

MAIL TODAY

Spices have unique flavouring and health-promoting properties which can be optimised by using the correct cooking techniques

BY RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

THE IDEA OF cooking without spice is anathema for Chef Gaurav Gaur, who is disappointed at the way Indians cook these days. "India is the pioneer of spices — the *Ayurvedas* have enough and more on them. But the way we cook completely takes away their nutritional benefits," declares Gaurav, executive chef, FIRE, The Park Hotel.

While we all appreciate how spices add to the flavour of food, less is known about their health promoting qualities. Or that the way we cook our food, spice and herbs either enhances or nullifies these benefits. The standard rule to preserve the goodness of spices is to add them at the end of the cooking process. "Most people add spices and herbs to hot oil at the beginning of the cooking process, which depletes their nutrient value," says Geetika Ahluwalia, dietician, Delhi Heart and Lung Institute. Here we guide you on the fine art of cooking in such a manner that enhances both the flavour of your food as well as the health benefits of the various herbs and spices in your dish.

STURDY ALL THE WAY

IT'S ONLY when we have a cold that we appreciate the value of ginger tea, or *adrak ki chai* that brings so much comfort and relief to that sore throat. This is because the active ingredient in ginger is a compound called gingerol which is believed to relax blood vessels, boosts blood circulation and relieve pain. Apart from being helpful for colds, it also helps with stomach problems. "Ginger is commonly used as a digestive aid and contains compounds that ease motion sickness and nausea," says Geetika. These healing qualities can be attributed to its high Vitamin C and antioxidant content. This root is also useful in fighting heart disease, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Better still, cooking doesn't destroy its health impacts. "Ginger is a very a sturdy spice and can withstand any ill treatment. If raw ginger is too pungent then it can be soaked in vinegar and used as an *achaar*. Gingerbread or ginger cookies are a great accompaniment to a cup of tea, even if you don't have a cold," says Geetika.

◆ **Best eaten raw.** But the good news is this root is as sturdy as it looks and being doused in oil and overcooked doesn't decrease its health benefits.

BEST EATEN RAW

GARLIC IS better known for warding off vampires instead of its amazing health benefits! But the fact is that if one can get over the issue of pungency, the *ayurvedic* suggestion of eating a clove of garlic first thing in the morning will help you ride over many a niggling health problem. "A wide range of diseases is countered by garlic. Research has shown that it dramatically lowers LDL cholesterol levels, combats high blood pressure and reduces blood sugar levels in diabetics," says Geetika. The list goes on and on. Extensive studies have also shown garlic to have clot busting properties, prevent cancer and help clear skin ailments like psoriasis. "Some people burn the garlic in oil, which is unnecessary. If garlic cannot be eaten raw then it is best to roast it on a *tawa* finely chop or powder it and then use it as a garnish. Else, while cooking it should be

added after the tomatoes and veggies so that it comes into minimal contact with oil," says Honey Khanna, dietician, Max Hospital. Chef Gaur adds, "if you must add the spices to oil, add them when the oil is slightly hot, that way the oil extracts the flavour without destroying the health benefits."

◆ **A raw clove of garlic** has the most health benefits. Usually it is added directly to hot oil during the cooking process, but this destroys its benefits significantly.

ADD AT THE END

LONG KNOWN for its anti-inflammatory properties, recent research has revealed that turmeric is a natural wonder, proving beneficial in the treatment of many different health conditions from cancer to Alzheimer's disease. Curcumin, which gives turmeric its bright yellow colour, is thought to be the active ingredient in this spice. A natural detoxifier, turmeric is a potent anti-inflammatory that studies have found is just as effective as drugs like hydrocortisone. "This spice has been found to be helpful in fighting inflammatory bowel diseases, rheumatoid arthritis, cystic fibrosis, cancer

especially prostate cancer — and Alzheimer's disease. It's also shown promise in offering cardiovascular and liver protection," says Honey. A well known remedy for cough and cold is to mix raw turmeric powder in milk or drink turmeric juice. "Turmeric is best added to a dish just before it is removed from the fire. To make sure the raw taste does not linger, simmer the dish for a minute after adding the spice," says Geetika.

ON YOUR SPICE RACK

TURN TO YOUR spice rack when you are wondering how to revive your flagging health and remember to be liberal with the powdered spices lying there. Commonly used spices like cinnamon, coriander, cumin, and chilly have plenty of goodness to offer. Coriander leaves are a very good source of iron, while seeds are supposed to be effective in the treatment of hypertension and high cholesterol. "Coriander leaves crushed into chutney or added to yoghurt is a fabulous cure for dysentery and diarrhoea," says Geetika. Many

sprinkle leaves liberally into the food, but ideally these should be added to a dish just before serving it since cooking destroys its properties. Since coriander powder isn't as effective as the fresh leaves, remember to add a little more of it than usual during cooking. The same goes for cinnamon which has anti clotting and brain boosting properties. "Clove and cinnamon is specially recommended for lowering bad cholesterol or LDL levels. It is also great for diabetics and is a great energy booster," says Geetika, adding that cinnamon can be added to dessert or cookies to retain their healthful properties. Cumin or *jeera* is recommended for insomnia. A teaspoonful of roasted and powdered cumin seeds mixed in a glass of water can help those who are sleep deprived as well as those who have a problem concentrating. Adding *jeera* to oil — as is the usual norm — should be avoided. And the next time you order pizza remember to ask for extra oregano. "The antioxidants in oregano are 40 times more than that in an apple. This herb should only be used as a garnish — abundantly — because cooking destroys it completely. It cleanses the digestive system and helps cure stomach ailments quickly," says Geetika.

◆ **Dry red chillies** are already depleted of their nutrients since they are processed so use fresh ones and don't drop them directly into the oil.

THE FIERY CURE



IT IS A common belief that chillies should be cracked in oil at the beginning of the cooking process or added in between to cut the hot flavour. The truth is however, that chillies are best eaten raw as that is when the health benefits are maximal. "Chillies, whether red, green or dried, are a treasure house of antioxidants and vitamin C which fight against cancer and cardiac disease. Research is ongoing to show they also help to control weight — though that might be because people can't eat too much of a chilly laden dish," laughs Geetika. Chillies are great for building the immune system and helps increase metabolism — thereby helping the body to burn more calories, which might explain the weight control aspect. High in Vitamin A and B6, they also have clot busting properties. "Always try and eat chillies raw, and chilly powder should be added towards the end of the meal," says Geetika.

◆ **Dry red chillies** are already depleted of their nutrients since they are processed so use fresh ones and don't drop them directly into the oil.



BE THE MASTER OF YOUR SPICES

rituparna.mukherjee@mailtoday.in