

The Power of Herbs: A Little Spice Goes a Long Way

What is Flavor? Flavor is defined by Webster's New World Dictionary as "*the quality of a substance that is a mixing of its characteristic taste and smell*". Flavor is influenced by our sense of smell. The use of our olfactory sense prepares our palate for the foods we are about to eat. Enhancing the flavor of our foods with spices and marinade adds to this sensation. The better the food smells, the better we anticipate it will taste.

There are any number of ways to enhance the flavor of foods. Sauces and marinades are common flavoring agents but simple herbs and spices are among the most underrated of all agents. Seasoning your meats prior to roasting or grilling enhances their flavor. Any grill master can attest to the delectable flavor of a grilled steak seasoned with fresh cracked black pepper and kosher salt. The salt and the pepper bring out the natural flavors of the meat. Marinating the meat (with products such as bourbon) along with adding smoking woods (i.e. oak, hickory or cherry) to the charcoal opens up an additional world of flavor.

Where do you begin? Investing in a spice rack is very important in developing recipes for a flavorful dishes in a healthy lifestyle. Indispensable spices for your home rack include: *cayenne pepper, Kosher salt, cracked black pepper, oregano, basil, paprika* and *thyme*. For even more flavorful dishes, *crushed red pepper, onion powder, garlic powder, and cumin* are good staples to have in your collection. Unless you are an everyday cook, it is recommended that spices are bought in small quantities so they won't lose their flavor. In addition to spices adding a unique flavor to meats, they add a minimum amount of calories which make them the preferred choice for healthy cooking.

How can you give your dishes their own signature flavor? Creating your own spice mixtures is not only fun but easy. For Jerk, Cajun, or Blackened seasonings, it's a simple matter to use the Internet to find a recipe (or peruse a local library or bookstore for recipe books with ideas). Creating your own recipe, you can alter the flavor to suit your tastes. A personal favorite mixture is blackened seasoning - customary for salmon or other fish such as catfish, but is also delicious on grilled burgers, steaks and chicken breast. With the depth of flavor provided by blackened seasoning, no additional sauce is needed to add to the dish. The following is a recipe for blackened seasoning including the calorie contents (in parenthesis)

Blackened Seasoning

1 tbsp paprika (20)

2 tsp salt (0)

1 tsp garlic powder (9)

1 tsp onion powder (8)

½ tsp cayenne (3)

2 tsp black pepper (12)

½ tsp thyme (0)

½ tsp oregano (2)

Total calories in the mixture: 54 calories

The above recipe is enough to season at least 10 servings of meat. Keep your mixture in a well sealed zipped bag in a cool dark place and use as needed. Close securely after each use. The mixture will keep its flavor for at least 6 months this way.

Why are herbs and spices a healthy way to add flavor? As an example, salmon is one of the most flavorful and healthy meats. You will find grilled, smoked or blackened salmon in nearly every Triangle area restaurant. Low in calories and saturated fat, and high in protein, salmon is one of the best health conscious foods (targeting of course fresh, wild salmon until the farm-raised salmon is raised in safer environments). Broiling, baking, or grilling are recommended by experts over frying as the preferred method to prepare salmon because they cook off any fat which may have any pollutants. Salmon has an average of 261 calories per 4 ounce portion, an impressive 33 grams of high quality protein, and a full daily portion of vitamin D. Salmon also contains Omega 3 fatty acids which reduce inflammation in our bodies and promotes a healthy heart. Grilled and blackened salmon takes between 8 and 14 minutes to cook. Smoked salmon takes up to 3 hours (after a curing time of 12 to 24 hours).

Now let's compare the calorie content in the above blackened seasoning to common servings of condiments and sauces for chicken, beef, pork and seafood. The following calorie contents listed are per tablespoon: ketchup (15), mustard (15), steak sauce (20), barbecue sauce (30), sweet and sour sauce (44), tomato pasta sauce (110), mayonnaise (139), and pesto (196). Add to this sliced cheese (110) or 3 strips of bacon (156) [and let's not forget the bun (200)].

Using just two of the condiments, plus extras, on your sandwich adds almost 500 additional calories to your meal! One local restaurant has a hamburger with barbeque sauce and bacon that comes in at over 1200 calories (this includes the two strips of bacon, barbeque sauce, beef patty, cheddar cheese and bun). And let's not forget, the sandwich does come with French fries, for another 409 calories. For a 200 pound man, that totals to almost the number of recommended calories for the entire day!

What alternative can you make at home? Take the opportunity to try a well seasoned hamburger without the *fixin's* and we guarantee that you will be pleasantly surprised. The combination of fresh spices along with burning wood over charcoal adds a special texture and flavor to an ordinary hamburger, chicken breast, steak or salmon. Slice your preferred meat and add to a mixed green salad with 2 tablespoons of dressing for another healthy alternative. Rather than deep frying chicken wings for your next tailgate party, try brushing your wings with apple cider vinegar and Cajun seasoning. After grilling, toss the wings again with 2 tablespoons of seasoning for a delicious and healthier alternative.

There is no reason to sacrifice your health for flavor. Experiment at home and when you eat out. Try the marvelous flavors that are available from a simple combination of spices. So next time you are on the grill and the steak sauce is beckoning- leave it in the cupboard, open your loaded spice rack and begin a new healthy adventure.

Tyrone Irby and Kathy Fall

Tyrone Irby, 43, has over 15 years in the beer, health and food service industries. He founded Up In Smoke Catering in 2005 as a healthy catering alternative and founded Choice Personal Fitness in 2007. He is regularly active in weight training, baseball and photography. He resides in Durham, North Carolina with his dog Bernie.

Kathy Fall, 46, has over 20 years in the technology and engineering industries. She is a lifelong writer who writes poetry, prose, technical documents, and business plans. She is regularly active in power walking, Yoga, and Chen style Tai Chi Chuan. She resides in Bronx, New York with her son Cheikh.

Tyrone and Kathy are also brother and sister, originally from Brooklyn, New York.

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