

MONDAY, APRIL 19, 1993

TASTE

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TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JAMES

Don't let your spices, herbs lose their flavor

I think it was momma who taught me that if a recipe called for just a half teaspoon of something, it probably wasn't worth running out to buy it.

First, a call would be made to Aunt Phyllis, and if that failed, she might even try Stella and Louie next door, but never would she run to the store and pay top dollar for a lot of something she might never use again.

Fortunately, I seldom had that problem because when I go spice shopping, it's usually a trip to Rafael's Spice Company at the Eastern Market in Detroit where I can buy as little or as much of what I need.

Prior to the closings of most of the bulk food stores in my area, it was always nice to know that they could also fill my need for just a teaspoon of something or another.

So I was intrigued the other morning during my thrice weekly visit to the gym when I was approached by a lady who asked me to write a column on the many uses of cardamom.

Seems that Easter Saturday night while checking her ingredients for a vegetable recipe, she noticed that it called for a half teaspoon of cardamom. Not having any change, she sent her son to the store with \$10 and asked him to buy a small jar of that spice.

When he returned with the jar, and placed her change — a dollar and some coins on the counter next to the jar. She couldn't believe her eyes — the jar cost almost nine bucks! Now she has a 2½ ounce jar of powdered cardamom that in her own words "would certainly last till the day I die."

Well dear friend, cardamom is expensive and what's worse, anytime you buy spices that are already ground or powdered, they will lose much of their potency if not kept airtight and out of the light.

Spicy tips

Here are a few suggestions I offered — powdered spices can lose up to 16 percent of their flavor every year. If you don't have airtight jars, place a small piece of plastic wrap over the top then screw the lid on real tight. For optimum sealing, invert the jar upside down and keep in a cool dark space.

By the way, the old spice rack hung over the stove is probably the worst place to keep your spices because of all the heat and humidity generated when cooking.

When possible, buy spices in their whole form. Cardamom comes in powdered and pod form. The pods are very easy to grind or grate.

In addition to a very low cost electric coffee grinder that doubles as a spice grinder, I invested in a small marble mortar and pestle that is just perfect for grinding and mashing, especially more flavorful spices that might linger in an electric mill or wooden bowl.

If all else fails, a small plastic bag and a rolling pin will pretty much do the same thing.

Flavorful soups

You don't always have to grind whole spices. When making soups or a sauce, for optimum flavor, place whole spices in a homemade cloth bag or stainless steel ball.

Cheesecloth works best but an old towel that now finds its home in the rag box can be cut into squares and then tied with kite string or kitchen twine. When the soup or sauce is done, simply remove the bag or tea ball and toss the used spices!

Fresh herbs

Now that summer is fast approaching, good cooks can grow their own herbs and spices. Nothing beats the fresh flavor of parsley and chives and basil, oregano, thyme and rosemary grows well in any sunny garden or window sill.

A good source for fresh herbs locally is Gray's Greenhouse located across the street from Mottet Airport on the southern fringes of Plymouth.

Two fresh herb growers have stalls at Eastern Market in Detroit. Shoppers were flocking there last week to buy them so get there early for the best selection.

Fresh herbs dry and freeze well. Many upscale grocery stores and fruit markets are now selling freshly picked herbs and plants. Shopping Center/Food Emporium always has a nice selection of fresh dill, basil, oregano, thyme and cilantro as well as Joe's Produce on Seven Mile just east of Farmington Road in Livonia.

Hang the herbs upside down in a sunny dry window for a week to dry or freeze them in marked, sealed plastic bags and use before defrosting in the same amount you would use fresh herbs.

Bon Appetite.

See Larry James' family-tested recipes inside. To leave a message for Chef Larry, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1898.



STAFF PHOTOS BY JIM JAGDFELD

Salads in Seconds

PRECUT VEGGIES: A HEALTHY CONVENIENCE



Precut salad mixes and vegetables are perfect for singles, two-career families, and people who don't have time to fuss with cutting, cleaning, and shredding vegetables for salads, side dishes and stir-fries.

BY JOAN BORAM
SPECIAL WRITER

Every once in a while, economic, technological and cultural shifts converge and produce radical changes in everyday life. There was the auto, the computer, the compact disc, and now, veggies — rabbit food has gone low tech.

Goaded by the new United States Department of Agriculture's "Five-a-Day" program, which urges all of us to eat at least five servings of fresh fruits and vegetables daily, Americans have become more diet conscious.

Precut carrot and celery sticks, salad mixes, and other ready-to-eat produce items are perfect for a single person, a two-career family, or anyone who's short on the time (or patience) it takes to wash, scrape, peel, trim, cut, or otherwise process fresh produce.

"I'm not a cook," said Cathy Corozon, of Livonia who works full-time and copes with a lively 17-month-old child in her spare time. "Salad mixes are the answer to my prayers. It's hard to come up with something different for dinner every

day, but salad mixes are something that I can count on. I can add different items, like onions and tomatoes or cheese or leftover meat to vary the flavor, or to create a main course. And when I go to my mom's house for dinner, I always volunteer a salad."

Salad mixes also make it possible for Corzon to incorporate works of mercy into her schedule. "At St. Genevieve's Parish we provide a funeral luncheon for the bereaved family. Obviously, there isn't much advance notice, so I always pick up an extra bag of salad mix, as a potential contribution to the luncheon."

Salad mixes are popular with customers who shop at Joe's Produce in Livonia, said co-owner Joe Maiorana, Jr. "Older people like it because they can enjoy several varieties of greens right out of the bag, with no waste. Working people like it because it's quick — they just open the bag, empty it into a bowl, and add dressing. Most people add refinements for color and flavor, but it's a matter of taste."

Precuts, such as broccoli and cau-

liflower florets and carrot sticks are prepared at the store to keep the price as reasonable as possible. A sign of the times, adds Maiorana, is the "fantastic" demand for vegetable and fruit trays for holidays and special occasions.

"Just as a thoughtful host provides non-alcoholic beverages, he or she provides an alternative to potato chips and cold cuts. Health-conscious guests appreciate the choice."

Emily Murphy of West Bloomfield, host of the "Emily Murphy Show" which airs on PBS Channel 56, and volunteer publicity chairperson for the Village Antique Show and Sale at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, relies on salad mixes to distract her from coffee and cookies.

"If a salad mix is in the vegetable drawer, I'll eat it," she said. "If it isn't, I'll opt for a sugar fix. These mixes are wonderful for busy people. There's no waste, and they encourage healthy habits just because they're there. I've never had one that wasn't really fresh."

Murphy said she believes that every meal should be a special occasion. Even when she's dining alone she puts a place mat and linen napkin on the table, and uses a salad bowl from her collection. "Some people collect teapots — I collect salad bowls," she said.

"Phenomenal!" is how Phil Riggio of Rochester, president of Aunt

Mid's describes the demand for the venerable Detroit firm's celery and carrot sticks, and broccoli and cauliflower florets. "We entered the pre-cut market two years ago and sales have increased by 160 percent since 1991," he said.

"It's a convenience item that busy people appreciate. The consumer gets 12 ounces of ready-to-eat product. It's a very labor-intensive product. Every piece is cut by hand to assure a standard size, there's no mechanization." Aunt Mid's will be offering cut fruits soon.

Jean Wass, catering manager for Nino Salvaggio's strawberry Hills, has been in the catering business for 15 years, five of them at the Farmington Hills market.

"People are increasingly aware of good nutrition," she said. "Vegetables used to be secondary at a meal. Now, people are making a meal out of a prepared salad. The trend is toward emphasis on vegetables, and meat is secondary."

"We prepare all of our salad mixes and precuts in-house. The precuts are especially popular on weekends when people entertain and serve them with a spinach or Maxwell dip. They're great for stir-fries, as well."

See recipes inside.

See SALADS, 2B

Similar qualities create wine, food harmony

FOCUS ON WINE



ELEANOR & RAY HEALD

has been touted as having "the best California cuisine in San Francisco" (even though the restaurant is an hour's drive north of the city). In addition to supervising his restaurant, Ash is Culinary Director at Fetzer Vineyards.

He was in metro Detroit recently hosting several charity dinners, in particular two connected with WineFest, the annual fund-raiser for the Ann Arbor Art Association in which Fetzer Vineyards is making significant contributions.

We caught up with Ash during his visit to discuss our favorite topic — wine and food. Ash didn't waste any time explaining easy ways for people to pair wine and food at home.

"There are five tastes, not just four," he said. "They are bitter, sweet, sour, salt (the four we knew) and pungent or pepper. The pepper taste varies most from person to person. That's why some people really like hot-spicy food and others don't."

Ash suggests pairing food and wines according to their similarities. If the food has sweetness, the wine should have some sweetness. If the food contains citrus or lemon, be sure the wine exhibits some tartness or lemony qualities.

If the food is salty or smoky, the wine should be



Fetzer Vineyards

Culinary artist: John Ash, culinary director at Fetzer Vineyards, known for his expertise at pairing food and wine, works in the kitchens of the Fetzer Culinary Center in California.

low alcohol and off-dry. Spicy or peppery foods require low alcohol, off-dry wines that are low in tannin. Rich, fatty foods need a wine with richness and body.

"One of the great failings of restaurants is they usually present the customer with the wine list before seeing the menu," said Ash. "Restaurants need to help the diner make a good wine and food match. A restaurant patron cannot know what the food will taste like by reading the menu. What I describe on my menu as being hot and spicy and what you may describe as hot and spicy may be two entirely different things."

Ash suggests that restaurants need to make wine recommendations on the menu. For each menu item, at least three wine recommendations should be included. If not specific wines, then at least, a style recommendation. Ash's point is that the chef spends significant time and effort creating a dish that people will enjoy, but then allows it to be ruined by a poor wine selection.

"Restaurants should offer a small wine tasting with the entree," he suggests. "A taste of three wines, selected to complement the food, would allow the diner to make an experienced selection when ordering wine by the bottle or by the glass."

Ash contends that cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay are much more difficult to pair with food than gamay, riesling, chenin blanc, sauvignon blanc or gewurztraminer.

"The worst wines to serve with spicy Thai or Latin foods are cabernet and chardonnay because they have too much alcohol and tannin," Ash said. "The fruitier the wines, the better they match with food."

Try your hand at preparing some of Ash's recipes inside, and match them with the recommended wine.

See SIMILAR, 2B