

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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April 14, 2006

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Cilantro - love it or leave it!

The world is divided into two types of people: those who love cilantro and those who hate it. Cilantro is an herb, a member of the carrot family. It is also referred to as Chinese parsley. Coriander is the seed of the cilantro plant, and it was probably one of the first spices used by mankind. Some sources claim that coriander dates back to 5000 BC. It has even been found in the tombs of Pharaohs.

Three parts of the coriander plant are used in flavoring foods. Each has its own distinct flavor and odor: (1) the fresh green leaf, cilantro, (2) the seed coriander which is used as a spice, and (3) the root which adds zest to many curry dishes. The leafy herb cilantro is used in many kinds of dishes around the world. It's the unique smell and taste that many people find they either like or dislike. Its flavor has been compared to a mix of parsley and citrus, although some people call it a putrid smell. They are the ones who hate it! The coriander seed has a distinctive taste of lemon and sage. It's much more mild and pleasant.

Cilantro's citrusy flavor is what is highly favored in Mexican, Asian and Caribbean cuisine. If you've ever eaten Mexican food, you've probably eaten cilantro. The leaves are used in salsas, salads, burritos and meat dishes. In India, the leaves used in chutneys and the seeds are used in curry. When chopped, the leaves as well as the roots add zest to many Thai foods. They mash both the leaves and roots in green curry paste too. You really need to use the leaves when they are fresh and raw, because they lose their flavor and fragrance if they are cooked too much.

Fresh cilantro leaves are found alongside, parsley, fresh basil, dill and other fragrant herbs in many markets today. Because cilantro looks so much like parsley they sometimes get mixed together. If you're in doubt, taste or smell a bit of leaf to be sure of what you are buying. Much of the cilantro sold in supermarkets in the US comes from California where it grows year-round.

Coriander is usually used as a spice or a condiment. Probably the place where most people have tasted it is in cookies and yeast breads such as Danish pastries. Ground coriander is the spice that gives sweet breads, rolls, gingerbread and cakes that warm flavor. Coriander is also included in seasonings for meats such as sausages, stews, and chicken dishes. When it comes to trying something new, why not begin by adding a dash of coriander to cooked beets for a zesty treat.

As part of traditional medicine, coriander seeds have been used to treat loss of appetite, gas, diarrhea and minor infections. However, there is no research to show that it really helps or cures any of those problems. But if you like the flavor, there's no problem with chewing on some seeds.

This week's recipe is for a pesto made from cilantro. Original Italian pesto is a green sauce made with fresh basil, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese and garlic. It is usually served over fresh cooked pasta but can be put on chicken or fish as well. Unlike basil pesto, this recipe uses cilantro and cashew nuts. The sweetness of the nuts enhances the flavor of cilantro instead of competing with it. You can also use pesto as a spread on warm rolls, as garnish with tacos, or add it to cottage cheese or yogurt for a dipping sauce with a international tang.

Although some recipes may not list fresh cilantro as an ingredient, they often use it as a garnish. It's low in calories and fat and adds flavor to any dish. Another tip:

whatever you don't use, you can freeze. Line an ice cube tray with plastic wrap and fill in the individual cube spaces with the pesto. Freeze and remove from the ice tray, put in a sealed freezer bag for future use. So, if you and your friends are not yet cilantro lovers, why not give it a try? If you think this might be too strong to start with, use half cilantro and half parsley. A whole new world of flavor is waiting for you!

Cilantro Pesto

Ingredients:

3 fresh garlic cloves	1 C packed cilantro leaves, large stems removed
½ C fresh Cashews	2 Tbsp fresh lemon juice
4 Tbsp Olive oil	

Preparation:

Place all ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth. Serve as a dip with crackers or chips or may be used to add flavor to your favorite pasta dish. Keep refrigerated until used.

(Thanks go to Mariah Arias, Dietetic Intern, for her contribution to this article!)

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