. Add to the lamb and mix together, then season with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

3. Heat a griddle pan, add the lamb and cook for 1 to 2 minutes on each side, or until cooked through.
4. For the couscous, place the oil, fresh herbs and couscous into a clean bowl. Mix well with a fork and season to taste.
5. To make the salsa, combine the apricots and red onion. Spread the couscous on a platter, top with the char-grilled lamb, then the salsa, and serve. ☺

