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Herbs- The Secret of Foreign Cuisine

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Herbs

The Secret of Foreign Cuisine

American cooks lack the ingredients, not the knack, declares Jane Stallings

CULINARY herbs, with a history behind them as romantic as the names thyme, chives, sage, laurel and rosemary, are truly ancient. Most of them originated around the Mediterranean region, hence fresh herbs are used almost exclusively in Europe today.

“In France cooking with herbs is taken for granted,” Clarita de Forceville states. “The French cook would no more think of omitting the ‘bouquet garni’ than the salt.” A classic of French cookery, the “bouquet garni” is included in most of the country’s recipes. It consists of two or three laurel leaves, two thyme leaves and one of parsley. An integral constituent of “boeuf à la mode” and “ragout de mouton”, two famous French meat dishes, it seasons French soups, meats en casserole and stews. According to famous French chefs, herbs should blend with whatever they supplement and not be discernible, individually, to the taste.

America has only a limited amount of fresh herbs on the market, which is sufficient since we do not have a taste for them. Dried herbs, which the American homemaker finds chiefly, are satisfactory to those of us who have uneducated palates.

Parsley, the commonest herb in use, is employed in America chiefly as a garnish. However, there are many other ways to serve this lowly plant that may grow wild and unperturbed in your back yard. The ancient Greeks relished it in soups and salads, the British use the leaves for seasoning fricasses and dressings for chicken and veal, while the economical Germans—true to their standards—use both roots and tops for cooking. According to them, the roots make an excellent boiled potato to be mashed, in savory omelettes, in soups, sauces for meats of questionable identity. In Germany, cruets of pulverized mint are set on the table to be dusted upon gravies and soups.

The aristocrat of culinary herbs, it is relished by peasants and royalty alike. German peasants flavor their cheese, cabbage soup, household breads, sauerkraut, biscuits and cake with caraway; the Dutch put it in their famous cheeses; in Norwegian and Swedish country districts black caraway bread is eaten with gusto by both natives and visitors. Trinity College, Cambridge, retains the charming custom of serving roast apples with a little saucy caraway, as do the partakers of the Shakespearean-like London Livery.

Other herbs employed in Europe but practically unheard of in America are savory, known as the “pepper herb”, marjoram, the German sausage herb, tarragon, used mainly to flavor vinegar. English rosemary, a pleasant addition to summer cups, and cheril, the chief ingredient in the seasoning used for the famous French “omelette aux fines herbes”.

The fact that dieters are instructed not to eat highly seasoned foods well illustrates the important place herbs hold in making ordinary foods really delicious. It is important to add just the correct amount of the right flavoring, and only good cooks and gourmet chefs have the knack, it seems. Most experts agree the trial-and-error system is the best way to develop “just the right flavor.” We all have an equal chance to discover epicurean tastes and dishes.