REFERENCE · EVERYDAY COOKING

Herb and Spice Pairing Chart

Prepared and approved by N. J. Sorensen, RDN, LD · FoodAndNutrition.com

Choose the right herb and spice for a dish without guessing, or find a workable substitute when an ingredient is unavailable. Sheet 2 carries the complete herb and spice reference.

Default Seasoning Combinations

Start here. One default combination per ingredient — the most reliable starting point for each.

MAIN INGREDIENT	DEFAULT HERB	DEFAULT SPICE	BASE	ALSO WORKS
Chicken	Thyme	Paprika	Garlic + olive oil	Rosemary, garlic powder
Beef	Rosemary	Black pepper	Garlic + olive oil	Oregano, cumin
Fish	Dill	Paprika	Lemon + olive oil	Parsley, coriander
Eggs	Chives	Black pepper	Butter or olive oil	Parsley
Beans and lentils	Cilantro	Cumin	Garlic + olive oil	Bay leaf, coriander
Vegetables (roasted)	Thyme	Paprika	Olive oil	Rosemary, garlic powder
Vegetables (sautéed)	Parsley	Garlic	Olive oil	Basil, red pepper flakes
Pasta and tomato	Basil	Red pepper flakes	Garlic + olive oil	Oregano

> **Default rule for most dishes:** one fat (oil or butter), one aromatic base (garlic or onion), one herb, and one spice. This four-element structure works across nearly all savory cooking.

QUICK BUILD — CHICKEN

- **Fat:** 2 tablespoons olive oil
- **Base:** 3 cloves garlic, minced
- **Herb:** 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- **Spice:** 1 teaspoon paprika

Combine and coat the chicken. Roast at 400°F. Treat 25–30 minutes as a starting estimate only — thickness and equipment vary. Cook until the thickest part reaches **165°F**, measured with a food thermometer.

DRIED VS. FRESH

Dried herbs are more concentrated. Substituting **dried for fresh**, use one-third the amount. Substituting **fresh for dried**, use three times the amount.

STORAGE

Dried herbs and ground spices. Airtight, away from heat and light. Replace every 12–18 months. Potency fades before visible deterioration — if it doesn't smell when the jar opens, it won't flavor the food.

Whole spices. Peppercorns, coriander, cumin, cardamom keep up to 3 years whole. Grind as needed; pre-ground loses volatile compounds within months.

Fresh herbs. Wrap in a damp paper towel and refrigerate; use within 5–7 days. Or stand upright in a glass of water — basil at room temperature, others refrigerated.

Substitution Reference

Results will differ but remain coherent.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE	USE INSTEAD	NOTE
Fresh basil	Dried basil	One-third the amount
Marjoram	Oregano	Stronger — use less
Coriander seed	Cumin	Similar warmth, less citrus
Tarragon	Fennel frond + parsley	Approximates mild licorice
Dill (fresh)	Fennel fronds	Good for fish and salads
Rosemary	Thyme + sage	Less piney, similar weight
Saffron	Turmeric	Color only — not flavor
Cumin	Caraway	Milder, same warmth
Celery seed	Celery salt	Cut other salt in recipe
Mace	Nutmeg	Nutmeg is stronger

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Complete Herb and Spice Reference

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NAME	TYPE	FLAVOR PROFILE	BEST USED WITH
Allspice	Spice	Warm blend of cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg	Sausages, braised meats, poached fish, pies, relishes
Achiote	Spice / paste	Mild, earthy, peppery; yellow-orange color	Latin American, Caribbean, Filipino stews and marinades
Anise	Spice / herb	Distinct licorice flavor	Cookies, pastries, bread
Basil	Herb	Sweet, aromatic, slightly peppery	Tomato dishes, pesto, salads, fish, eggs
Bay leaf	Herb (whole)	Pungent, slightly sassafras-like aroma	Stocks, soups, stews, braised meats, beans
Bouquet garni	Herb blend	Varies; typically thyme, bay, parsley	Stocks, soups, sauces — remove before serving
Caraway	Spice (seed)	Earthy, slightly anise-like	Rye bread, cabbage, sauerkraut, Eastern European dishes
Cardamom	Spice	Sweet, aromatic, complex — expensive	Curries, Danish pastries, pickling
Cayenne	Spice (ground)	Very hot, sharp heat	Soups, sauces, fish, eggs, spice blends
Celery seed	Spice	Strong celery flavor; use sparingly	Salads, dressings, pickling, tomato dishes, marinades
Chervil	Herb	Mild parsley and tarragon combination	Soups, salads, egg dishes, fish, sauces
Chili powder	Spice blend	Warm, earthy; mild to hot by blend	Chili, stews, sauces, ground meats
Chives	Herb	Mild onion flavor	Salads, eggs, fish, soups, sauces
Cilantro	Herb	Bright, citrusy, pungent; some taste soap	Salads, salsa, sauces, soups, eggs, dressings
Cinnamon	Spice	Warm, sweet, aromatic	Baked goods, stewed fruits, ham, hot drinks, some stews
Clove	Spice	Pungent, sweet, intense — use sparingly	Whole: marinades, stocks, hams. Ground: pastries, cakes
Coriander	Spice (seed)	Warm, slightly citrusy — cilantro seed	Pickling, sausages, curry, gingerbread, salsa
Cumin	Spice (seed)	Earthy, warm, slightly bitter	Chili, curry, beans, sausages, eggs, soups, rice
Curry	Spice blend	Complex, peppery, warm; turmeric-forward	Curry dishes, vegetables, soups, fish, meat, rice
Dill	Herb / seed	Herb: light, fresh. Seed: more pungent	Seed: pickling, soups. Herb: salads, fish, vegetables
Fennel	Spice (seed)	Sweet licorice, similar to anise	Sausages, tomato sauces, marinades, fish, pickling
Fine herbs	Herb blend	Delicate; chives, tarragon, parsley, chervil	Egg dishes, fish, broiled meats, compound butters
Garlic	Fresh / dried	Pungent, aromatic — base of most savory cooking	Almost universal across savory dishes
Ginger	Spice	Warm, sharp, slightly sweet	Baked goods, curries, stir-fries, pickling, chutney
Juniper berry	Spice (whole)	Piney, resinous — principal flavor of gin	Game dishes, marinades, sauerkraut
Mace	Spice	Like nutmeg but milder — nutmeg's outer covering	Baked goods, sausages, fish, vegetables, preserves
Marjoram	Herb (dried)	Like oregano but milder and sweeter	Beef, veal, lamb, poultry, sausage, soups, vegetables
Mint	Herb	Cool, aromatic; spearmint and peppermint common	Lamb, fruits, tea, peas, carrots, jellies, sauces
Mirepoix	Vegetable base	Savory, aromatic — onion, celery, carrot	Stocks, sauces, soups, roasts
Mustard seed	Spice	Very pungent; white, yellow, or brown	Prepared mustard, pickling, sauces, salsa
Nasturtium	Leaf / seed	Peppery, pungent	Salads, pickling
Nutmeg	Spice	Sweet, warm, aromatic	Baked goods, cream sauces, soups, chicken, veal
Oregano	Herb	Pungent, stronger than marjoram	Italian and Mexican dishes, tomato sauces, meats
Paprika	Spice (ground)	Mild and sweet to smoky to hot by type	Fish, seafood, meats, salads, sauces, eggs, garnish
Parsley	Herb	Fresh, mild, slightly peppery; curly and flat-leaf	Garnish, stews, sauces, salads, vegetables, potatoes
Pepper	Spice	Black: pungent. White: milder, sharp. Green: mild	Universal across nearly all savory cooking
Poppy seeds	Spice (whole)	Crunchy, nutty	Breads, rolls, pastry, cookies, dressings
Rosemary	Herb (whole)	Very aromatic, piney, resinous	Lamb, beef, chicken, fish, soups, stews, marinades
Sachet bag	Spice mix	Varies; peppercorns, bay, thyme, parsley stems	Braised meats, game, stews, soups, pickling
Saffron	Spice (threads)	Mild, floral; intense yellow — very expensive	Rice, potatoes, soups, sauces, paella, biryani
Sage	Herb	Pungent, earthy, slightly musty	Stuffing, pork, poultry, soups, stews, fish
Savory	Herb	Fragrant, peppery, mint-family; summer preferred	Salads, eggs, vegetables, stuffing, soups, meats, fish
Sesame	Seed	Nutty, high oil; toasted is stronger	Bread and roll garnish, salads, Asian cooking, tahini
Tarragon	Herb	Delicate, slightly licorice; like mint and anise	Béarnaise, chicken, fish, salads, eggs, vinegar
Thyme	Herb	Warm, earthy, slightly floral	Soups, stocks, sauces, meats, poultry, salad dressings
Turmeric	Spice (ground)	Earthy, slightly bitter; vivid yellow-orange	Curries, rice, soups, pickles, eggs — color as much as flavor

Where this chart does not apply. Cultural spice blends — garam masala, za'atar, ras el hanout, five-spice — have internal ratios that substitution alters significantly; use them as their recipes prescribe. **Delicate finishing herbs** such as basil and parsley burn at high heat; add them after cooking or as garnish. **Baking** spice ratios are formula-dependent and need more precision than general pairing guidance provides.

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