

**DESHI MIX**  
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# The story of spices

Spice up your taste buds with healthy spices in your diet. According to the International Organisation for Standardisation, there is no clear-cut division between spices and condiments. The term spice or condiment applies to such natural plant or vegetable products or mixtures thereof, in whole or ground form as are used for imparting flavour.

Aromatic food substances which enhance flavour are spices and herbs. Spices are usually dried roots, barks or seeds used whole, crushed or powdered. Herbs are usually the fresh leaves, stems or flowers of herbaceous plants. Spices are also stronger than herbs.

Spices not only excite your tastebuds, but are composed of an impressive list of phytonutrients, essential oils, antioxidants, minerals, and vitamins that are essential for overall wellness. Spices have been integral part of our food for centuries, and have retained their relevance even to this day. It is all thanks to the Arab and European explorers, whose contributions in spreading them from their place of origin to the rest of the planet has immensely broadened their use and popularity all across the world.

In the culinary arts, the word spice refers to any dried part of a plant, other than the leaves, used for seasoning and flavouring a recipe, but not as the main ingredient. Why not the leaves you ask? That is because the green leafy parts of plants used in this way are considered herbs.

Every other part of the plant, including dried bark, roots, berries, seeds, twigs, or anything else that isn't the green leafy part, is considered a spice.

The history of spices is almost as old as human civilisation. It is a history of lands discovered, empires built and brought down, wars won and lost, treaties signed and flouted, flavours sought and offered, and the rise and fall and of different religious practices and beliefs. Spices were among the most valuable items of trade in the ancient and medieval times.

Around 3500 BC, the ancient Egyptians were using various spices for flavouring food, in cosmetics, and for embalming their dead. The uses of spices spread through the Middle East to eastern Mediterranean and Europe. Spices have been closely connected to magic, culture,

traditions, preservation, medicine and embalming since early in human history. Spices were a key component of India's external trade with Mesopotamia, China, Egypt and Arabia, along with perfumes and textiles -as far back as 7000 years ago- way before the Greek and Roman civilisations.

Spices can be categorized botanically according to their source of plant part as follows:

Leaves of aromatic plants: Examples include bay leaf, thyme, curry leaf etc.

Seeds: Examples include fennel, coriander, fenugreek, mustard, cumin, nutmeg, dill, aniseed, celery etc.

Fruits: Examples include cardamom, cayenne pepper, black pepper, vanilla, all spice, tamarind etc.

Roots or bulbs: Examples include garlic, ginger, turmeric, galangal etc.

Bark: Cinnamon, cassia etc.

Flower: cloves are dried flower bud, also saffron, asafoetida etc

Arils, such as mace (part of nutmeg plant fruit).

## SENSORY CHARACTERISTICS OF SPICES

Spices give aroma, colour, flavour and sometimes, even texture to food. Each spice or herb has specific unique chemical compounds that create these sensual qualities. Even casual cooks are probably able to identify the four most well-known flavour profiles -- bitter, salty, sour and sweet. When talking about spices, a true spice aficionado simply cannot be limited to just four or five. Spices usually do not have a single flavour profile.

Let's go through some most commonly used sensory characteristics when describing the flavours and aroma profile of spices. Saltiness is not included simply because flavour does not come from an individual spice in any capacity.

### Bitter

Bitterness alone is not a good flavour for us as we are especially sensitive to it. Bitter flavours are usually considered an acquired taste, and they are present in coffee, chocolate.

Spices that are considered bitter are bay leaves, fenugreek seeds, horseradish, mace, cloves, lavender, ajwain, epazote, oregano, marjoram, peppercorns, thyme etc.

### Cooling

Cooling spices are those that give the mouth a refreshed sensation. Some cooling spices include spearmint, dill, anise, fennel, sweet basil etc.

### Earthy

These spices have an earthy flavour, which comes from presence of geosmin. Cumin, achiote (Annatto), and saffron are spices that have an earthy flavour.

### Hot

Hot spices are those that add a strong flavour to the food and make it spicier. The hot flavour profile comes from the most exciting part of the flavour range. This flavour is characterised by its ability to heat up your mouth quickly, sometimes making food unbearable enough to leave you coughing. If your chilli is the right level of hot, you may find yourself crying as well. Pepper, chillis, mustard seeds, garlic, white pepper, and wasabi are all hot spices.

### Sweet

This flavour is defined by how much sugar our tongue can discern in a food. Usually sweet foods are paired with sour or salty food. The contrasting flavours are pleasing to the human tongue and gives our brain a pleasing chemical reaction. Allspice, caraway, fennel, cardamom, nutmeg, poppy seeds, sesame seeds, star anise, and granulated honey are all considered as sweet spices.

### Floral

These spices are those that give us the nice flavourful experience of the spring. You would more than likely associate this flavour with teas. Some floral spices include coriander, lemongrass, rose petals, saffron, sweet basil, thyme, lavender.

### Nutty

Some people associate this flavour with almonds. Foods that are also associated with this flavour are cashews, peanuts and walnuts. There is almost something buttery about the nutty flavour. Some nutty spices include black cardamom, coriander seeds, poppy seeds, sesame seeds, cumin seeds etc.

### Pungent

Spices that fall under the pungent classification are strongly flavoured, and have

strong aromatics as well. Some pungent spices include allspice, epazote, garlic, ginger, grains of paradise, marjoram, mustard, onion, paprika, dill seeds etc.

### Sour

Sour flavours make your mouth pucker. Amchur, sumac and tamarind are some examples of sour spices.

### Woody

Woody flavours are those that taste vaguely like wood. Sometimes, you will find coffee being described as woody, especially if the coffee beans are aged. Some woody spices include cinnamon, cardamom, clove, juniper, rosemary, Sichuan peppercorns.

## GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF SPICES

Spices add flavour and colour to food, and make the food palatable and hence, the variety in the diet, cereals, pulses, vegetables or meat can be cooked in variety of forms due to the addition of different kinds of spices.

Spices in general stimulate salivation, acid secretion, and digestive enzyme. Spices increase the secretion saliva containing more of ptyalin so that food rich in carbohydrates are easily digested.

Some spices have anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, and antioxidant properties.

Some spices help in improving the impaired blood glucose levels in the body and help diabetics.

## NUTRITIONAL VALUE AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF SPICES

Spices are used in small quantities to flavour dishes, meaning they add very few calories. This doesn't mean spices don't cause a large impact on your diet. They can be a great way to add necessary vitamins and minerals.

Spices contain an impressive list of plant-derived chemical compounds that are known to have disease preventing and health promoting properties. They have been used since ancient times for their anti-inflammatory, carminative properties. Let's take a look at some of the exciting benefits that many of the world's most popular spices have for our overall health.

