



THE LITTLE INGREDIENT GUIDE

Herbs & Spices

40 ingredients. Origins, flavour and cooking notes.



A herb for freshness, a pinch of spice to set the direction: use this ingredient guide to pair ingredients, find substitutes and decide when to add them. The notes cover culinary ingredients, not medical uses.

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These images are illustrations, not a guide to identifying wild plants. Use only reliably identified culinary ingredients.



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Parsley

Petroselinum crispum



Fresh and grassy with a light peppery edge.

Identifying features

- Divided leaves with pointed lobes
- Rich green colour
- Fresh herbal scent

Origin

Parsley comes from the Mediterranean region. This entry uses the leaves of leaf parsley rather than the root of root parsley.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh or frozen leaves give a fresher result than dried parsley.

When to add it

Fold in just before serving; the stalks can simmer in stock.

Goes with

Potatoes, eggs, mushrooms and lemon sauces.

Sources: 1, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French persillade, German potato dishes or Levantine tabbouleh.

Substitute

Chervil is gentler; chives shift the flavour towards onion.

Storage

Keep the bunch cool in a slightly damp cloth, or chop and freeze in portions.

Chives

Allium schoenoprasum



Mildly onion-like with a gentle bite.

Identifying features

- Thin hollow tubes
- Green blades
- Onion scent when cut

Origin

Chives are native across much of the temperate northern hemisphere. They are perennial bulb plants grown for their tubular leaves.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or frozen; dried chives often lack the juicy onion note.

When to add it

Snip into rings and add after cooking.

Goes with

Scrambled eggs, soft cheese, potatoes and light soups.

Sources: 3, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European soft-cheese and egg dishes, or finish a French-style soup.

Substitute

Finely sliced spring onion greens, starting with less.

Storage

Keep cool in a slightly damp cloth, or freeze after snipping.

Dill

Anethum graveolens



Fresh, lightly sweet and reminiscent of anise.

Identifying features

- Threadlike leaf divisions
- Loose blue-green fronds
- Sweet herbal dill scent

Origin

Dill is thought to have originated in the Mediterranean region. This annual plant provides fine leaves as well as differently flavoured dill seed.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or frozen fronds; adjust dried dill to taste.

When to add it

Add near the end; coarse stalks can infuse a cooking liquid.

Goes with

Cucumber, fish, potatoes and yoghurt dips.

Sources: 4, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Scandinavian-style fish, eastern European cucumber salads and potato dishes.

Substitute

Chervil for a subtle anise note, or parsley for a different fresh flavour.

Storage

Keep cool and loosely wrapped, or chop and freeze.

Basil

Ocimum basilicum



Sweet and peppery, sometimes with a clove-like note.

Identifying features

- Broad soft oval leaves
- Green, or purple in other cultivars
- Sweet spicy scent

Origin

Basil is native to tropical parts of Africa and Asia. Genovese basil is a cultivated form of this species.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh for pesto and salads; dried basil suits cooked sauces better.

When to add it

Tear and add the leaves at the end.

Goes with

Tomatoes, mozzarella, courgettes and pasta.

Sources: 5, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Italian-style tomato dishes and pesto; other basil cultivars suit different cuisines.

Substitute

Parsley with a little mint makes a different variation, not an exact match.

Storage

Keep a pot in light and away from cold; use cut leaves promptly or freeze.

Thyme

Thymus vulgaris



Robust, savoury and warmly aromatic.

Identifying features

- Tiny narrow leaves
- Grey-green sprigs
- Strong savoury scent

Origin

Common thyme comes from south-western Europe and south-eastern Italy. It is a low-growing subshrub with a woody base.

Fresh or dried?

Useful fresh or dried; start with a small amount of dried thyme.

When to add it

Sprigs can simmer with the food; remove tough stalks before serving.

Goes with

Mushrooms, beans, braises and roasted vegetables.

Sources: 6, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Mediterranean vegetables and French-style braises.

Substitute

Marjoram is milder; rosemary is more resinous and needs a lighter hand.

Storage

Wrap fresh sprigs and refrigerate; keep dried leaves sealed away from light.

Rosemary

Salvia rosmarinus



Strong, resinous and slightly pine-like.

Identifying features

- Firm narrow needle-like leaves
- Dark upper surface and pale underside
- Resinous scent

Origin

Rosemary belongs to the Mediterranean region and neighbouring areas. The evergreen shrub is now botanically named *Salvia rosmarinus*.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh sprigs or dried leaves; chop the dried leaves finely.

When to add it

Let it cook with the food, then remove whole woody sprigs.

Goes with

Potatoes, lamb, focaccia and roasted carrots.

Sources: 7, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Italian focaccia, Mediterranean roasted vegetables and lamb.

Substitute

Thyme takes the dish in a less resinous direction.

Storage

Refrigerate fresh sprigs; store dried leaves sealed, dry and dark.

Oregano

Origanum vulgare



Savoury, warm and assertively herbal.

Identifying features

- Small oval leaves
- Green opposite leaf pairs
- Strong savoury scent

Origin

Oregano is native to Europe and Asia. Its culinary leaves grow on a perennial plant in the mint family.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or dried; dried oregano is convenient for tomato sauces.

When to add it

Simmer in sauce or rub over vegetables shortly before serving.

Goes with

Tomatoes, pizza, aubergines and beans.

Sources: 8, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Greek-style vegetables and Italian tomato sauces.

Substitute

Marjoram is milder and slightly sweeter.

Storage

Refrigerate fresh sprigs; seal dried leaves away from light.

Marjoram

Origanum majorana



Rounded, gently savoury and slightly sweet.

Identifying features

- Small rounded oval leaves
- Soft grey-green colour
- Mild sweet herbal scent

Origin

Marjoram comes from Turkey and the Mediterranean region. This small aromatic subshrub is closely related to oregano.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh and dried forms both work in hearty dishes.

When to add it

Cook briefly with the dish, then taste again at the end.

Goes with

Potatoes, lentils, mushroom fillings and minced meat.

Sources: 9, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European potato, lentil and minced-meat dishes.

Substitute

Oregano, using less to begin with.

Storage

Keep fresh sprigs cool; store dried marjoram sealed and dark.

Sage

Salvia officinalis



Warm, savoury and slightly bitter, with a strong scent.

Identifying features

- Oblong wrinkled leaves
- Velvety grey-green surface
- Strong savoury scent

Origin

Common sage is native to the Mediterranean region. Its grey-green leaves come from a woody shrub.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh leaves suit sage butter; use dried sage sparingly in stuffings.

When to add it

Warm briefly in butter or cook inside a stuffing; avoid burning it dark.

Goes with

Squash, gnocchi, beans and pork.

Sources: 10, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Italian-style sage butter with gnocchi or a savoury stuffing.

Substitute

A little rosemary or thyme gives a different herbal note.

Storage

Wrap fresh leaves and refrigerate; keep dried sage sealed and dark.

Tarragon

Artemisia dracunculus



Gently anise-like, savoury and slightly sweet; the cultivar matters.

Identifying features

- Long narrow flat leaves
- Flexible green shoots
- Anise-like scent

Origin

Tarragon has a wide natural range in the northern hemisphere. French tarragon is the aromatic cultivated form prized in cooking.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh French tarragon is especially aromatic; adjust dried tarragon cautiously.

When to add it

Infuse briefly or add towards the end of a sauce.

Goes with

Eggs, chicken, mushrooms, mustard sauces and herb vinegar.

Sources: 11, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French-inspired egg, chicken and mustard-sauce dishes.

Substitute

Chervil provides a gentler anise note.

Storage

Wrap fresh sprigs and refrigerate, or freeze in portions.

Chervil

Anthriscus cerefolium



Delicate and fresh with a faint anise note.

Identifying features

- Finely divided lacy leaves
- Light green colour
- Delicate anise scent

Origin

Chervil comes from the Middle East, Russia and the Caucasus. It is usually grown as an annual culinary herb.

Fresh or dried?

Best fresh; frozen works, while dried chervil is much quieter.

When to add it

Stir in after cooking rather than boiling it for a long time.

Goes with

Omelettes, spring soup, peas and herb butter.

Sources: 12, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French-style omelettes or central European spring soups.

Substitute

Parsley for freshness, or a little tarragon for stronger anise.

Storage

Refrigerate in a slightly damp cloth and use promptly.

Lovage

Levisticum officinale



Very strong, celery-like and reminiscent of stock.

Identifying features

- Large toothed leaflets
- Glossy dark green colour
- Distinct celery scent

Origin

Lovage comes from the eastern Mediterranean region. It is a perennial plant with large divided leaves.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or dried, starting with very little.

When to add it

Let one leaf infuse the soup, then taste before adding more.

Goes with

Vegetable soup, potato stew, lentils and mushrooms.

Sources: 13, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European vegetable stocks and hearty potato stews.

Substitute

Celery leaves, if celery is suitable for the people eating the dish.

Storage

Wrap and refrigerate the leaves, or chop and freeze; seal dried lovage.

Wild garlic

Allium ursinum



Garlicky, green and fresh.

Identifying features

- Broad lance-shaped leaves
- Smooth green leaf margins
- Garlic scent when crushed

Origin

Wild garlic is native to Europe and neighbouring parts of Asia. Its culinary leaves come from a perennial bulb plant.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh leaves or frozen portions; dried leaves lose much of their fresh character.

When to add it

Use raw in dips, or fold into hot food at the end.

Goes with

Soft cheese, pesto, potatoes and spaetzle.

Sources: 14, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European spring dishes, herbed soft cheese or spaetzle.

Substitute

Chives with a little garlic.

Storage

Refrigerate wrapped and use promptly, or prepare cleanly and freeze.

Mint

Mentha spicata



Fresh, gently sweet and cooling in character; this entry means spearmint.

Identifying features

- Toothed pointed oval leaves
- Green opposite leaf pairs
- Recognisable mint scent

Origin

Spearmint is widespread in Europe and parts of Asia. It belongs to the varied genus *Mentha*, whose cultivars differ in scent.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh for salads and dips; dried mint gives a different aromatic effect.

When to add it

For a fresh note, cut and add at the end.

Goes with

Peas, yoghurt, couscous, lamb and fruit.

Sources: 15, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try a Levantine-style couscous salad, British mint sauce or a fresh yoghurt dip.

Substitute

Lemon balm adds lemon rather than a mint flavour.

Storage

Wrap fresh sprigs and refrigerate; keep dried leaves sealed and dark.

Lemon balm

Melissa officinalis



Gently lemony and green, without much acidity.

Identifying features

- Broad slightly heart-shaped leaves
- Wrinkled green blades with scalloped edges
- Lemon scent when crushed

Origin

Lemon balm is native from southern central Europe to central Asia. This perennial belongs to the mint family.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh leaves are the first choice for a clear lemon aroma.

When to add it

Add just before serving or infuse in a cooled liquid.

Goes with

Fruit salad, soft cheese, peas and cold drinks.

Sources: 16, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try summery central European fruit dishes and soft-cheese desserts.

Substitute

A little lemon zest, which does not provide the herbal note.

Storage

Keep refrigerated in a slightly damp cloth and use soon.

Summer savory

Satureja hortensis



Peppery, savoury and assertively herbal.

Identifying features

- Narrow pointed flat leaves
- Thin branching shoots
- Peppery herbal scent

Origin

Summer savory comes from south-eastern Europe and western Asia. Unlike perennial winter savory, it is grown as an annual herb.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or dried summer savory.

When to add it

Cook with beans and remove coarse stalks before serving.

Goes with

Green beans, lentils, potatoes and mushrooms.

Sources: 17, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European bean dishes and hearty stews.

Substitute

Thyme with a little freshly ground pepper.

Storage

Refrigerate fresh sprigs; store dried savory sealed and dark.

Bay leaf

Laurus nobilis



Savoury and aromatic with a resinous edge.

Identifying features

- Firm elongated elliptical leaves
- Dark green with slightly wavy edges
- Savoury resinous scent

Origin

True bay laurel comes from the Mediterranean region. The culinary leaves are from *Laurus nobilis*, not similarly named ornamental plants.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh leaves differ from dried ones; start with one leaf.

When to add it

Simmer in liquid and remove the whole leaf before serving.

Goes with

Stock, lentils, tomato sauce and braises.

Sources: 18, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French-style stocks, Mediterranean tomato sauces and central European lentils.

Substitute

A little thyme gives a different herbal note; omission is also an option.

Storage

Refrigerate fresh leaves; dry completely and seal for longer storage.

Borage

Borago officinalis



Mild and green with a cucumber-like character.

Identifying features

- Broad rough leaves
- Green with visible bristles
- Cucumber-like scent

Origin

Borage comes from the Mediterranean region. This annual plant is recognisable by its rough hairy leaves.

Fresh or dried?

Young fresh leaves feature in traditional cooking; concentrated preparations are not recommended here.

When to add it

If used, chop finely and add at the end; read the source note.

Goes with

Traditionally herb sauces and cucumber dishes.

Cuisines & dish ideas

Traditionally associated with Frankfurt green sauce; read the source note and suggested alternative.

Substitute

Dill with a little finely grated cucumber makes a different variation.

Storage

Keep fresh leaves cool and use promptly.

Note

Borage can produce pyrrolizidine alkaloids itself, as explained by the BfR. Its traditional use is therefore not a general recommendation to eat it; dill and cucumber are described as a flavour alternative.

Sources: 19, 2, 20

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Coriander leaves (cilantro)

Coriandrum sativum



Boldly green and citrus-like; people perceive it very differently.

Identifying features

- Rounded lobed lower leaves
- Delicate light green stalks
- Distinct green citrus-like scent

Origin

Coriander is associated with the Mediterranean region and western Asia. The leafy herb and the dried fruits come from the same annual plant.

Fresh or dried?

Use fresh or frozen leaves; they are not interchangeable with coriander seed.

When to add it

Fold in when serving; finely chopped stalks can go into a sauce.

Goes with

Salsa, lentils, rice dishes and lime dips.

Sources: 21, 2

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try it as a fresh finish for Mexican-inspired salsa or South Asian-style lentils.

Substitute

Parsley with a little lime zest gives a different flavour.

Storage

Keep the bunch cool and loosely wrapped, or chop and freeze.

Sweet woodruff

Galium odoratum



Origin

Sweet woodruff is native to Europe and parts of Asia and northern Africa. This perennial has conspicuous leaf whorls around slender stems.

Fresh or dried?

Use only reliably identified material; wilting changes its scent. Read the coumarin source note.

When to add it

For culinary aroma, infuse briefly and remove the herb; no dosage is suggested here.

Goes with

Traditionally flavoured drinks and desserts.

Sources: 22, 2, 23

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Hay-like, sweet and distinctive after brief wilting.

Identifying features

- Narrow leaves in whorls
- Several leaves at one stem level
- Hay-like scent on wilting

Cuisines & dish ideas

A traditional central European fragrance for drinks and desserts; read the coumarin note.

Substitute

Vanilla gives a different sweet fragrance, not an equivalent replacement.

Storage

Keep purchased fresh material cool and follow the product instructions promptly.

Note

The BfR lists sweet woodruff as a plant containing coumarin. This entry therefore gives no quantity recommendation for homemade drinks or concentrates.

Black pepper

Piper nigrum



Hot and warm, with woody or fruity notes depending on the pepper.

Identifying features

- Small roughly round berries
- Wrinkled dark brown to black surface
- Warm pungent scent when ground

Origin

Black pepper comes from India. Its dried fruits grow on the climbing plant *Piper nigrum*.

Fresh or dried?

Keep whole black peppercorns for grinding; ready-ground pepper loses scent more quickly.

When to add it

Whole berries can infuse stock; season with freshly ground pepper near the end.

Goes with

Mushrooms, eggs, meat and savoury sauces.

Sources: 24, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European mushroom dishes or Italian-style cheese pasta.

Substitute

A little chilli adds heat without the pepper aroma.

Storage

Store whole or ground pepper sealed, dry and dark.

Paprika

Capsicum annuum



Sweet, hot or smoky depending on the variety; check the label.

Identifying features

- Fine red powder
- Muted brick-red colour
- Fruity spicy scent

Origin

Paprika is ground from dried *Capsicum* fruits. *Capsicum annuum*, the species discussed here, has American origins.

Fresh or dried?

This means dried powder, not fresh bell pepper; sweet and smoked paprika differ.

When to add it

Stir briefly into fat over moderate heat, then add liquid; avoid burning it dark.

Goes with

Goulash, potatoes, beans and dips.

Sources: 26, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Hungarian-inspired braises or Spanish-style potatoes and beans.

Substitute

Pure mild chilli powder, checking the heat first.

Storage

Keep sealed, dry and away from light; use a dry spoon.

Caraway

Carum carvi



Strong, warm and slightly anise-like; quite different from cumin.

Identifying features

- Narrow curved fruits
- Dark brown with pale ribs
- Warm anise-like scent

Origin

Caraway is native to Europe and Asia. The spice sold as seed is botanically a dried fruit.

Fresh or dried?

Use whole dried fruits or crush them just before cooking.

When to add it

Bake into dough or simmer in a braise.

Goes with

Rye bread, cabbage, potatoes and cheese pastries.

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European rye bread, cabbage dishes and cheese pastries.

Substitute

Fennel seed is sweeter; start sparingly.

Storage

Keep whole fruits airtight, dry and dark.

Sources: 27, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Nutmeg

Myristica fragrans



Warm, sweet and strongly aromatic.

Identifying features

- Hard oval seeds
- Brown irregularly wrinkled surface
- Warm spicy scent when grated

Origin

Nutmeg comes from the Moluccas in Indonesia. It is the seed of *Myristica fragrans*, while mace is the surrounding aril.

Fresh or dried?

Finely grate the dried whole nut; use ready-ground nutmeg sparingly.

When to add it

Grate into mash or sauce near the end, tasting after each small pinch.

Goes with

Mashed potatoes, spinach, béchamel and cheese pastries.

Sources: 28, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French béchamel and central European mashed potatoes or spinach.

Substitute

A little mace, allowing for its different strength and flavour.

Storage

Store whole nuts dry and dark; seal ground nutmeg tightly.

Cinnamon

Cinnamomum verum



Warm, woody and sweet-smelling; Ceylon and cassia differ.

Identifying features

- Many thin rolled bark layers
- Light brown brittle quills
- Warm sweet scent

Origin

Ceylon cinnamon comes from Sri Lanka. Its thin rolled bark layers differ from the thicker bark of cassia.

Fresh or dried?

Use dried bark sticks or powder; read the BfR note for frequent use of larger quantities.

When to add it

Infuse sticks in liquid and remove; mix powder into dough or fillings.

Goes with

Apples, rice pudding, baking and braised lentils.

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European apple baking or Levantine-inspired lentil dishes.

Substitute

A little cardamom offers a different warm aromatic direction.

Storage

Keep sticks and powder sealed, dry and dark.

Note

According to the BfR, cassia contains more coumarin than Ceylon cinnamon. The BfR recommends Ceylon cinnamon for people who frequently use larger quantities.

Sources: 29, 25, 23

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cloves

Syzygium aromaticum



Very strong, warm and sweetly pungent.

Identifying features

- Nail-shaped buds
- Dark brown stalk and rounded head
- Very intense spicy scent

Origin

Cloves come from the Moluccas. The spice consists of dried flower buds from an evergreen tree.

Fresh or dried?

Whole dried buds suit infusions; use ground cloves in small pinches.

When to add it

Add whole cloves early and remove before serving.

Goes with

Red cabbage, compote, spiced baking and braises.

Sources: 30, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European red cabbage and winter spiced baking.

Substitute

A little allspice is softer and less pungent.

Storage

Keep sealed away from light; buy small amounts of ground cloves.

Allspice

Pimenta dioica



Suggests cloves, pepper and cinnamon, but is a single spice.

Identifying features

- Rounded berries
- Brown surface with a small calyx mark
- Clove-and-cinnamon-like scent

Origin

Allspice comes from tropical America. Its dried berries come from *Pimenta dioica* rather than a blend of spices.

Fresh or dried?

Use whole dried berries or grind them freshly.

When to add it

Infuse whole berries in cooking liquid; add powder to fillings and dough.

Goes with

Red cabbage, stews, marinades and spice cake.

Sources: 31, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Caribbean-inspired marinades or central European braises.

Substitute

A small pinch of cinnamon with a little clove and pepper is an approximation.

Storage

Keep whole berries sealed, dry and dark.

Juniper

Juniperus communis



Resinous, savoury and distinctly pine-like.

Identifying features

- Rounded berry-like cones
- Blue-black with some dusty bloom
- Resinous pine scent

Origin

Common juniper is widespread in the northern hemisphere. Its berry-like cones are used as a spice.

Fresh or dried?

Use dried culinary *Juniperus communis* berries, lightly crushed.

When to add it

Add early to braises and remove coarse berry pieces before serving.

Goes with

Sauerkraut, mushroom ragout, game and strong sauces.

Sources: 32, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European sauerkraut, mushroom and game dishes.

Substitute

A small sprig of rosemary gives a different resinous note.

Storage

Store dried berries tightly sealed, cool and dark.

Mustard seed

Sinapis alba



Yellow mustard seed starts mildly nutty and develops pungency when crushed and moistened.

Identifying features

- Tiny round grains
- Yellow to ochre colour
- Mustard scent after crushing and moistening

Origin

White mustard has a natural range from Europe to China. Its yellowish seeds are sold as yellow mustard seed.

Fresh or dried?

This entry means dried yellow seeds; brown and black mustard are different ingredients.

When to add it

Simmer whole seeds in pickling liquid or warm them carefully in fat.

Goes with

Pickled vegetables, potatoes, cabbage and sauces.

Sources: 33, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European pickling or South Asian-inspired vegetable dishes.

Substitute

A little prepared mustard, adjusting the dish for its salt and acidity.

Storage

Keep whole seeds dry and dark; refrigerate homemade sauces.

Cumin

Cuminum cyminum



Warm, earthy and strongly aromatic; not the same as caraway.

Identifying features

- Elongated lengthwise-ribbed fruits
- Light brown and only slightly curved
- Warm earthy scent

Origin

Cumin comes from the eastern Mediterranean region and western Asia. Like caraway, the dried fruits are commonly called seeds.

Fresh or dried?

Crush whole seeds freshly or use ground cumin.

When to add it

Toast whole seeds briefly over moderate heat; warm the powder briefly without burning.

Goes with

Lentils, chickpeas, chilli dishes and roasted carrots.

Sources: 34, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Levantine chickpeas, South Asian lentils or Mexican-inspired beans.

Substitute

Ground coriander seed with a little pepper takes a different direction.

Storage

Keep whole fruits sealed and dark; use ground cumin promptly.

Turmeric

Curcuma longa



Earthy, warm and slightly bitter.

Identifying features

- Fine powder
- Strong yellow to orange colour
- Earthy spicy scent

Origin

Turmeric is an ancient cultivated plant from the South Asian region. The powder comes from its dried underground rhizome.

Fresh or dried?

This entry shows dried powder; the fresh rhizome tastes different.

When to add it

Warm the powder briefly in oil, then cook with liquid.

Goes with

Rice, lentils, cauliflower and sauces.

Sources: 35, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try South Asian-inspired rice and lentil dishes.

Substitute

Omission is more accurate than a same-colour substitute; saffron tastes different.

Storage

Store powder sealed, dry and dark; do not shake it over a steaming pan.

Ginger

Zingiber officinale



Fresh ginger is citrus-like and hot; dried ginger is warmer and less juicy.

Identifying features

- Irregular branching rhizome
- Beige skin and pale yellow cut interior
- Hot citrus-like scent

Origin

Ginger is an ancient cultivated plant of tropical Asia. The culinary piece is an underground rhizome rather than a true root.

Fresh or dried?

Use the fresh rhizome in stir-fries and sauces; powder often suits baking.

When to add it

Briefly sauté finely chopped ginger early, or grate some in near the end.

Goes with

Stir-fried vegetables, soup, marinades and baking.

Sources: 36, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try East Asian-inspired stir-fries or central European ginger baking.

Substitute

Ground ginger makes a different version rather than an exact substitute; start to taste.

Storage

Keep fresh pieces wrapped and cool or freeze them; seal powder dry.

Green cardamom

Elettaria cardamomum



Warm and fresh with a slightly eucalyptus-like character.

Identifying features

- Oval lengthwise-ridged pods
- Pale green shell and dark seeds
- Fresh spicy scent

Origin

Green cardamom comes from southern India. Its culinary seeds sit inside dried fruit capsules of the ginger relative *Elettaria cardamomum*.

Fresh or dried?

Whole green pods protect the aroma; grind the seeds just before use.

When to add it

Infuse lightly crushed pods in liquid and remove; add ground seeds to dough.

Goes with

Rice pudding, yeast dough, coffee and rice dishes.

Sources: 37, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Scandinavian-style yeast baking or South Asian-spiced rice.

Substitute

A little cinnamon with lemon zest gives a different warm note.

Storage

Keep whole pods sealed, dry and dark.

Star anise

Illicium verum



Intensely sweet and liquorice-like.

Identifying features

- Star of woody fruit chambers
- Brown pointed segments
- Strong anise scent

Origin

True star anise comes from southern China and northern Vietnam. The spice is the star-shaped dried compound fruit of *Illicium verum*.

Fresh or dried?

Whole dried fruits are easy to remove; use powder sparingly.

When to add it

Infuse whole stars in sauce or stock, then remove.

Goes with

Plum compote, braises, broths and spiced baking.

Sources: 38, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Chinese-inspired braises or a winter plum compote.

Substitute

Aniseed, starting with a small amount.

Storage

Keep whole stars sealed, dry and dark.

Vanilla

Vanilla planifolia



Warm, soft and sweet-smelling, without replacing sugar itself.

Identifying features

- Long narrow flexible fruits
- Dark brown wrinkled skin
- Tiny dark seeds inside

Origin

Culinary vanilla comes from Mexico and Central America. The fruits commonly called pods grow on a climbing orchid.

Fresh or dried?

Use cured dried pods or pure vanilla powder; vanilla sugar also adds sugar.

When to add it

Split the pod, infuse seeds and shell in liquid, then remove the shell.

Goes with

Rice pudding, custard, pears and baking.

Sources: 39, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try French-inspired custards, central European puddings and baking.

Substitute

A labelled vanilla extract, allowing for the product strength.

Storage

Store pods airtight and dark according to the pack, protecting them from drying out.

Saffron

Crocus sativus



Floral, hay-like and slightly savoury; a little shapes a whole dish.

Identifying features

- Individual fine threads
- Dark red colour
- Slightly flared thread ends

Origin

Saffron comes from a long-cultivated crocus that is not known in the wild. The spice consists of dried flower stigmas.

Fresh or dried?

Dried threads are easy to portion; powder is harder to assess visually.

When to add it

Infuse the threads in a little warm liquid, then add both threads and liquid.

Goes with

Risotto, rice, fish soup and yeast baking.

Sources: 40, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Italian risotto or Spanish-inspired rice dishes.

Substitute

There is no equivalent; turmeric changes both colour and flavour differently.

Storage

Keep threads sealed, dry and protected from light.

Fennel seed

Foeniculum vulgare



Sweet, anise-like and warm.

Identifying features

- Elongated ribbed fruits
- Greenish to light brown colour
- Sweet anise scent

Origin

Fennel comes from the Mediterranean region. Its dried lengthwise-ribbed fruits are used as fennel seed.

Fresh or dried?

Crush whole dried fruits just before using.

When to add it

Bake into dough, or toast briefly and simmer in sauce.

Goes with

Bread, fish, tomato sauce and roasted vegetables.

Sources: 41, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Italian-style tomato sauces or a Mediterranean fish dish.

Substitute

Aniseed is also sweet but different; start sparingly.

Storage

Keep whole fruits sealed, dry and dark.

Coriander seed

Coriandrum sativum



Warm and nutty with a citrus-peel note, unlike the fresh leaf.

Identifying features

- Round lengthwise-ribbed fruits
- Beige to light brown colour
- Citrus-spicy scent when crushed

Origin

Coriander is associated with the Mediterranean region and western Asia. The spice consists of dried fruits from the same plant that provides cilantro.

Fresh or dried?

Grind whole dried fruits freshly or use ground seed.

When to add it

Toast whole fruits briefly or simmer in stock; warm powder briefly.

Goes with

Bread, carrots, lentils and marinades.

Sources: 21, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European bread or South Asian-inspired lentils.

Substitute

A little cumin with lemon zest is a distinctly different variation.

Storage

Keep whole fruits sealed and dark; buy small amounts of powder.

Chilli

Capsicum annuum



Fruity to smoky, with heat varying greatly by variety.

Identifying features

- Pointed dried fruits
- Wrinkled dark red skin
- Pale seeds inside

Origin

Chillies belong to *Capsicum* species from the Americas. *Capsicum annuum*, discussed here, includes many cultivated forms with different heat levels.

Fresh or dried?

Fresh fruits, dried pods, flakes and powders differ; this entry shows dried pods.

When to add it

Add early for integrated heat or near the end for a clearer fruity note.

Goes with

Beans, tomato sauces, stir-fried vegetables and marinades.

Sources: 26, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try Mexican-inspired beans, East Asian stir-fries and spicy tomato sauces.

Substitute

Milder chilli flakes or paprika, adjusting for the heat wanted.

Storage

Keep dried pods sealed and dry; refrigerate fresh chillies.

Dried bay leaf

Laurus nobilis



Warm and savoury, with less green character than fresh bay.

Identifying features

- Elongated firm leaf blade
- Muted olive green and visible midrib
- Savoury scent when broken

Origin

Dried bay comes from the same Mediterranean *Laurus nobilis* as fresh culinary bay. Drying is a processing method rather than a separate plant species.

Fresh or dried?

Use fully dried true bay leaves, not ornamental plants with similar names.

When to add it

Add one leaf early to liquid and remove before serving.

Goes with

Lentils, soups, tomato sauce and braises.

Sources: 18, 25

[Ingredient card and recipe links on menutome.com](#)

Cuisines & dish ideas

Try central European lentils, French-inspired braises and Mediterranean sauces.

Substitute

Fresh true bay, starting with little and tasting.

Storage

Store dry, airtight and away from light; replace when the scent is weak.

Sources & image note

The sources support botanical origins, features and factual notes. Pairings and substitutes are editorial cooking suggestions. Sources accessed on 25 October 2026.

Image note: All illustrations in this ingredient guide were created with AI.

Texts created with AI assistance and reviewed for content by the publisher.

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