

CHAPTER 02 : SEASONING AND FLAVORING

Eating is essential for life, yet the enjoyment of eating good food is dependent on good flavour. Humans have travelled the globe, often at great risk, in search of fine flavours and methods of preserving foods, seeking, primarily what we refer to as spices. In the thirteenth century, spices were so precious that they were accepted as currency along with gold. Little was known of the trade routes to India and the Middle East at this time. The search for spices and the spice route drove explorers like Columbus and Magellan to travel the seas and discover new continents.

Seasoning can be described as the enhancement of natural tastes that are present in food without drastic alteration to the basic flavour. Salt in its various forms is the basic seasoning agent. There are two types of salt that are available.

Rock salt is mined from deposits on land. This is very coarse in texture and is sold as table salt (with the addition of iodine) or as pickling salt (without iodine).

Sea salt is produced by the evaporation of sea water. Sea salt is an impure salt and can be refined. It contains natural amounts of iodine.

From these two salts are also derived **soy** and other flavoured salts. Flavoured salts are refined salts that are combined with other flavourings such as garlic and celery. Flavored salts with a mixture of herbs and spices are also available. There are also **naturally** flavoured salts that are available in certain parts of the world that are characteristic to that region only. These salts can be used in cooking and also work well in marinades. Soy in its various forms like paste and sauce come from the orient where it is derived from soy beans fermented in a **brine**. Soy will add seasoning to food to which it is added but will also alter the colour because of its dark appearance.

MSG (mono sodium glutamate) is an example of secondary seasoning. It is the sodium salt of glutamic acid. This is a white powdery/crystalline compound that is produced naturally by both plants and animals and even the human body. MSG, which is commonly used in the kitchen, is produced from an array of products such as seaweed, fish bones and wheat gluten. It is

extracted through a process of fermentation and drying. It has only a slightly salty taste of its own. Its purpose is to bring out the natural flavours in the food to which it is added. Even though MSG is sodium, it contains only $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ - $1/4^{\text{th}}$ the sodium of natural salt. It is very common in oriental cooking and if used properly, can reduce the need for salt.

Flavouring, as opposed to seasoning, is the addition of a new flavour to a food. Flavorings enhance the natural taste of the food it is added to. This results in an alteration of the natural flavour of the food. The various types of flavouring agents can be categorized as herbs, spices, concentrated flavouring agents, wines/spirits, vinegar and marinades. Without flavours, there will be little distinction between one dish and the next. It is flavour in most cases that defines international cuisine. The chilli of Mexico, the tomato and basil of Italy, the fermented soy of the Orient the myriad of spices of India - all provide strong and distinctive flavours. It will be extremely helpful for the modern chef to be acquainted with the various flavours that are associated with international cuisine. This familiarity along with a working knowledge of seasoning and flavouring principles, will enable a chef to use flavours successfully in new and unexpected combinations.

It should be noted here that there are dominant flavours and undertones. The dominant flavours should be limited to one or two elements, such as the main ingredient and one other flavouring agent. Any additional flavour should be subtle, so as not to take away attention from the dominant flavour. A particular recipe may call for five or six spices. One or two of these should be dominant. The others should form a subtle undertone.

Spices

The term spice comes from Latin, which roughly translated means "fruits of the earth." Spices, as distinguished from herbs, are derived from various parts of the plant. The bark (cinnamon), buds (clove), the flower (saffron), the fruit (all spice), the root (ginger) and the seed (mustard) can all be used. Spices can be used whole or ground. The advantage of whole spices is that they have a longer shelf life compared to the ground version. Some spices contain antioxidant components which slow down the removal of their essences It is also easier to remove whole spices from food when it is being served. Ground spices are in the powdered form. The advantage is that they are ore easily incorporated and uniformly as well.

Herbs

The second category of flavouring agents incorporates herbs, which comes from Latin, meaning *grass*. Herbs are defined as the leaves and stems of soft stemmed non-woody plants. Herbs and their use can be traced back to ancient Egypt, Greece and China. It would seem that they were originally gathered for culinary purpose, but like spices, they also have medicinal properties. Herbs can be categorized as fresh, dried, pickled or frozen.

Fresh herbs as the term denotes are used fresh without alteration, freshly picked. This does not mean that the cook needs to pick them for them to be called fresh. Like cut flowers, they are available packaged from the suppliers.

Dried herbs are the same as fresh herbs, except they have the water content removed, which concentrates the flavour.

Pickled herbs are fresh herbs that are stored in brine.

Frozen herbs are either directly frozen or they may be blanched before freezing. Those that are blanched have a longer shelf life. Freeze dried herbs are also available. These are fresh herbs which have been freeze dried and then vacuum packed.

Fresh herbs are always preferred to dried herbs. The flavour seems to be more complex and complete. Dried herbs, which are not stale, deliver a more concentrated flavour. A rule of thumb is one teaspoon of fresh herbs is roughly equal to 3 teaspoons of dried herbs. A frozen herb has a flavouring power similar to that of a fresh herb.

It should be noted that when working with cold foods, the product should sit for at least one hour in the refrigerator after the addition of either herbs or spices to allow for full release and combination of flavours. In the case of hot foods, flavouring can be added at the beginning, middle or at the end of the cooking time. Which is best, will be determined by the type of flavouring and the type of food. Most flavourings need heat and time for the release of their flavour. Fresh herbs take a very short time to release their flavour and therefore should ideally be added towards the end of the cooking time. Dried herbs can be added towards the middle of the cooking process.

Concentrated Flavoring Agents

Flavouring agents are concentrated in two ways. Extraction (oleoresins) or distillation (essential oils).

Oleoresins are extracts from herbs and spices that are usually subject to a vacuum. In the process, most of the solvent (alcohol) is removed. Essential Oil is stem distillation of the flavour and the aroma compounds in a herb or a spice. The disadvantage is that it lacks the flavour in the final oil. Some cooking oils such as olive oil and walnut oil can also be used as flavouring agents in salads, marinades and salsas.

Wines and Spirits

Wines and spirits have become a staple flavouring agent in almost all culinary repertoires. There are two types of wines: Table wines and Fortified Wines. Table wines are mainly produced from grapes but other fruit such as peaches and strawberries can also be used to make wine. Non fruit items like rice and rhubarb are also known to produce good wine. Fortified wines are those which have a spirit added to the wine and include brandy, Port and Sherry and these are used extensively in the flavouring of Desserts.

Wines have unlimited uses in the kitchen. They contribute not only flavour to the dish but also acidic value, salt and sugar. The alcoholic content of wine contributes little to the flavour, yet is a major consideration for the stability of sauces and salad dressings. Wines need to be reduced before addition to a prepared product, particularly products containing egg and dairy products. Reduction of the wine reduces the acid content and evaporates the alcohol, leaving the flavour intact. The alcohol and acid in raw wine creates a natural heat, which can cause coagulation of the protein in egg. Wine reductions are essential for soups and sauces, and can be used for braising, de glazing and sauteeing. Wines can contribute a great deal of flavour to marinades and salad dressings. In most cooking applications, it is not necessary to use the finest wine. Most often an inexpensive wine will do. A fine quality wine may be required for a delicate sauce or dessert. The contribution of wines and spirits to sorbets, desserts and pastries is major.

Flavoured Oils

Certain Oils like Olive Oil and Mustard Oil do impart flavours to the food. They will enhance the salad to which they are added or are also used in pickles in certain parts of India.

Vinegars

Vinegar, technically, is a by product of the fermentation of wine. Vinegar comes from the French term meaning **sour wine**. Commercially distilled vinegar contains 5% acetic acid which gives vinegar its characteristic flavour. **Cider vinegar** is made from apples and is native to America. **Distilled vinegar** is colourless and quite strong and is often used in pickling. **Malt vinegar** is made from malted barley and has a caramel colour. **Rice vinegar**, used predominantly in Japan and China could be red white or even black in colour. **Wine vinegar** is obtained from wine or sherry. **Flavoured vinegars** are common these days and flavours such as herbs (tarragon, dill, rosemary) fruits (lemon, raspberry), flowers (rose petal) and vegetables (horseradish) are added to the vinegar.

Vinegar was originally use as a preservative. However, it is now being used as an aromatic complement to the food. When flavouring with vinegar, be sure to taste constantly to avoid over seasoning. In hot foods, add the vinegar towards the end of the cooking time. Flavour will not be lost due to evaporation. Vinegar has great value in the kitchen when used with understanding and caution.

Marinades

The final flavouring agent is the marinade, a seasoned liquid in which a product is soaked for the purpose of flavouring as well as tenderizing. A marinade consists of four parts:

- The oil
- The acidic content
- The seasoning and the flavours and
- Flavour enhancers

There are two types of marinade: The cooked marinade and the raw marinade.

The cooked marinade is first prepared over heat before the product is added to it.

Raw marinade is a mixture used without being cooked, thereby requiring longer exposure of the product and is used to change the texture of the product.

When marinating for longer periods of time, it is best to refrigerate the product. Otherwise marination takes place best at room temperature. The thicker the product, the longer it will take to marinate. Meats take a longer time to marinate than fish.

To conclude, one must understand that seasonings and flavourings are the cornerstones of culinary excellence. A sure sign of inexperience is over seasoning or under seasoning a dish. Traditional boundaries have been relaxed in recent years, allowing you to take a classical dish and adding a subtle twist to it. In this manner a good chef develops his own style. One of the greatest assets of culinary art is that it is limited only by your imagination.

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