



Clockwise from top left: Flat-leaf parsley, coriander, mint, thyme, oregano, rosemary, dill.

Herbal *flavour*

No longer mere garnishes, fresh herbs are valued for both their taste and nutritional value, writes MIM BEIM. Recipes by KATHRYN ELLIOTT

Until the mid-1980s, garnish was proof you were eating in a posh restaurant. It usually took the form of a sprig of curly parsley that perched beside your lobster mornay. It was purely decorative and I suspect the same garnish met several lobsters on a busy Saturday night. Today, herbs, including parsley, have a more fulfilling role as a wholesome part of the meal rather than just looking pretty.

Picked from fields and roadsides, eaten cooked or raw in salads, herbs were traditionally considered peasant food. Unwittingly, the toffs missed out on a feast of flavour and nutrients. In fact, herbs are possibly our earliest medicine. For hundreds of years, potions and poultices made from herbs were the stock in trades for local shamans, monks and wise women.

Fresh herbs not only add colour and flavour; they boost a meal from merely nutritious to a positive healthfest, being a rich source of minerals, vitamins and antioxidants. Adding herbs to your diet will improve your general wellbeing, but, to obtain a marked therapeutic effect you will need to consult a herbalist who will prescribe the correct dosage for you in tincture or tablets.

Basil: Basil's pungent, lime-coloured leaves lift any salad. In particular, basil and tomato taste wonderful together — add bocconcini for the Italian classic, insalata caprese. They are also a great team in the garden where basil will warn off tomato-munching insects. Best eaten fresh, basil leaves quickly wither, losing their aromatic oils.

Basil is recommended for the nervous system, helping to relieve headaches, and is also good for digestive problems, especially bloating and flatulence. An Asian variant, holy basil, is used to treat colds and flus.

Dill: Northern Europeans, especially Poles and Rusksies, have a fondness for food infused with dill (and dill seed), such as herring (rollmops)

Tips for greens

* Fresh herbs are preferable to dried as they contain more essential oils and vitamins, but it's better to have dried herbs than none at all.

* As dried herbs tend to have a more concentrated (although less delicate) flavour, for every teaspoon of dried herbs in a recipe you need to use a tablespoon of fresh.

* Fresh herbs are available from most supermarkets, but they're gratifyingly easy to grow, their only requirements being sunshine, water and a bit of soil. They're equally easy to grow on a window ledge, balcony or planted in the vegie patch.

* To store fresh herbs, wrap them in paper towels, then into a plastic bag. Store in the vegetable crisper of fridge.

and gherkins (dill pickle). But a little goes a long way. The sharp tang of dill and its larger cousin, fennel, cuts through oily flavours and spices up cabbage and potatoes.

The word "dill" derives from an Old Norse word meaning "to lull", a reference to its mild sedative properties. Dill water (gripe water) is used for easing colic in babies but is just as effective for adult digestive difficulties.

Mint: The freshest-smelling herb, mint comes in dozens of varieties, including peppermint, Asian mint, spearmint, chocolate mint, eau de cologne mint and common garden mint — the one we like for mint sauce and mint tea. Peppermint is preferred for medicine, and both peppermint and spearmint are used in confectionary and toothpaste.

Mint is a versatile herb, equally at home in savoury or sweet food. It adds to the flavour of roast lamb as well as a bowl of fresh fruit

salad. Mint is usually a standard medicine for IBS and diverticulitis as well as colds and flus. **Parsley:** There are two main varieties, curly and flat-leafed, the former more popular in English-speaking countries, the latter almost universal in mainland Europe and the Middle East, where it is used in tabbouleh.

A good source of vitamin C and iron, parsley also contains phytohormones, making it a fine herb for menopausal women. Parsley is also used for kidney and bladder problems, including fluid retention.

Arugula: Arugula (rocket) sneaks in as a herb, even though it's usually called a lettuce. Alan Davidson writes in his *Penguin Companion to Food*: "Arugula's popularity as a smart ingredient in Western restaurants may obscure the fact that it is grown and liked in some places, eg the north of Sudan, where cuisines are less susceptible to fashion."

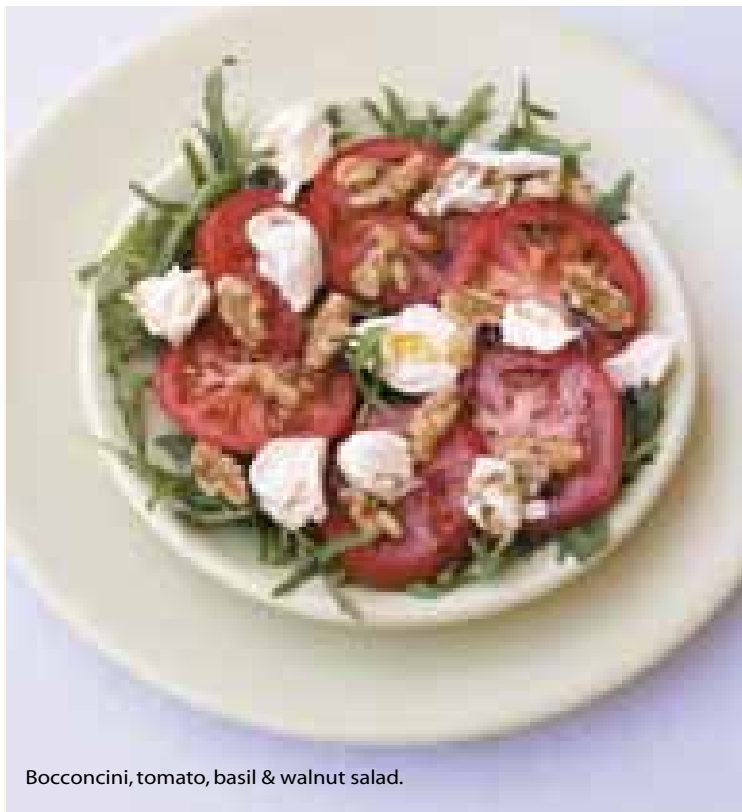
Arugula's strong, bitter taste is a clue to its liver-friendly character. Enjoy arugula and other herbs in a salad before a meal to kick-start the digestive juices.

Rosemary: Of all the herbs, rosemary has the most dramatic aroma. Its sharp, almost camphor-like scent permeates the richest meats and sauces. A hardy plant that adores all-day sunshine and the sea breezes of its native Mediterranean, rosemary is steeped in folklore and used symbolically at weddings and funerals. The name comes from the Latin *ros marinus*, "dew of the sea".

It was traditionally prescribed to stimulate the mind and memory. Gerard, a herbalist, in 1633 recommended it for curing "coldness" in the brain. "Some rosemary should be boiled in wine and the patient should inhale the fumes."

Research has shown that rosemary is useful for mild anxiety and depression, muscle pain and circulatory weakness. It contains carnosol and rosmarinic acid, two of the strongest plant antioxidants. It's also liver protective and aids the liver's role in detoxification. ➤

ten minute kitchen



Bocconcini, tomato, basil & walnut salad.

Rosemary veal with parsley salsa

Veal schnitzels, while usually covered in breadcrumbs and deep-fried, can also be cooked uncrumbed. As they're so thin, they cook really quickly, so be careful not to overcook. Veal is beautiful with rosemary and the addition of the salsa provides the vegie content of the meal. Serves 2.

- 2 sprigs rosemary, finely chopped
- Small amount of flour for dusting the veal
- 2 veal schnitzels (scaloppine), uncrumbed
- 1 punnet cherry tomatoes, washed and cut in half
- 1/3 bunch parsley
- 3 large handfuls baby spinach
- Juice of half a lemon
- Olive oil

Mix together the rosemary and a couple of tablespoons of flour. Season and then dip the veal into the flour, dusting off the excess. Heat about a tablespoon of olive oil in a non-stick frypan on a medium-high heat. Add the

veal and seal on one side for 1-2 minutes. Turn over and seal the other side for 1-2 minutes. Remove from the pan and place on a serving plate. Mix together tomato, parsley, spinach and lemon juice and serve with the veal.

Bocconcini, tomato, basil & walnut salad

It's worth buying the best tomatoes you can for this salad. The addition of walnuts gives a crunchy contrast in texture and adds omega-3. Serve with crusty bread to mop up the dressing. Serves 2.

- 3 sprigs basil, washed and torn into small pieces
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 2 tsp balsamic vinegar
- 6 bocconcini, thickly sliced
- 4 fresh tomatoes, thickly sliced
- 1/2 bunch rocket (arugula)
- 2 tbsp walnuts

Put basil, olive oil, vinegar, bocconcini and tomato into a bowl. Mix together, season and leave to stand for 5 minutes. Check the taste and add more vinegar,



Rosemary veal with parsley salsa.

olive oil or seasoning if necessary. Just before serving, pile the rocket onto a platter and tip the tomato and cheese mixture on top. Scatter with walnuts and serve immediately.

- 1 zucchini, julienned
- 1 tbsp dill, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp mint, finely chopped
- 2 flathead fillets
- Olive oil

Fish parcels with dill & mint

This could be cooked in one baking dish, but I like wrapping the ingredients in baking paper and serving as individual parcels. You then get to open the parcel on your plate and inhale the fragrant aromas. Serve with boiled potato and a mixed salad. Serves 2.

- 4 slices of lemon
- 150g snowpeas
- 1 carrot, julienned

Preheat oven to 200°C. Take 2 large sheets of baking paper. Put 2 slices of lemon into the middle of each and layer on the snowpeas, carrot and zucchini. Sprinkle on half the dill and mint. Put the fish on top and drizzle with a small amount of olive oil. Sprinkle on the rest of the herbs. Fold the parcel, rolling the edges together to form a tight seal. Place the two parcels on a baking sheet and put them straight in the oven for 8 minutes. Remove the parcels and serve immediately. ■



Picked from fields and roadsides, eaten cooked or raw in salads, herbs were traditionally considered peasant food.