

## Tastes of Thailand - Thai Herbs and Spices

Thai cuisine is unique for its rich textures and aromatic flavors. The liberal use of spices and herbs infuses every Thai dish with savory or sweet tastes and fragrances, uniting an array of characteristics in each dish. An assortment of Thai spices and herbs can add zest and color to everyday cooking.

If your local grocery store or Asian market does not carry fresh herbs from Thailand, which are more potent and flavorful than their milder American cousins, look for frozen Thai herbs, or buy canned or bottled mixed pastes and other condiments to use as a base for making sauces, soups, or curries.

Following are a few examples of commonly used ingredients that work as well in regular American fare as in traditional Thai cuisine.



**Coriander** (*Phak Chi*), a member of the carrot family, has delicate leaves, deep roots, and seeds, all of which are used in Thai cooking. Added to curries and vegetables, coriander seeds provide a mild taste and fragrance. The roots are crushed with garlic to flavor meat and often are included in soup. The leaves, also known as **cilantro**, are used extensively as a garnish, chopped in curries, or added to soup, such as

*Tom Yam Kung*, hot and sour shrimp soup. In other parts of the world, the slightly bitter cilantro leaves season salsas, guacamole, and salads.



**Thai coriander seeds** (*luk pak chee*) have a sweeter, more fragrant flavor than their larger, Western counterparts. Ground or dry-roasted to bring out their flavor, coriander seeds are added to marinades and dipping sauces and mixed with cumin and turmeric into curry pastes. A mixture of pounded garlic and Thai pepper makes a tasty rub for roast pork and other meats. Coriander seeds are found in a variety of ethnic dishes around the world.

**Chinese celery** is a smaller version of the celery sold in Western markets, but its flavor is much stronger. Indispensable to many Thai soups and stews, both the leaves and green or white stalks add flavor to vegetables, meat soups, and stir-fries.



**Cloves.** In addition to adding flavor to curries, this pungent, aromatic spice brings zest to tomatoes, salty vegetables, ham, rice dishes, cheese, and pickles. In Thailand, cloves traditionally have been chewed with betel leaves. Thais believe cloves kill bacteria and act as an antispasmodic, and some chew cloves after meals to aid digestion.

**Ginger** (*Khing*) is used in various forms as a flavoring and spice. Usually peeled and crushed before used, ginger can be eaten raw or incorporated into curries. Pounded with a little salt, pepper, and garlic, ginger makes a delicious marinade for chicken or beef. Ginger's carminative, anti-nausea, and anti-flatulence properties are acknowledged to improve digestion and to counteract nausea and vomiting. Europeans and Americans traditionally use dried ginger in sweets such as gingerbread, spice cookies, and fruit compotes, as well as a sprightly addition to soups and meat dishes.



**Turmeric** (*Khamin*). Unlike other members of the ginger family used in Thai cooking, fresh turmeric is pleasantly mild. Despite its bright orange color, turmeric imparts a surprisingly brilliant yellow hue to foods with which it is cooked. Fresh turmeric is popular in southern Thailand for curries, soups, stir-fried dishes, fried foods, snacks, and desserts. In other cultures, turmeric is used to flavor and color a variety of foods, including butter, cheese, and pickles. Through the ages, turmeric has served as a medicinal herb, known for its stimulant and tonic properties. Its juice is used as an internal antiseptic and antidote to blood poisoning.

**Lesser Ginger or "Rhizome"** (*Krachai*). This special rhizome or rootstock possesses a distinctively piquant flavor and tangy fragrance that cannot be mistaken for other members of the ginger family. Because its exuberant, aromatic quality makes seafood taste fresher, it is used primarily in seafood dishes. The fingers growing from the node are cut into fine slivers and tossed along with other fragrant herbs into hot-and-spicy stir-fries, curries, and incendiary soups.

**Galangal** (*Kha*) is the most popular type of ginger for Thai cooks. Stronger in flavor than common ginger, with an almost peppery flavor, fresh *kha* is a magical ingredient when finely slivered into hot-and-sour seafood salads or soups. Galangal is essential for creating the popular, coconut milk-based sweet-and-sour soup, *Tom Kha*. This rhizome, used fresh, dried, or powdered, helps mask the "fishiness" of seafood and the heaviness of red meats, making them taste cleaner, more delicate, and more succulent.



**Kaffir lime** (*Bai Magroot*). Both the fruit and leaves of the kaffir lime, for which there is no true substitute, lend Thai cuisine a distinctive taste. Leaves are added whole to curries and soups as an aromatic, astringent ingredient. When sliced into fine, edible slivers and sprinkled over salads, they impart a luscious, flower-like fragrance. The fruit's zest is widely used in Creole cooking and the rind used to make curry. The leaves sometimes are added to

rum, vodka, beer, or other alcoholic drinks. Since the lime's leaves slightly resemble an insect, some theorize the word "kaffir" is derived from the German word for bug, "käfer."

**Lemon Grass** (*Takhrai*) is one of the most commonly used herbs in Thai cuisine. It adds a tangy, lemony flavor and aroma without acidity or sharpness. While fine slices are eaten in total, larger pieces are used just for flavor and aroma. Lemon grass also is pounded into curry pastes and, in dried form, infused in beverages. In traditional Thai medicine, lemon grass long has been used to treat colds and stomach ailments and has been found to act as an analgesic and sedative. Lemon grass added to cold water, with honey and salt, makes a refreshing drink. Most Americans probably have eaten a form of lemon grass without realizing it, since citral, one of its key chemicals, is found in a variety of beverages and foods, including candies, puddings, baked goods, meat products, and even in certain fats and oils.



**Thai Hot Chilies** (*Phrik Khee Nu*) are among the world's hottest varieties. Tiny, about one inch in length, the chilies are green or red. Thin-sliced or pounded, Thai hot chilies are used liberally in curries, soups, sauces, and salads (such as *Som Tam*, green papaya salad, or *Yam Nuea*, spicy Thai beef salad), as well as a table condiment. Thais use a variety of chilies, fresh or dried in powdered form, or fried to accompany various dishes. Add chilies to any ethnic dish that needs some fire, including your favorite chili recipe, or sprinkle on a chili dog.



**Shallots** (*Hawm Daeng*) are the preferred onions for Thai cooking and, like garlic, are essential ingredients for cuisine from Thailand. Purplish-red in color, they are smaller and drier than the orange-brown variety commonly sold in the United States. When chopped and pounded to make curry and chili pastes, shallots add a depth of flavor. Served raw in salads, they are sweet and mild, with little aftertaste. Roasted shallots impart a smoky dimension to Thai foods. Packages of crispy, fried shallots, available in many Asian markets, make excellent garnishes for salads and other dishes.



**Garlic** (*Khratiam*), a member of the onion family, is found in almost every savory Thai dish, serving as a rich backdrop for other flavors. It is crushed, chopped, and minced for stir-fried dishes; pounded to paste for curries, hot-and-sour sauces, and salad dressings; roasted and mashed to impart a mild, sweet taste and smoky dimension to chili sauces; and sliced, chopped, and fried to make crispy garlic and garlic oil to flavor soups, salads, and noodle dishes. Sold in jars in Asian markets, Thai pickled garlic has a pleasant sweet-and-sour taste. Like shallots, Thai garlic is smaller and sweeter than Western varieties but more pungent, giving Thai dishes more flavor.



**Peppercorns** (*Phrik Thai*). Brined Thai green peppercorns, sold in jars in U.S. markets, are added in minute amounts to relatively spicy dishes at the very end of the cooking process. They also are used to make the tangy Thai chili paste that accompanies vegetables, rice, and meat. Chewing young, green peppercorns provides a refreshing burst of flavor, and these highly aromatic, mildly hot berries are tossed whole into Southeast Asian spicy stir-fries, dry curries, dipping sauces, and intensely flavored soups.



As green berries mature, they may be picked and dried in the sun to become black peppercorns, or allowed to fully ripen on the vine, then bleached and sold as white peppercorns. Both black and white peppercorns are used widely in traditional dishes around the world.

**Thai Basil.** Fresh basil leaves are used extensively in Thai cooking, including stir-fried meat dishes and curries. Among the basil varieties most commonly used are **lemon basil** or **hoary basil** (*Maenglak*) often sprinkled over soups and salads to impart a light, sweet, lemon flavor and aroma; **Thai sweet basil** (*Horapha*), which is added at the last minute to salads, curries, seafood, and sautéed chicken dishes to provide a mildly anise taste; and the strongest variety, **Thai holy basil** (*Kahrao*), frequently inserted into chicken, beef, or pork stir-fries (such as *Kai Phat Bai Kraprao*, stir-fried chicken with holy basil), to provide a slightly hotter, sweet, clove-like flavor. Combined with garlic, fresh chilies, and fish sauce, holy basil infuses meat and seafood with considerable flavor. Basil's medicinal uses include treating indigestion and stimulating the appetite.



**Thai Mint Leaves** (*Saranae*) are used as a garnish and to provide an invigorating fragrance to vegetables, beef salad, and other dishes. Mint leaves also balance the fire of chilies, with which they often are combined. Rich in vitamin C, mint leaves have been found to reduce perspiration and cure flatulence.

**Scallions** (*Ton Hom*), also known as spring onions and green onions, are members of the *allium* family. Milder than larger onion varieties, they are steamed, grilled, or fried; added raw to salads; or diced into stir-fries and rice dishes. Whether sliced or whole, scallions appear in countless recipes from around the world.





**Green Papaya** has a very mild, almost bland, taste, but it takes on robust flavors when combined with other ingredients. Its crisp, chewy texture is unlike that of any other fruit or vegetable. Green papaya salads feature in Thai cuisine, with recipes varying in degrees of hotness, depending on the ingredients, including the amount of chilies. The hottest salads are from northeastern Thailand and Laos, where they are eaten with barbecued chicken and steamed white sticky rice as a staple. Green papaya also makes a delicious addition to vegetable soup.