

## Flavours from the Garden

*by Chef Brian Henry*

We use herbs and spices to flavour our food and beverages. The distinction between the two is often confusing but the definitions are as follows; herbs are the fresh or dried leaves of plants that grow in somewhat temperate climates. Spices are the buds, flowers, bark, seeds and roots of those plants grown throughout the tropics. Some plants will yield both herb and spice like coriander which gives us the herb cilantro from its leaves and the spice coriander from its seeds.

The element of flavour is a complex relationship between our taste buds and our noses. The basic tastes are salty, sweet, umami, savoury, bitter and sour. These are easily detected by most people when they eat. Beyond these basic tastes we discover flavours that have little to do with our palates and are more accurately associated with aroma. When taste and aroma meet, our olfactory nerve sends a message to the brain. The brain then tells us what we are tasting. The olfactory nerve is inside the mucus membrane of our noses. This helps us understand why we can't taste anything when we are stuffed up with a cold or suffering from hay fever because the aroma of food simply cannot get through to the brain.

There are a number of ways to use herbs and spices in the kitchen. Fresh as always is best. It is important to lightly bruise herbs to release their aroma. To do this one can rub the herbs between their palms, chop them very fine or gently heat them to release their flavours.

Another option for harnessing the flavour of fresh herbs is to make them into herbed infused oil. The technique for making herb infused oil is much the same whether the ingredient is basil, rosemary, oregano, mint or cilantro. For every cup of oil, you will need two tightly packed cups of any soft-leaved green herb. Bring a large saucepan of water to a boil. Add the herbs, making sure that the leaves are completely submerged, and blanch for five seconds. Drain the herbs into a strainer and immediately plunge them into a bowl of ice water. Once cooled drain the herbs again. Squeeze all of the water out of the herbs and pat dry with paper towels. Next puree the herbs with the oil in a food processor. Strain the herb puree through a fine-mesh sieve. Store the herb oil in a sterilized glass bottle, cover tightly and refrigerate. For optimum flavour, use within a week.

I prefer to use less strongly-flavoured oils like sunflower, safflower, canola and grapeseed oils as they are mild tasting and allow for a more prominent herb flavour to come through.

You can use a blender, immersion blender or a food processor to mix your herb oil. I recommend a food processor as blenders incorporate air into the oil filling it with bubbles and making it cloudy.

I like to keep herb oils in squirt bottles. This allows me to add a squirt of oil to salad dressings, crostini and marinades. I will even squirt the oil over fish and chicken before baking or grilling them as it will add flavour and make for a healthy alternative to the aerosol non-stick sprays.



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