

Cooking with Herbs

By Debbie Coyle / Lynnette de Sandoval del Valle de los Unicornios

Here I'll only cover bouquet garni, herbal butters and herbal vinegars but there is much more to cooking with herbs. There are breads, sweets (rose petal cookies!), teas, jellies, sauces, oils, and more.

EXPERIMENT!

Two things to remember when cooking with herbs:

- 1) Fresh herbs and flowers are best, but make sure they were grown for consumption — pesticides are a no-no!
- 2) The oil (flavor) is more concentrated in dried herbs than fresh, a rule of thumb equivalent is:

1/4 teaspoon dried, finely powdered =
3/4 to 1 teaspoon dried, crumbled =
1 1/2 teaspoons fresh chopped

Herbal Butters

Homemade bread fresh from the oven with herb butter melting into it, steamed vegetables with a pat of herb butter, baked potatoes with lots of herb butter! Wherever you use it, herb butter adds a touch of class as well as flavor.

To make herb butter:

Softens one stick of butter or margarine.

Mix in (by spoon or blender) 4 to 6 tablespoons of finely chopped herbs — fresh is best. If you use dried herbs: soak them in warm water for 5 to 10 minutes and then drain before use.

Store in a covered container in the refrigerator or freezer.

Maitre d'hôtel butter, one standard combination, includes parsley, lemon juice, salt and pepper. The lemon juice helps to enhance the herb's flavor — use a few drops to 1 tablespoon, as taste dictates.

Bouquet garni mixtures are perfect combinations for butters. Other possible ingredients include (alone or in combination):

ground onion or garlic, dill, paprika, chives, mint, sage, tarragon, cinnamon, ground rose or marigold petals, nutmeg, rum, vinegar, honey, ground citrus peel (just the colored portion — not the white parts). Play around with it, butters are not expensive to make!

For table service: the butters can be reshaped into a stick, served in a bowl or crock, or molded into fancy shapes with cookie cutters, molds or ice cube trays

Bouquet Garni

Bouquet garni is a traditional method of flavoring soups and stews in which fresh stalks of several herbs are bundled together, simmered with the food and then discarded.

The “classic” bouquet garni combination is:

1 sprig of parsley
1 bay leaf
2 sprigs of thyme
1 sprig of marjoram (optional)

Tie the herbs together with string and hang inside pot during cooking. Remove before serving.

Other popular bouquet garni combinations include:

Parsley, celery leaves, onion and thyme.

Parsley, thyme and cloves. (for lamb)

Parsley, basil, rosemary, oregano, bay leaves, peppercorns and garlic.

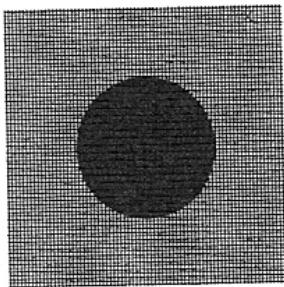
Seasoning is, of course, a matter of taste — experiment with bouquet garni mixtures: start with the traditional recipe and substitute or add other herbs until you find your own special combinations.

If you wish to collect every bit of herb before serving:

Place the herbs in a tea ball during cooking

or

Package them in a cheesecloth bag:



Herbs in the center of Cheesecloth square



Cheesecloth bag, the corners of tied up

Place the bouquet Garni in the center of a 5-6 inch square of cheesecloth. Bring the corners of the cheesecloth together and tie the neck of the “bag” with string. Leave enough string to hang bag in pot.

Bouquet garni can also be made with dried herbs, using a tea ball or cheesecloth bag. These make wonderful gifts: give a jar of bouquet garni mix and include a tea ball or a jar of bouquet garni filled cheesecloth bags, remember to include directions for use and perhaps a recipe or two.

Herbal Vinegar

Herbal vinegars add a special “tang” to your cooking. They can be used for salad dressings, marinades, steaming vegetables (add a little to the water for a subtle taste difference) and anywhere you would use plain vinegar.

Herbal vinegars are easy to make: add fresh herbs (or other flavorings) to the vinegar and heat it so that the herb’s oils are released to combine with and flavor the vinegar. Herbal vinegars are as much about looks as they are about taste, think vertical: stand stocks of herbs upright in the bottle, wind citrus peels around a bamboo stick, use whole (eatable) flowers instead of petals, the visual effects are wonderful!

Ingredients:

Vinegar:

There are many types of vinegar commercially available. None is more “right” as a base for your flavored vinegar than others.

Cider vinegar complements many herbs with its flavor and is supposed to be more healthful than other vinegars.

Red wine vinegar will add its distinctive flavor and color to the mix. Rosemary-flavored red wine vinegar is wonderful on beef!

White distilled vinegar gives you a “pure base” of flavor and color to play with.

There are more — again — experiment. If it doesn’t taste good, maybe it will make a good face or hair rinse!

Flavorings:

The possibilities are endless, try bouquet garni recipes or your favorite herbs and spices. Don’t forget: citrus peels, onions, garlic, peppercorns, rose petals, marigolds, sugar (sweet mint vinegar for lamb!), and fruits (strawberry vinegar!). Again, fresh herbs are best—but if you are using dried herbs, use one of the cooking methods described below and strain them out before bottling (I’ve had the best luck with using the crockpot method with dried herbs).

Preparation methods:

Traditional:

Bottle the ingredients and the vinegar and place in the sun for 3-6 weeks, until the flavor has reached its peak.

Stovetop:

Combine 1/2 of the vinegar and 1/2 of the flavorings in an enamel or glass pan (remember no metal) and SIMMER for 10 to 20 minutes (boiling will cause the vinegar to break down). Let it set for 20 to 30 minutes more and then remove the flavorings. Divide the remaining ingredients between the bottles and fill them 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 way with fresh vinegar. Adjust the flavor by adding more or less of the unflavored vinegar, but remember that the fresh ingredients will continue to flavor the bottled mixture. Cap and store in a cool, dark place. Taste in a couple of weeks and adjust flavor if necessary.

Crock pots:

Combine 1/2 of the vinegar and 1/2 of the flavorings in the crock pot cook on the highest setting for 2 to 6 hours, taste as you go to determine when to stop cooking. Let it cool and then remove the flavorings. If you use dried herbs, package them in cheesecloth (see Bouquet Garni instructions) for easy retrieval—use several small packages rather than 1 large one.

Divide the remaining ingredients between the bottles and fill them 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 way with fresh vinegar. Adjust the flavor by adding more or less of the unflavored vinegar, but remember that the fresh ingredients will continue to flavor the bottled mixture. Cap and store in a cool, dark place. Taste in a couple of weeks and adjust if necessary.

Storage:

Bottles for herbal vinegar can be anything from old wine bottles to store bought, cut glass fancies and anything in between. However, vinegar reacts badly to metal so use plastic caps, corks or lined lids. Herbal vinegars made with distilled vinegar last 3-6 years while wine vinegar last 6 months to 2 years, depending on the storage method. Vinegar kept in the refrigerator will last longer than vinegar displayed in the window or other sunny spot. Discoloration or cloudiness means the vinegar is starting to break down and will probably go bad in the next year.

Vinegar Recipes

Rosemary Vinegar:

2 sprigs of rosemary per bottle (an inch or two shorter than the bottle)

Red wine vinegar

Place half the rosemary in an enamel or glass pan (keep the best stems for the bottles), add 1/2 the vinegar. Simmer for 10 minutes and let stand for 30 minutes. Place a sprig of rosemary in each bottle and fill 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 with fresh.

Lemon Vinegar:

6 4-6 inch lemon peels per bottle (use the yellow part of the peel only, the juice or the white rind will produce cloudiness)

White distilled vinegar

Combine 1/2 the peels with 1/2 the vinegar in an enamel or glass pan. Simmer for 15 minutes. Let set for 20 more minutes. Divide the remaining peel among the bottles and fill each with 1/2 cooked and 1/2 fresh vinegar.

Onion and Garlic:

8 1/2 inch slices of onion

6 cloves of garlic (peeled but whole)

White distilled vinegar

Warning: Cook this on a day when you can air out the house (think about the smell of hot onion, garlic and vinegar!).

Combine 1/2 of the onion slices 1/2 of the garlic cloves with 1/2 of the vinegar in an enamel or glass pan. Simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Let set for 30 minutes. Divide the remaining ingredients among the bottles and fill each with fill 1/2 with cooked and 1/2 with fresh vinegar.

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