

CUMIN

One of the most-often used spices in my kitchen is one that is not a typically western or European spice, and that is cumin. Cumin, also pronounced “coomin” as well as “cum-in”, is the dried seed of a small member of the parsley family. It grows primarily in hot climates, and was native to Egypt and the Holy Land, and is mentioned in the Bible not only as a seasoning for soup and bread but as a form of currency.

The ancient Egyptians used cumin as far back as 5,000 years ago, and cumin seeds have even been found in the pyramids. Cumin was also a favorite of the ancient Greeks and Romans, both as a seasoning and as a cosmetic, and was popular in Europe and England back in medieval times, where it also became a symbol of love and fidelity. People carried cumin in their pockets during wedding ceremonies, and soldiers going off to war were given a loaf of cumin bread by their wives or sweethearts. Despite this, cumin gradually lost favor in Europe after the Middle Ages.

Cumin always remained a favorite in the Middle East, however, and is a staple flavoring of Moroccan food, where it flavors couscous, their national dish. Cumin is also a major seasoning ingredient in Indian food, where it appears in almost all dishes and spice blends. And although the use of cumin faded in Europe, the Spanish brought it to Mexico and Cuba, where it remains an essential ingredient in Mexican and Cuban food, and is one of the main spices found in chili powder, so necessary for good old American chile con carne.

Cumin, with a distinctive powerful and pungent taste, slightly bitter yet warming, was thought to aid the digestion, and modern research is starting to confirm that, showing that cumin may help the stomach produce the enzymes that break down food. Cumin also seems to have anti-cancer properties.

Cumin is available in both whole seed and in ground form, which is stronger in flavor. Many Indian dishes call for adding a teaspoon or so of whole cumin seeds to the hot oil in the frying pan for a couple of minutes before adding the onions and whatever else goes into the dish. And although cumin is not used in Europe very much anymore, it still is used in some Portuguese sausage, in Germany as a pickling ingredient in sauerkraut, and flavors both Dutch Leyden and German Muenster cheeses. And cumin, together with caraway which it resembles in looks if not in taste, is used to flavor the famous German liqueur, Kummel.

Cumin is a fairly strong spice, and can overwhelm other flavors, so don't use more than a teaspoon in a dish meant to serve four people. I like to gently roast some cumin seed in a hot pan for a couple of minutes and then ground it in a spice grinder for a richer flavor.

Cumin goes wonderfully well with beans, and is a great addition to many dishes featuring garbanzos, black beans, or lentils. In fact, the Indians make a topping for their dahl, or lentils. Simply heat a tablespoon of oil in a small pan. When hot, add a teaspoon of cumin seeds, some chopped garlic, a chopped Serrano chili, and a small seeded and chopped tomato. Cook for a few minutes until the tomato softens, and stir this into your pot of lentils.

If you're a fan of brown rice, try adding some cumin, dried apricots and some almond slivers for a great taste. Adding a little ground cumin to some stir-fried or sautéed vegetables will give them a North African flair. Or sizzle some cumin seeds and a little chopped garlic in some hot olive oil and pour it over the vegetables. A little ground cumin is wonderful in a lime or lemon-based marinade for chicken, lamb or pork. Add about a quarter-teaspoon ground cumin to your corn muffin batter for a southwestern touch.

Take a hothouse cucumber and slice it in half, without peeling it. With a spoon, scrape out the seeds. Then cut it into fine dice and stir it into a cup of plain yogurt, along with a good pinch or two of salt, a quarter-teaspoon of ground cumin, and a couple of tablespoons of chopped fresh mint or cilantro. This is *raita*, an Indian dish that is a wonderful accompaniment to any Indian meal, or indeed to any roast or barbecued meat.