

CULTURAL DIVERSITY *in* FOOD

American cooking has become a melting pot of diverse cuisines using herbs and spices from all over the world. The first gifts from Native Americans to the first European settlers were recipes using corn in hoecakes, pumpkin pie, Indian pudding, succotash, and hasty pudding. Native spices include dill, chives, mustard, parsley, garlic, and basil. Creole cooking, which marries French, African and Spanish cuisines, and Cajun cooking, is very hot and spicy, has ventured from the far South regions where it originated to all over America. The next few pages will help rev up your meals using another country's specialties.

Mexican

To create a Mexican-spiced meal, use cilantro, garlic, chili powder, cumin, oregano, chili peppers and cinnamon. Several Mexican peppers are available at the grocery store. Arbol chili peppers are bright red pods that are almost as hot as cayenne peppers. Chipotle peppers have a rich smoky flavor. The Serrano pepper is more pungent and spicy than the larger jalapeno.

Salsa is the Mexican word for sauce and can signify cooked or fresh ingredients. Authentic Mexican salsa includes tomatillos, a round, cherry-like fruit. Another Mexican fruit is the prickly pear which is well suited for salads, jellies and jams. Jicama, often referred to as the Mexican potato, has a sweet, nutty flavor which is good both raw and cooked.

The hand-shaped tortilla can be made from corn flour (mesa) or wheat flour, but it is always baked on a griddle. It can be eaten plain or wrapped around various fillings. Tortillas are the base for burritos, tacos and other dishes. They are sold prepackaged in the refrigerator section of most grocery stores.

The Caribbean, Central & South America

Because of the abundance of tropical fruits, Caribbean cooking reflects a myriad of flavors from hot and spicy to fruity. Guava originates in Central America and can be eaten fresh or juiced. Uniq fruit, a native to Jamaica and a cousin to the grapefruit, is also an exotic change in fruits.

The Scotch bonnet pepper is used widely in jerk barbecue and other meat dishes. Jerk seasoning is a special spice blend that is great with grilled chicken and pork. Add small amounts of black and green peppercorns, coriander, nutmeg, mace, cinnamon, curry, saffron, cayenne pepper, allspice, ginger, tamarind, cilantro, cloves and chili powder to your next barbecue sauce, soups, pastas or main dishes. Jamaican ginger is a rich, heavy, sweet spice, perfect for barbecue recipes.

Caribbean Rice Pilaf

Mince one each of red, green and yellow pepper, one medium onion and 4 cloves of garlic. Sauté all ingredients in one tablespoon of oil for 3-5 minutes. Add one tablespoon of curry powder and mix well. Serves six over three cups of cooked rice.



France

Over 600 varieties of cheese make cheese an important part of French cuisine. French crepes are a versatile pancake stuffed with leftovers or a fruit filling.

French chervil and tarragon are sweet herbs which imparts a delicate flavor to marinated vegetable or meat salads. Shallots are a cross between an onion and garlic with a more delicate, sweet flavor. Dijon mustard is used to glaze poultry, seafood or meats, or as an accompaniment.

Germany

Germans consider pepper an essential spice. Add juniper, cloves or allspice to meat marinades. Juniper berries are popular in sauerbraten and stuffed poultry. Savory leaves are popular in soups, stews, broiled fish or chicken. Caraway can be added to cabbage, breads and potatoes to make a Bavarian-style side dish. Poppy seeds, which originated in Holland, can intensify the sweet flavor in fruit salads or breads.

The Mediterranean

Commonly used Mediterranean spices are garlic, lemon, oregano, mint, bay leaf and parsley. Flavor a yellow cake with anise seed. Annatto seed is an integral part of Spanish cooking. It imparts a natural red-yellow color and pungent flavor to rice and seafood. Many dishes, such as patella, use a small amount of saffron. Greek oregano is sweet and strong when added to tomato sauce. Mandarin oranges grown on the Mediterranean coast are delicious.



Tuscan Style Vegetables

Slice one each red and yellow pepper, medium onion, zucchini, and 2 large portabella mushrooms. Sauté all ingredients in 1 tablespoon oil and add one cup of prepared marinara sauce. Simmer 10 minutes until vegetables are cooked and serve four.

Italy

A simple way to cook Italian-style is to buy Italian seasoning, which is a blend of garlic, thyme, basil, oregano, parsley and marjoram. A ¼ teaspoon each of rosemary, oregano and thyme added to 1 cup of plain tomato sauce turns the meal into real Italian.

A traditional first course is antipasto ~ an assortment of cheese, smoked meats, olives, fish and marinated vegetables. Caponata is generally served as a salad, side dish or part of an antipasto, consisting of eggplant, onions, tomatoes, anchovies, olives, pine nuts, capers and vinegar, all cooked together in olive oil. Minestrone is a classic Italian soup chock full of vegetables, beans and pasta. Ratatouille is a popular dish that combines eggplant, tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, zucchini, garlic and herbs all simmered in olive oil. Biscotti, a twice-baked cookie is enjoying resurgence in popularity. Of course, spaghetti, fettuccine, manicotti, lasagna and pizza will always be Italian favorites.

Scandinavia

Scandinavians use mainly the sweeter spices, even in their sauces. Cardamom, poppy seed, cinnamon, nutmeg or caraway add a Scandinavian touch. Dill seed is popular when seasoning seafood.

Flatbreads and crisp breads accompany stews. Home-produced ham and bacon are favorites, as are rabbit and pheasant.

Africa

African food encompasses a wide variety of foods. Sweet potatoes can be baked and sprinkled with coconut, cardamom and brown sugar. Add tomato chunks to white fish that has been sprinkled with vinegar, turmeric, chili powder, cumin and garlic before baking. Couscous is a very fine grain made from semolina flour. Cooked, it may be served with milk as porridge, with a dressing as a salad, with added vegetables or sweetened and mixed with fruits for dessert.

The Middle East

Middle Eastern food includes whole grains, dried beans, yogurt, vegetables, herbs, garlic, onions and seasonings. To spice up your dishes, start with a small amount of tahini, mint, lemon juice, cinnamon, nutmeg, cumin and fenugreek.

Humus is a thick sauce made from mashed chickpeas seasoned with lemon juice, garlic and olive or sesame oil, or sesame seed paste (tahini). Serve with pita. Dolmas are stuffed grape leaves, usually with vegetables or fruits stuffed with a savory, well-seasoned filling, such as ground lamb, squash, eggplant, cabbage quinces and apples. Dolmas are usually braised or baked and may be eaten hot or cold. Bulgar, also known as wheat pilaf, can be combined with parsley and tomato to produce a Middle Eastern salad. Since many varieties of figs are grown in the Middle East, many dishes use them.

India

To make any menu taste Indian, add curry. Curry goes well with meats, rice, grains, sauces, soups and stews. Turmeric and saffron can be used interchangeably for flavor as well as for the yellow color. Try sweet curry for the same flavor as hot curry, but with less spice. Other spices to use include ajwain seed (useful in flavoring ordinary lentil and bean dishes), cardamom, cinnamon, coriander, cloves and fenugreek.



Sweet Potato Soup

Add one 15-ounce can of sweet potatoes and 2½ cups of fat free milk in a blender and puree. Add one 14-ounce can of reduced sodium chicken broth, ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg, and ¼ teaspoon white pepper. Heat thoroughly.

The Orient

Oriental cooking varies from country to country. *Chinese* add ginger, garlic, sesame seeds, hot peppers, mustard and soy sauce to their rice dishes. *Japanese* add teriyaki, ginger, garlic, mustard and wasabi or green horseradish. For *Thai* flavor, add red curry paste or powder, coconut milk, basil, cilantro, mint and red pepper.

British Isles

Mace, fennel, basil, mustard, Worcestershire, thyme, curry, bay leaf, sage and parsley are common spices in British cooking. Fennel can be added to almost all fish dishes and mace can be used in place of nutmeg to flavor doughnuts, fruitcake, muffins and vegetable beef soup.

Use Your Imagination!

Cuisines are so numerous; they can't all be mentioned here. But with a little imagination, your kitchen excursions can take you all around the world. Go to your local library and check out the available international cookbooks. Pick a recipe and take a trip around the world!

Be sure and consult your physician or registered dietitian before making any changes in prescribed health care regimes.

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