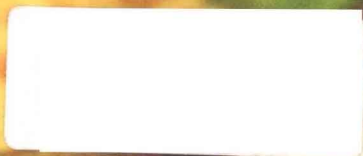


**HERBS**

# Herbs

*Herbs*

Over 200 mouth-watering dishes for every  
season, using nature's supreme ingredients



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Over 200 mouth-watering dishes for every season, using nature's supreme ingredients



Edited by Lyn Coutts



PERIPLUS



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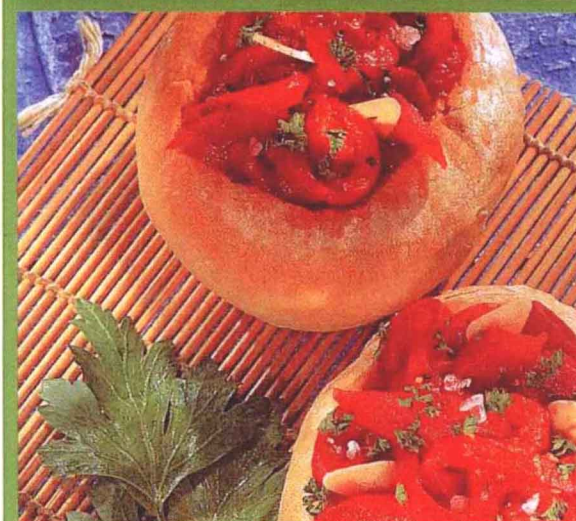
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# INTRODUCTION

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For many years herbs, both fresh and dried, were relegated to supporting roles in cooking. As garnishes, they were hastily scattered over a dish to make it look presentable; or as an ingredient, they were often added as an ill-considered after thought. But herbs now have starring roles; restaurant menus rarely fail to list the herbs used in a dish, and the makers of ready-made meals know that if there is no herb in the name, the product will not move off the shelf. Because of this top billing, it is appropriate that we learn how to store and use herbs so as to extract their full flavours.

There is nothing new about this. Herbs, after all, are plants of great antiquity going back to the earliest civilizations. There are records of their uses and techniques of cultivation in ancient Egypt, Persia, Arabia, Greece, China and India. The Chinese compiled a list of 365 herbs by 2700 BC. Both literally and metaphysically, herbs have their roots in our collective past.

Herbs have a magical and mystical hold over traditions in many cultures. The ancient Romans believed that a wreath of bay leaves would protect the household from lightning strikes, and the Ancient Greeks burned thyme as an offering to their gods. Even in modern Greece, a wreath of herbs is often hung on the front door to absorb evil influences that could otherwise spell doom for the family.

Herbal medicine is once again being given the

respect in Western cultures that it deserves. Many of us will now opt for a herbal remedy or a calming herbal tea before we reach for the medicine chest. It has been suggested that medicinal preparations—mostly based on herbs—were a by-product of cooking. All herbs have medicinal qualities, some providing the active ingredients in modern pharmaceutical compounds.

Our current affair with herbs – and long may it continue and strengthen – is comprehensive. We bathe in herbs, wash our hair with herbed shampoos, anoint wounds with herbal liniments, and last, but not least, we eat them and we are all the better for it. It seems only natural then that the nutritional benefits of many herbs should be recognized. Parsley, for example, is brimming with vitamins A, B, and C and iron; and a handful of parsley, chewed, will also sweeten the breath.

Aiding and abetting the surge in herb cooking is the easy availability of fresh herbs – parsley, basil, dill, coriander and mint are on the supermarkets shelves throughout the summer and beyond – and the introduction of herbs and seasonings from China, Japan, South-east Asia, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Herb flavours that were once considered exotic are now well on their way to becoming standard in home cooking. Coriander, which graces almost every Thai dish, was until recently one such exotic herb.



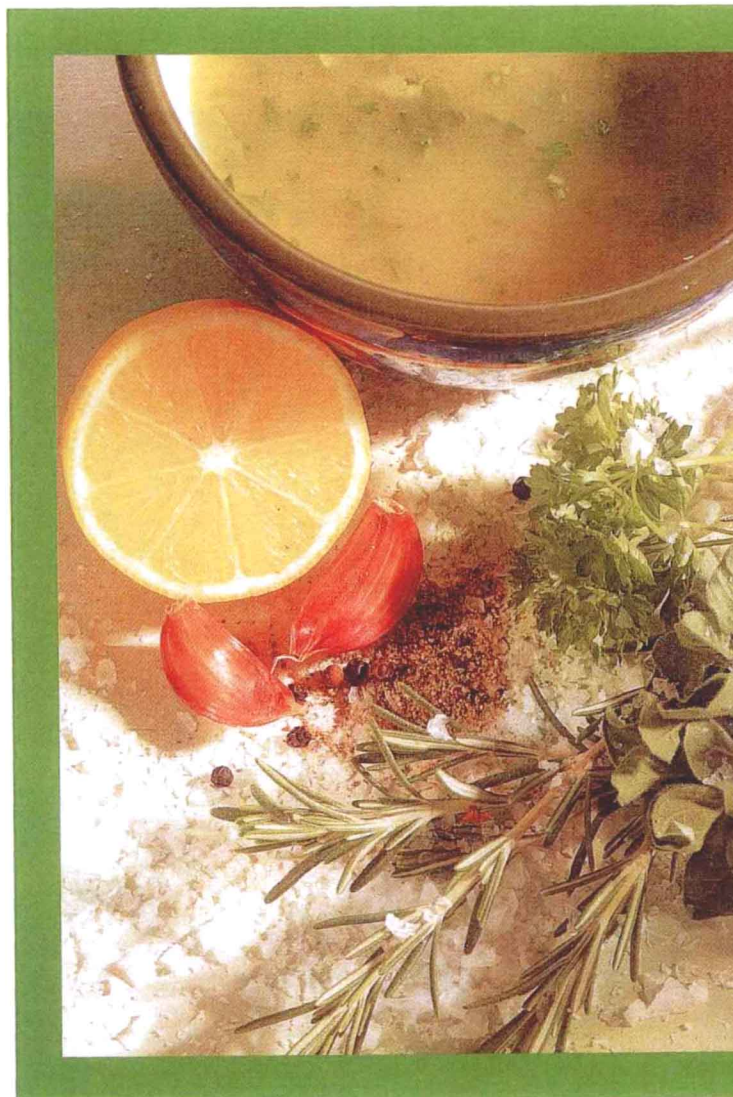
Because of the universal nature of herbs, this book includes recipes from Portugal, Lebanon, India, Thailand, China, Italy, Greece, France, the Balkans, Mexico, South America, North America and Russia. Though the recipes are very different, each offering the opportunity to savour varied tastes, the unifying theme is herbs. Each recipe unwraps a herb's secrets, so that their wonderful – and sometimes challenging – flavours, textures, colours and aromas are revealed. The types of dishes range from the wholesome to the indulgent, simple and basic to the complex and sophisticated. There are recipes for vegetarians, and for parties, family meals, breakfasts and brunches, picnics, suppers and formal dinners.

### PERFECT PARTNERS

Certain herbs and foods go together like Gable and Leigh, Astaire and Rogers. They combine in exciting relationships, or meld in perfect harmony. Some of these partnerships are well-established in cooking: chives with potatoes or eggs; dill with fish or cucumbers; tarragon with chicken; basil and tomatoes; rosemary and lamb; bay leaf with stews and even custard. Indeed, without the frisson of sage and veal, there is nothing 'jump in the mouth' about the Italian dish, saltimbocca.

Some starring herb partnerships include: thyme, marjoram and sage; and basil and oregano. Parsley goes with just about everything, and even seems to enhance the flavour of the herbs in its company.

Do not be bound by these relationships, however, experiment and develop your own specialties using the recipes in this book as a base. Likewise, the measurements, timings and temperatures suggested in this book are not written on tablets of stone. It is far better to employ your own good judgment and sensitive palate. The only way to really tell if the flavours of a dish are as you want them is to taste as you cook. Products vary from brand to brand, and even the flavour of herbs varies from season to season. Many herbs are at their prime for only



*HERBS WORK PARTICULARLY WELL IN DRESSINGS AND MARINADES*





short periods, therefore it may be necessary to increase or even decrease the quantity of herbs used in a particular recipe. The exception to this is parsley, which retains a consistent flavour throughout the year.

When you try new herb combinations, bear in mind that lovage, oregano, marjoram, hyssop, bay, sage, thyme and rosemary are regarded as strongly pungent and flavourful herbs, so use judiciously. Note that recipes using uncooked eggs should not be consumed by people at risk, such as those with weak immune systems and pregnant women.

## GROWING HERBS

Recall how you savour the aroma of herbs in dishes, then imagine enjoying those aromas every time you walked into your garden or kitchen. Herbs will not only add sparkle and zest to your cooking, but they will also help to purify and sweeten your environment.

Easy herbs to grow indoors in pots on windowsills are: thyme, rosemary, marjoram, parsley and chives. Even mint is best confined to a pot. Plant herbs in a good-quality potting mix into fair-sized pots with adequate drainage holes. It may be necessary to use a liquid fertilizer to maintain the nutrients in the potting mix to encourage good growth. Site the pots in a sunny, warm position, and water frequently.

In the garden, depending on location and aspect, a traditional herbal garden is possible. But if space is limited, make sure you plant at least some of the following: bay, basil, rosemary, lemongrass, parsley, marjoram, thyme and oregano.

The best time to harvest fresh herbs is as soon before cooking as possible, or in the morning before they are warmed by the heat of the sun. Sever the sprigs or stems with scissors so that the leaves are not bruised. Store them until needed as described in the next section. Harvest herbs for drying just as they begin to flower to take advantage of their full flavour at this time. Gather them on a dry day, or after the dew has dried.



GRILLED SARDINES WITH ROSEMARY



## PREPARING AND STORING HERBS

Rinse herbs in cold water and remove any discoloured leaves. Shake or pat with kitchen paper to dry before cutting with a sharp knife, or tearing by hand as for basil, on a chopping board.

To store herbs for later use, keep the stems intact and wash gently in cold water so as not to bruise the leaves or break the stems. Then dry the herbs in a salad basket, or pat dry with kitchen paper. To keep herbs in prime condition, place them in a clean polythene bag with sheets of moist kitchen paper, seal the bag and store in the crisper or vegetable compartment of a refrigerator. It may be necessary to replace the kitchen paper with freshly moistened ones.

Alternatively, place the herbs in a glass jar, their stems in water, and cover with a polythene bag. Store in a refrigerator. Occasionally shake the jar and top up with fresh water.

You can freeze any leftover small bunches of green herbs, such as mint or chives, by washing and drying them, wrapping them in aluminium foil or cling film, and placing them in the freezer where they will stay flavourful for about two months. Use these frozen herbs for cooking only, though, because while freezing doesn't ruin the flavour, it causes the leaves to go limp.

## USING AND STORING DRIED HERBS

Dried herbs are used direct from their containers. The flavour of dried herbs is more concentrated than fresh ones, so substitute a teaspoon of dried herb for a tablespoon of fresh. Make sure that you store dried herbs away from heat in a cool, dimly lit place in sealed containers.

## DRYING HERBS

You can successfully dry your own herbs by tying the stems together in small bunches and hanging them upside down and out of direct sunlight in a cupboard, attic or kitchen. When the herbs are dry (allow about two weeks), place them on a piece of kitchen paper and remove the leaves from the stems. Discard the stems and then rub the leaves through a fine-mesh strainer to remove any stray bits of stem.

Air-drying herbs has two drawbacks. In the city, polluted air can make air-drying seem less than satisfactory; and it is said that the quicker the herbs are dried, the better their flavour will be. For these reasons you may prefer to dry herbs in an oven. To do this, place the herbs in a single layer on a baking sheet lined with either aluminium foil or kitchen paper, and set the oven to its lowest temperature. Leave the herbs in the oven for twelve hours, or until the leaves are brittle. Remove from the oven, allow the herbs to cool, and then strip the leaves from the stems. Store the dried herbs as described above.

## WHEN TO ADD HERBS

Bouquet garni and selected herbs are best added to long-cooking foods during the final 60 minutes of cooking. Add fresh herbs (an exception is basil) to quickly-cooked foods, like omelettes or pasta sauces, along with the other ingredients. Basil should be mixed in towards the end of cooking. Dried herbs should be soaked in a little milk before being added. Add mint to green peas and potato dishes at the start of cooking, then add a few more sprigs at the end.

## HERBS

**BASIL** The best and most flavourful variety is grown in the Mediterranean. Those grown elsewhere, even in its native India, are just never as fragrant. The small leaf variety has a stronger flavour than the large leaf basil. Basil has many uses and can be added liberally to dishes, but its most famous incarnation is in pesto sauce. Aficionados call it the tomato herb because of its affinity with this fruit. Dried basil is not a satisfactory substitute for fresh.



**BAY** Bay is not strictly a herb, it is an evergreen perennial, and its leaves can be used dried or fresh. Remove the bay leaf from the dish at the end of the cooking. Though sometimes known as laurel, bay is not to be confused with poisonous varieties of laurel.



**BOUQUET GARNI** This seasoning, bound in a muslin bag, consists of parsley, thyme and bay leaf. Add it to soups and stews.

**CORIANDER** Also known as Chinese parsley or cilantro, it resembles flat-leaf parsley, but its pungent citrus-like flavour gives it a distinctive character. It looks wonderful as garnish, and the flavour will permeate any dish. When buying coriander, look for vigorous, deep green leaves; avoid bunches or potted coriander with limp or yellow leaves.



**CHIVES** It seems a pity to buy chives, when they are so easily grown in the garden or in a small pot on a sunny windowsill, and then freshly harvested. Their oniony taste makes them ideal as a garnish, to flavour sauces and cooked dishes, and to add bite to salads. The purple blossom can be eaten. Chinese chives, which have larger stems, taste of garlic.

**DILL** Its distinctive feathery leaves and heavenly caraway flavour and aroma make this a favourite herb in Greek, Turkish and Russian cooking, but it is best known in dill pickles. Use it in salads, egg dishes and cooked vegetables, or as a garnish and flavouring for fish dishes.



**FINES HERBES** This is a mixture of chopped aromatic herbs such as parsley, chervil, tarragon and chives, combined in various proportions to suit the dish. It can be used to flavour sauces, cream cheese, meat, sautéed vegetables, and omelettes.

**HERBES DE PROVENCE** This refers to those herbs that have basked in the long hours of sunshine and sunk their roots into the fine soil of the Provence region of France. Included are thyme, marjoram, tarragon, juniper, lavender, bay, rosemary and fennel. Great for grilled dishes.



**MARJORAM** This herb can be used in almost any meat dish – meat loaf, stews, liver dishes and sausages – but some fish dishes are also enhanced by its flavour. Count among these: baked fish, salmon cakes and creamed shellfish. Marjoram complements mushroom dishes, green beans and peas, potato dishes, Brussels sprouts, aubergines, asparagus, carrots, spinach and courgettes. It can even liven up a coleslaw.

**MINT** Applemint, orange mint and Bowles mint are varieties of mint, but it is spearmint that finds its way to the dinner table. It is used as a garnish, or to flavour sauces, relishes and stuffings. It complements many desserts and fruit salads. Add it to lentil dishes, or to potato salads dressed with mayonnaise for a tasty change. Mint is also used to flavour drinks.



**OREGANO** Also known as wild marjoram, this peppery-flavoured herb grows wild over the hills of Italy and Greece. It is a natural partner for cheese, tomatoes, beans and aubergine dishes. If using dried, use the Greek variety – called *rigani*.



**PARSLEY** Curly-leaf parsley is slowly being overtaken in the popularity stakes by its Italian relative, flat-leaf parsley. Despite its strong flavour, this herb can be used

in generous quantities, and added to many dishes as you would salt. As an extra special touch, fry curly-leaf parsley as an accompaniment to a fish dish. Use only the fresh herb, the dried herb is tasteless.

**ROSEMARY** A herb that is easy to grow and harvest, and gives year-round pleasure in the garden. Rosemary has a special affinity with roasted or grilled chicken and lamb. Use judiciously fresh, and avoid dried rosemary as it can have an unpleasant taste.



**TARRAGON** Referred to by the French as the 'king of herbs', tarragon leaves (do not use the stem) make a welcome addition to salads, cooked dishes, and sauces such as Béarnaise and Hollandaise. If given a choice, use the more flavourful French rather than Russian tarragon.



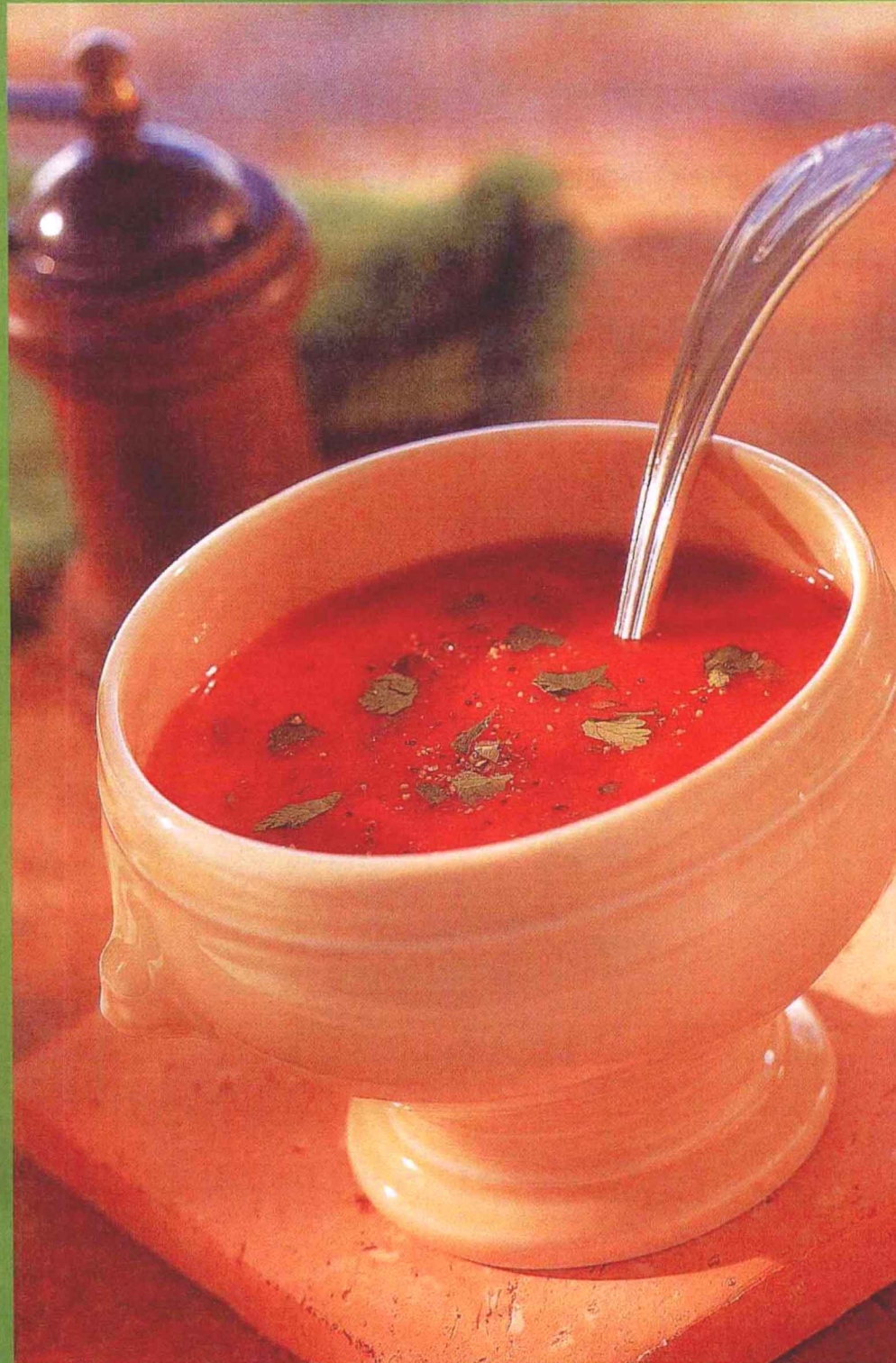
**THYME** One of the best known and popular herbs, use it to flavour stews, soups, roast meat dishes, stuffings for poultry, and to season tomatoes, potatoes, courgettes, aubergine and sweet peppers. It partners well with wine, especially in slow-cooked dishes. Preserved olives taste all the better with the addition of thyme. Its strong, sharp taste can overpower some dishes, so you may prefer to use the more subtle lemon thyme.







# SOUPS, SPREADS & DIPS





# BORSCHT

Serves 6

A Russian and Polish specialty, strongly flavoured with beetroot and other vegetables.

## INGREDIENTS

2 large onions  
3 large beetroot  
3 large carrots  
2 parsnips  
4 stalks celery  
3 Tbsp tomato purée  
4 large tomatoes  
½ small white cabbage, shredded  
1 Tbsp honey  
1 Tbsp lemon juice  
salt and freshly ground black pepper

*handful of chopped parsley*

*a little all-purpose flour*

*soured cream or natural yoghurt,  
to serve*

Cut onions, beetroots, carrots, parsnips and celery into matchsticks. Then bring a large pan of salted water to a boil, add the tomato paste and the vegetables and simmer them for 30 minutes or so, or until tender.

Skin the tomatoes, remove the seeds, and chop. Add to the pan with the cabbage, honey, lemon juice and seasoning. Simmer for 5 minutes, then throw in a handful of chopped parsley. Check seasoning.

If necessary, thicken the soup with a blend of flour and soured cream. The soup is best made the day before eating. Serve chilled or reheat and serve with a bowl of soured cream or yoghurt.

