

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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For many of us, our closest encounters with the herb oregano come on a pizza. It's usually the little grey-green crumbled leaves in the shaker on the table, or that the guy behind the counter splatters across the pie just as it comes out of the oven. To those accustomed to American pizza and spaghetti, a sauce without oregano is 'missing something.' It just doesn't taste as good as it usually does. Which seems reasonable for an herb whose name, thousands of years ago, meant "mountain joy"!

Oregano, or at least one of the many herbs called oregano, has been used since before Greek and Roman times in the Mediterranean. Some people call it Spanish thyme. Wild marjoram is another name it gets. Whatever the name, the herb is used to give a "Mediterranean" flavor to pizza and spaghetti sauce certainly, but also to bread, cheese, fish, eggs, vegetables, beans and lentils. Many herbed or spiced olives and olive relishes have oregano as a major part of the herb mix. People make oregano tea. Some recipes call for it in ice cream too.

There's another herb with a very similar flavor that is used frequently in Mexican foods. This plant has similar flavor and scent compounds but is usually much stronger. The flavor is described as 'sharper'. If you want a strong oregano flavor, look for Mexican oregano. It's part of the mix sold as 'chili powder', and is used in Mexican soups and stews, usually ones with meat. Yet a third plant with a similar flavor is used often in Philippine cooking. If possible, gently sniff the herb before you buy it, to decide if it's too strong for your tastes.

Most spice descriptions call it pungent, herb-y, slightly bitter or aromatic. It certainly provides mouthwatering aroma. Just think of a fresh-from-the-oven pizza and your mouth can start to water. Beside the heavenly scent, a couple of the chemicals in oregano react with the lining of our mouths to make our mouths feel heat. It's not a pepper-type heat, just a sensation of warmth. But it can be a very strong sensation, so add oregano gently if you're experimenting with a recipe. To liven up the flavor and aroma of dried leaves rub them gently in the palms of your hands before adding them to the dish.

That heat may be part of the reason that most cooks prefer to use the dried form rather than fresh leaves. The fresh leaves have a much stronger, camphor-type smell that reminds some people of old-fashioned moth balls if it's used in too large a dose. It's one of those heat-producing chemicals that creates the aroma.

Beyond food, oregano has had medicinal uses for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks and Romans used it for aching muscles, to calm cramping and upset digestive systems, and as an antiseptic for open sores or wounds. It is certainly being studied, for these and potentially many other medical and food safety uses. However the results so far are not very promising. Part of the problem is that what seem to be the most active ingredients are not well or evenly absorbed. Some people absorb a lot, others very little. Also, large doses of some of them can severely irritate the skin or the linings of the lungs or stomach. Some that are absorbed are grabbed by the kidneys and kicked out in the urine almost immediately, before they could do other jobs. So there's still a long way to go before oregano becomes a medicine.

But there's nothing at all to keep us from enjoying it in our food! Here's a

Mediterranean version of an old favorite. It will taste familiar, a little like pizza, but different too. Give it a try for dinner with mac and cheese, meat loaf or chops.

Stewed Tomatoes with Oregano

4 cups canned tomatoes (2- 15 oz cans)	½ tsp dried oregano leaves
¼ tsp dried basil leaves	1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 Tbsp sugar or substitute	1 Tbsp margarine or butter
1 ½ Tbsp cornstarch (or 3 Tbsp flour)	2 Tbsp cold water
1 slice dry bread, crusts removed	1 tsp salt optional

Combine tomatoes, oregano, basil, onion, sugar, pepper (and salt if using) in saucepan.

Chop or crush any large chunks of tomato. Bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer 15 minutes. Add margarine. Combine cornstarch and cold water, mix until smooth.

Drizzle slowly into simmering tomatoes, stirring constantly until thickens. If this is not thick enough, crumble slice of bread and stir into tomatoes. Serves 4-5.