

#183 - The Lazy Genius Guide to Spices

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! Today is episode 183 - the essential spice cabinet. I get asked about spices so often, so we're going to tackle all the essential things in this episode. Spices are pretty important in cooking obviously, so let's demystify a few things and also run through what could be your essential spice cabinet.

Today we'll talk about what they're good for, what to have, how to use them, how to store them, and a couple of final tips and tricks.

So first, what are herbs and spices good for? Three main things: flavor, color, and variety. Flavor makes sense. The stuff in your spice cabinet makes food taste a certain way which definitely comes in handy. Color! This one gets overlooked but is super important. We all know we eat with our eyes too, and a lot of the vibrant color you might get in certain foods comes from spices like chili powder or turmeric. Also those little flecks of oregano in a red spaghetti sauce has the tiniest bit of color contrast that's pleasing to the eye too. Unless you're my kids and then you think that any flecks of anything are essentially my attempts at destroying all that is good in this world. And the third thing that herbs and spices are good for is variety, as in adding variety to the same ingredient. A piece of chicken seasoned with cumin and coriander is very different from a piece of chicken seasoned with fennel seed and black pepper. You could cook the chicken in the exact same way, but changing out those spices adds so much variety. So that's the basics of what they're good for. No big surprises there.

Second, what spices should you have? This is where you might expect a list, but I'm not going to really give you one. Here's why. You like different things than I do. You and your people enjoy different flavors than the people who live next door to you, so it's important that you choose your own essential spices. It's only essential if you use it. We've learned that with kitchen tools and ingredients and all kinds of things. It doesn't matter if someone else says something is essential. It's only worth storing if you're going to use it which is why it's good to make your own list. Here's how you do that.

Think about cuisines that you like to eat. If you cook a lot of Mexican food or Indian food or Chinese food or Italian food, you need certain herbs and spices to adequately capture the flavor you're going for. So if there's a cuisine you just don't do much, don't store spices for that cuisine, at least not to completion. You don't need every single kind of chili powder if you barely use one.

So here's what I'd recommend. There is a link in the show notes for a spice resource from a website that's all about spices, and it has spices listed by cuisine. Scroll that, note what kinds of cuisines you enjoy cooking, and see what spices are good to have on hand. It could be that you have what you need and can let go of the pressure you feel to have more. It could be that you've always wanted to cook Chinese food but can't figure out why you're stirfry just tastes like soy sauce. Maybe it's because you've never gotten Chinese five spice which is pivotal, like the

main spice blend used, for Chinese flavors. So that resource can be super helpful to name what you need based on what you already cook and enjoy eating.

<https://www.spicesinc.com/p-3746-most-popular-spices-by-cuisine.aspx>

For our family, we go pretty hard for Indian food, so I have all of those spices: cardamom, allspice, coriander, paprika, cumin, turmeric, all of it. Sometimes I even toast and grind my own seeds! But that's because we love Indian food and make it a lot. Half of the cuisines on that list I never make and probably won't for a long while, so there's no need for me to have most of those spices around.

You choose what's essential to you. If you use it, it's essential. If you don't, it's clutter.

Next up, how to use herbs and spices. One thing that I don't feel like gets talked about enough is that herbs and spices really need fat to make the biggest difference in your dish. If you put a handful of dried oregano into a pan of tomato sauce, it'll make the sauce taste like oregano for sure, but if you put it into the olive oil along with the garlic and red pepper flake, you create a depth of flavor that permeates the entire pan of sauce. Fat is a flavor distributor. It brings everything to life, so think about how you can add herbs and spices to recipes directly into fat.

Another question that comes up a lot is fresh versus dried. Fresh leafy herbs like basil and parsley versus their dried counterparts, or fresh whole spices like whole cumin seeds or cardamom pods or peppercorns as opposed to spices that have already been ground. Here's what you need to know about that.

Fresh always has a better flavor than dried. I think always. Freshly ground cumin seeds taste better than what comes ground straight of the jar. Adding fresh basil to a tomato sauce as opposed to dry? Different ballgame. But does that mean the dried or ground version is worse and you should never do it? No, not even close. I use cumin and spices out of the jar 95% of the time. Occasionally I'll toast and grind my own when I really want the flavor to feel special, but that doesn't mean the alternative isn't special. It's still delicious. So here's your permission to use whatever you have and whatever makes you get into the kitchen with confidence. If cooking with fresh basil brings you joy because it's vibrant and pretty and fresh and you like chopping it, use it. If cooking with dried basil brings you joy because it's easy to open a jar and be done with it, use it. Name what matters about how you cook before making big judgments or decisions on fresh versus dried herbs and spices.

Now if you're using dried when fresh is called for or the other way around when it comes to herbs, not spices, your general ratio is 3 to 1. Three parts fresh for one part dried. So one tablespoon of fresh basil equals one teaspoon of dried basil since there are three teaspoons in one tablespoon. If you toast and grind your own spices, keep the amounts the same as if you're just spooning out already ground spices from the jar, but enjoy the bigger punch of flavor. It's nice.

Next, how to store them. There are a couple of rules here and then you decide. First, they need to be airtight to get their longest life. Really keeping them in their jars is your best bet in most cases because they're already packaged in a way that prolongs their life as much as possible. Sometimes it feels like you should have some beautiful bespoke spice container and a wooden mortar and pestle on your counter to be a real cook, but you don't. Spice jars can be mismatched and in a drawer or cabinet and be as good and helpful as anything else. Just keep them airtight; jars are great for that.

A couple of other storage thoughts are about access. You want to be able to find what you need when you need it. So many of us have double and even triples of spices because we can't find the one we already have. A couple of things for this. Wherever your spices are stored, try and make it so you can see them all and what they are at about the same time. Maybe you have them on a lazy susan in cabinet so you can spin and see. But you also might not see what's in the middle of the lazy susan, so those get lost. Maybe you have them in a drawer like I do, but you have to pick each one up to know what it is which drives a human crazy. For that, write on the cap with a sharpie what the spice is so you can see it at a glance. A great at a glance idea is to use a clear shoe organizer over the back of a pantry door so you can see them all at once and see the label. That's the thing. You want to be able to see what you have at a glance so you can find what you need easily and not buy what you already have. Within that system you can organize by cuisine like we talked about or alphabetically or not at all. Whatever works for you to make your spice cabinet serve you well.

And then a couple of final tips before we go. I think it's better to spend more per ounce on a smaller jar of a lesser used spice than to spend more money and get a better deal but also have to store a larger jar of spices that will likely go old before you use them. We're trained and helpfully so to check the cost per ounce of something. That's why we love Costco. Everything is so cheap per ounce or per unit compared to other stores! But also now you have to store a five gallon jug of oil that was twenty cents an ounce instead of twenty-four cents an ounce. Sometimes it's better to spend less money on a smaller item that's not as good of a deal as the big one. That's a lesson we need to remember. Because you're not really saving money if you're spending more on something "cheaper" and then throwing it away or forgetting it's there because it's too big to fit with all the other things of its kind.

And one final tip: when you're making a recipe that calls for an herb or spice you don't have, google a substitution for that thing. It could be you could use something different or even leave it out. This is true in my change your life shawarma recipe. There's a spectrum of spices you could use to make this recipe work, and some you shouldn't leave out, like cumin, but others you can, like allspice. So notice how much of the spice is called for, and see if you have something that could be a stand-in. You don't always have to buy the new spice to get the recipe to work well. Salt and fat do wonders for a recipe. The spices are fine if you fudge a little.

So that's the lazy genius guide to spices! You had to know I wouldn't give you a list of them because that rarely is a thing universally across different kitchens. I want you to have the tools

to use and store the spices you have and understand what you need to cook the meals you like to eat.

Thanks so much for being here and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!