

In the back of your spice rack is a blend waiting to happen

In the deep recesses of that cupboard, there is inspiration

BY KRISTEN HARTKE

Whether they're found in a cupboard, a drawer or a rotating rack, a host of little-used spices are probably taking up valuable real estate somewhere in your kitchen — and they've probably been there for years. Maybe it's a jar of allspice you only crack open for gingerbread cookies at Christmas, the sumac you were inspired to purchase by the Ottolenghi cookbook on the coffee table or that jar of Himalayan pink salt that just seems too fancy to use.

Use it all, says chef and spice purveyor Lior Lev Sercarz, and use it now. "Your spice cabinet should be a place of inspiration," he says, "not a place to gather dust."

Raised in a kibbutz in Israel where he recalls the food as being either bland or vinegary, Sercarz sees spices as the place where recipes should start, rather than an afterthought sprinkled on just before serving. "A potato can be transformed into a meal, just with the addition of spices," he says.

Start by taking stock of what's tucked away in that cabinet, beginning with the darkest recesses, which most likely house the spices that have seen the least use. If they've been there longer than a year — as Sercarz suspects they have — you don't have to discard them, but you could consolidate several. Try creating blends with them, to use as seasoning for dips and sauces, dry rubs for meat, poultry and fish, or even to amp up the flavor in coffee and cocktails.

"If you make blends, you will find ways to use them across recipes, from sweet to savory," says Sercarz. "It's an edible tool."

He suggests using the spice pantry the way you use your refrigerator, where items are regularly eaten and replaced and stock is rotated every few months from the back to the front. New additions should be marked with a date one year from when purchased, just to give you a deadline for using it up, or, at the very least, creating a new blend with what's left.

Take ground cloves, for instance. As a spice with a tongue-numbing quality, it can frighten home cooks with its intensity, yet Sercarz sees it as a versatile vehicle for flavors — when used in moderation. In his latest book, "The Spice Companion: A Guide to the World of Spices" (Clarkson Potter, 2016), he recommends blending cloves with other spices that might also be found in the back of the cupboard, such as juniper berries, galangal and licorice root, to create a seasoning for sautéed savoy cabbage, or to add a spicy note to a traditional old fashioned cocktail.

"Most people don't need a recipe, they just need the application," Sercarz says. Hence, he'll suggest dusting fresh scones with a mixture of cloves and confectioners' sugar or mixing cloves with balsamic vinegar and grated apples to accompany pork chops.

Sercarz particularly urges home cooks to stop thinking of individual spices as relating to specific cuisines. He points out that black pepper, a native of Kerala, is hardly limited to Indian recipes, yet we tend to use chipotle powder only in Mexican recipes, or relegate curry leaves to, well, curry.

"It's a spice," he says. "It doesn't matter where it comes from."

Not only is pepper used across all cuisines, different types of pepper have specific flavor profiles, so it sometimes makes sense to switch out the black peppercorns for other varieties, such as herbaceous green or delicate white. This practice enhances different recipes and allows for a deeper appreciation of the characteristics of that variety.

When cleaning out the cupboard, take time to taste the spices. (Sercarz considers anything that can be dried and used to add flavor a spice, so this includes herbs, bark, berries, leaves and so forth.) Then start consolidating them into new combinations, such as celery seed with cayenne pepper. You could use that blend to flavor a compound butter, bloody mary or crab cake. A blend of marjoram, dried mint and fennel seed can season grilled fish, be sprinkled over bruschetta or lend a grassy note to emulsified olive oil and orange juice to drizzle on raw baby turnips.

"You probably already have a signature chicken recipe where you use a certain combination of spices," says Sercarz, "like salt, pepper, paprika and oregano. Just go ahead and make a batch of



PHOTOS BY THOMAS SCHAUER/LA BOITE

Chef Lior Lev Sercarz of La Boite in New York says that blending spices is a good way to consolidate room in your cupboard and use up what you've had for awhile.



JENNIFER CHASE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Spice blends that Sercarz recommends, from top: Apium, Estrago, Limonit, Muraya and Sal.

Mix them up, then put them on almost anything

BY KRISTEN HARTKE

"We don't have a culture for using spices" in America, says Lior Lev Sercarz, chef and owner of New York spice store La Boite, "but, at the same time, everybody uses them, so there is hope." If you take his suggestion to blend the spices in your pantry into new combinations, he says, those blends can be used endlessly — in scrambled eggs, stir-fries, stews and soups, sprinkled onto toast, or even infused into sparkling water.

When creating blends, add varying amounts of ingredients to a bowl, tasting every so often to adjust to your palate. Some spices — such as cumin, caraway and mustard seeds — do well when they've been lightly toasted in a dry pan over low heat or in the oven, to help release their oils. Remember to play with textures as well, which creates layers of flavor: keep some seeds whole; finely chop dried citrus peel, and lightly crush dried herbs.

For grinding, a standard coffee grinder (it's best to have one dedicated for spices) will do the job well; as Sercarz notes, a mortar and pestle looks pretty on the countertop, but it'll take a lot longer to grind those spices to the right consistency.

Which spices are essential to keep on hand? He suggests chile powder, paprika (he favors smoked), cinnamon, fennel or anise, and cumin or caraway.

"Add some good salt and pepper, and you're on your way," he says. While you're at it, change up the brands that you buy every so often, just for the sake of comparison — you might be surprised at the differences you'll find just among basic black peppercorns. Here are five blend sugges-

tions that you may want to try from Sercarz's book, "The Spice Companion: A Guide to the World of Spices" (Clarkson Potter, 2016):

Apium: 2 tablespoons celery seed, ½ tablespoon poppy seeds, 1½ heaping teaspoons ground caraway seeds, scant ¼ teaspoon black sesame seeds.

Adds texture to julienned raw vegetables drizzled with olive and lemon juice or a lightly salty crunch to pasta salad.

Estrago: Scant ½ teaspoon coarsely chopped black peppercorns, scant ¼ teaspoon granulated dried lemon peel, 2 teaspoons ground dried dill, 1 tablespoon crushed basil leaves, ¾ cup ground dried tarragon leaves.

Use to make a compound butter for grilled meat or fish or add to sautéed shrimp and fettuccine.

Limonit: 3 tablespoons ground lemon grass, 2½ tablespoons crushed dried basil leaves, 1 tablespoon toasted/ground coriander seeds, 1½ heaping teaspoons Aleppo or mild chile flakes.

Use in a saute of pork, pineapple and cashews, or to brighten a mango and shrimp salad.

Muraya: 2 cups ground dried curry leaves, 1½ tablespoons crushed dried cilantro leaves, 1 tablespoon dried basil leaves and 1 teaspoon ground Sichuan pepper.

Good for braised eggplant in coconut milk or as a savory note in toffee pudding.

Sal: 1 teaspoon ground anise seed, 1 teaspoon granulated dried orange peel, 1 tablespoon coarsely ground Sichuan pepper, 1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds, 1 tablespoon fleur de sel or medium-grain sea salt.

Sprinkle over raw salmon or on fresh avocado salad.

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Most spices work together regardless of origin, Sercarz says. "It's a spice," he says. "It doesn't matter where it comes from."

that blend for yourself, consolidating it into one jar, then try it on eggs, or roasted fish or whipped into goat cheese."

At La Boite, Sercarz's New York spice store, you'll find more than 40 spice blends for inspiration, with combinations that can seem unusual or spark an "aha" moment. Fenugreek, cumin, dried onion and garlic become a perfect foil for spinach and lamb, while lemongrass, ginger and palm sugar can highlight either a fruit smoothie or a spicy dish of clams and chorizo. That little jar of pumpkin pie spice that's hiding in

the corner of your cupboard would be just as much at home in a chickpea curry as on the Thanksgiving table, because, in Sercarz's philosophy, a blend really has no limitations.

"I've never had spices that don't work together," Sercarz says, "it's just about adjusting the ratios. And even when I think a blend is very savory, I'll have a customer put it into a brownie and prove me wrong. I love that."

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Where to buy spices around D.C.

Whether it's the Internet or ethnic grocery stores or the farmers market, there are plenty of places to find pretty much every spice under the sun. When shopping for spices, consider purchasing small quantities so that you can use them up while they are at their most flavorful. Lior Lev Sercarz suggests storing spices in glass, if possible, but says acrylic or wood containers are also good options if you're concerned about breakage.

Also, try to avoid storing spices in direct sunlight, too close to the stove or directly above an unintentional heat source like under-cabinet lighting, as this can affect the spices' flavor and longevity.

Here are some local and national spice suppliers:

Bazaar Spices: A wide assortment of cuisine-specific spices and botanicals are available at two D.C. locations (Union Market and Shaw) along with specialty salts in a variety of flavors. bazaarspices.com.

Full Moon Farm: Freshly har-



Buying spices in small quantities makes it easier to use them while they are at their peak.

vested and then dried, the cured herbs from Virginia's Full Moon Farms have a fresh-from-the-farm scent and big flavor profiles; they can be purchased online and at some local farmers markets. fullmoonfarm.net.

La Boite: Sercarz's store specializes in more than 40 unique

spice blends along with single spices. You can purchase online or at the store in New York. laboiteny.com.

Penzeys: With a popular catalogue business as well as stores in 28 states (including locations in Falls Church and Rockville), Penzeys offers single spices and blends in both small and large quantities. penzeys.com.

Souk: From the owners of Sweet Lobby Bakery, Souk's spices are ground to order by the ounce; you'll also find bittering agents like milk thistle seed and wild cherry bark. desouk.com.

The Spice Suite: The D.C. store has more than 100 spices in stock; owner Angel Anderson won a Best of DC award in 2016. thespicesuite.com.

The Spice and Tea Exchange: This national retailer (with locations in Georgetown and Alexandria) offers whole and ground spices, as well as some unusual items like dehydrated wine and beer that can be used in seasoning blends. spiceandtea.com.

—K.H.