

Combining Herbs & Spices to Create Your Own Blends

Presented by Susan Belsinger

The culinary herbs can be divided into two main flavor groups, mild and robust. They tend to follow the annual and perennial classifications. Basil, chervil, dill, and parsley are some of the more delicate-tasting annuals. Robust perennials, which generally have woody stems, include garlic, rosemary, sage, savory, tarragon, and thyme. There are some annuals like coriander and summer savory that are strong in flavor, while some perennials, such as marjoram and bay, are mild. Mild and robust do not always refer to the taste of the fresh leaves. Mild also describes herbs that combine well in cooking, or whose flavors soften in cooking.

Robust herbs are hardy and their flavors remain strong even when cooked for a long time. They can be used together or singly for braised or roasted meat or poultry, and in soups or stews. They can be combined with basil, marjoram, or other mild herbs.

The milder herbs can often be used in larger amounts and with more variation. Two or three can be combined in one dish if their flavors are complementary. These mild-mannered herbs are good in salads and dishes in which the leaves are used raw or cooked for a short time. Follow your own taste when combining herbs. Experiment with herbs that appeal to you most and that you think might work well together. Even if you add a little too much of a fresh herb, it is unlikely that it would ruin a dish. However, if too many herbs are used in one dish, their flavors may clash or become muddy. When combining herbs you should find a balance of flavor in your palate. Usually a blend of two or three herbs provides enough flavor interest and balance for most dishes. Complex dishes like long-simmered soups or stews or *bouquets garnis* may use up to four or five herbs.

Drying an herb usually concentrates some, but not necessarily all of its oils. This means that some flavor elements are stronger, while the fragrance may be weaker. The nuances and balance are not as great as they are when fresh herbs are used.

When using a dried herb in place of a fresh herb, the amount of dried herb to substitute is usually one-third that of the fresh. For example, a teaspoon of dried marjoram would be substituted for a tablespoon of fresh, minced leaves. Dried robust leaves should be substituted carefully. Often, only one-half teaspoon of sage, rosemary, or thyme will be needed in place of a tablespoon of the fresh minced herb.

Add dried herbs in small quantities; for maximum flavor, crumble the leaves as you add them to a dish to release their essential oils. If the dried herbs are fairly fresh, their taste will be strong. Dried herb seeds are full of the plant's essential oils and are quite strong in flavor. Usually a teaspoon is enough to flavor a whole dish. Add a small amount, simmer, taste, and adjust as needed.

Herbal Blends

Many of the following herb blends are prepared with fresh herbs. However, when the fresh herbs are not in season or you don't have them on hand, dried herbs work perfectly well. Just keep in mind that dried herbs are much stronger because the water has evaporated out of the leaves and the essential oils are concentrated. Therefore, if you would normally use 3 sprigs of fresh thyme, you would probably only use one or two of the dried sprigs. The ratio for substitution of fresh to dried herb is generally 3 to 1 (i.e.: 6 fresh sage leaves to 2 dried sage leaves).

The other item of importance that I cannot stress enough is to dry your own herb leaves whole or buy whole herb leaves, rather than in small broken pieces, avoid ground or rubbed. Once the herb leaves are crumbled, they release most of their essential oils and lose much of their aroma and flavor. It is best to crumble the whole leaves as you use them in a recipe and put all of the herbal essence into your dish.

Bouquet Garni

Parsley
Thyme
Bay leaf

Optional: savory, sweet marjoram, sage, or rosemary

A *bouquet garni* (bōh-kāy gār-nēē) is a bundle of herbs tied together. The classic French *bouquet garni* combines the trio of bay leaf, thyme, and parsley. The bay and thyme can be fresh or dried; the parsley is used fresh and sometimes it is just the stems. The famed Auguste Escoffier defines a *bouquet garni* in the specific proportions of 8 parts parsley, 1 part bay and 1 part thyme.

Used in French cooking most often for flavoring stocks, but also used in soups, stews, and sometimes sauces. The traditional herbs are bay leaf, parsley, and thyme, although there are many variations. I have seen a piece of celery or lovage with the leafy top used, marjoram, sage, savory, and even rosemary. Bouquet garnis are most often made with fresh herbs, by tying the fresh herb sprigs together with thin kitchen string or unwaxed, unflavored, dental floss is good for this—sometimes they are wrapped in a leek leaf and then bound with the string. Dried bouquet garnis are made by combining the dried herbs leaves and placing them in a small piece of cheesecloth that is then tied up, or you can use the little bouquet garni bags, especially designed for this purpose, fill your own teabags, or place them in a stainless tea ball. The bouquet garni is removed at the end of cooking and discarded.

Although the classic contains just three herbs, many different herbs are used for bouquet garnis depending on the dish being prepared. However, you can make your own *bouquet garni* from any combination of herbs that you like. Usually a blend of two or three herbs provides enough flavor interest and balance for most dishes. Complex dishes like long-simmered soups or stews with *bouquets garnis* may use up to four or five herbs. Besides the traditional herbs and

depending upon the recipe, I sometimes like to use savory, sweet marjoram, sage, or rosemary in my bouquet garnis.

A traditional bouquet garni includes bay, parsley, thyme, and you might also add savory, and an allium such as garlic chives. Fresh bay leaves are ethereal compared to dried ones—since they lose their fresh bouquet. Either flat-leaved or curly parsley can be used, or a few of each plant. French, English, or Provençal thyme are all good culinary herbs. Summer or winter savory are both good; winter is stronger in flavor. Use this *bouquet garni* in soups, stocks, stews, and in marinades.

The herbs can be tied with a string, tied up in cheesecloth or placed in a muslin bag so that they can easily be removed from the pot before serving. Generally, the herbs are fresh in season, but they can also be dried. Quite literally the term means a “garnish bouquet” and these were always removed from the finished dish.

Store the Bouquet Garni in a labeled jar away from heat.

Italian Seasoning

The most well-known Italian herbs are of course, basil and oregano. I like to use a little sweet marjoram to tame the heat of oregano, and most often use the herbs in equal parts. Very occasionally I will add just a little of one or two of the following—sage, rosemary, thyme or fennel seed—depending on the dish. This is a nice dried blend to have on hand and add to your tomato sauces, minestrone, to garnish vegetables, meats or fowl, is great in a vinaigrette or used to make garlic bread. Of course, fresh garlic must be added along with these herbs. I use this combo fresh when in season—it is wonderful on a plate of fresh tomatoes, tossed with fresh-cooked summer squash or beans, on anything from the grill, and sempre with pasta.

Makes about 1/2 cup

About 4 tablespoons basil

About 2 tablespoons oregano

About 2 tablespoons sweet marjoram

Optional: bay leaf, parsley, rosemary, fennel seed

Combine the herbs in a bowl and toss well to blend. Store the Italian Seasoning in a labeled jar away from heat and out of direct light.

Stuffing Blend (Poultry Seasoning)

The most common herbs used with chicken and turkey are sage and thyme. You can use a blend of just these two herbs, or many commercial blends include one, a combination of, or all of the following: basil, marjoram, parsley, rosemary, and savory. This seasoning is used in the stuffing, baked in or out of the poultry, or sprinkled in the cavity of the bird during cooking, rubbed on the skin, in the basting juices, or after cooking scattered over the warm bird. Most often used dried, you can also combine these herbs and use them fresh.

Makes about 1/2 cup

About 3 tablespoons sage

About 3 tablespoons thyme

About 2 tablespoons sweet marjoram

Optional: basil, parsley, rosemary, and savory

Combine the herbs in a bowl and toss well to blend. Store the stuffing blend in a labeled jar away from heat and direct light.

Togarashi

This spice blend is believed to date back to 17th century Japan and is used to add spice to dishes from noodles and rice, grilled meats, chicken and fish and is often used as a rub or in a marinade. It flavors vegetables, salads and salad dressings, soups and tempuras. I like it sprinkled on veggies, over dips, on popcorn and potatoes.

Often called Japanese seven spice, there are two types of togarashi: “shichimi” and “nanami”. They are very similar though—the ingredients are the same, just in different proportions—and nanami is more fragrant with extra orange peel. “Shichi” translates to seven and “togarashi” means peppers, thus called seven spice, which is the number of spices used in addition to the nori seaweed.

When first introduced to this spice blend, I was intrigued by the addition of the orange peel and seaweed added to the chiles—it is a fun and flavorful condiment. Togarashi is fairly hot, so reduce the amount of red chile flakes if you want it to be less pungent.

Makes about 1/2 cup

1 sheet quality toasted nori, crumbled

1 tablespoon white sesame seeds

1 tablespoon black sesame seeds

1 1/2 teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns

3 tablespoons red chile flakes

1 tablespoon and 1 teaspoon dried orange peel

1 1/2 teaspoons ginger powder
1 1/2 teaspoons poppy seeds

Pass the sheet of nori over a gas flame or hot burner for 2 or 3 seconds to barely toast it. Crumble it into a bowl into small pieces.

In a dry skillet or spice roasting pan, lightly toast the sesame seeds with the Sichuan peppercorns over low heat, shaking the pan a few times, until fragrant, about 30 to 60 seconds; take care not to burn them or they will taste bitter. Transfer them to the bowl with the crumbled nori and let cool.

Add the red chile flakes, orange peel, ginger and poppy seeds to the bowl with the toasted seeds and nori and stir to blend. Transfer half of the mixture to a spice/coffee grinder and pulse until it is coarsely ground; it should be a coarse texture rather than ground fine—leave some texture. Repeat with the other half of the spice mix and then toss the blend together.

Transfer to an airtight jar and label. Store in the pantry or out of direct light for about 3 months.