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Sprinkle new spices into your cooking

By MARY-JO SAWYER

Have you ever wished you could be on the set of "Top Chef" when the chefs were creating all those unique recipes? Well, members of the Richmond Dietetic Association had an experience close to that recently.

Chef John Csukor hosted a group of registered dietitians at his beautiful test kitchen in his Kor Food Innovation facility in Ashland. Csukor is involved in a large variety of food activities ranging from designing recipes for some local restaurants and food manufacturers, to food styling and photography. He gave the dietitians an update on how to cook with spices and reduce sodium, as recommended in the new 2010 Dietary Guidelines.

He prepared a wonderful, aromatic Indian Biryani recipe. It included 10 herbs and spices, more than most of us would probably feel comfortable using or even know how to combine. Clare Costello, director of the Dietetic Internship at VCU Medical Center, asked the chef an important question. "How can we encourage clients to use more spices without feeling intimidated?"

Csukor's response was encouraging: "It's like learning how to drive a car. You didn't have much knowledge at first, but you got better as you practiced. Don't be afraid!" He suggested going to the Food Network and selecting a recipe that you would not typically make, using new spices. Then try another, and another.

To reduce sodium, he suggests using a flavored salt, and just adding a pinch at the end, on top of this dish instead of during cooking. "That way, you don't need as much and you get lots of bang for your buck!"

The spices for the recipe that evening were provided by Erin Corning, brand manager of Duke's Mayonnaise, which is part of the C.F. Sauer Co. Corning reminded us that spices not only taste good, but also are good for us. They have antioxidant properties that help keep our immune system healthy.

Corning's top 10 spices based on their antioxidant properties are cloves, cinnamon, oregano, turmeric, parsley, basil, cumin, sage, mustard seed and marjoram. It's best to get these spices from foods rather than supplements. Parsley and sage are toxic in large amounts, and cinnamon contains a blood thinner, which could cause problems for some people.

So what's in your spice cabinet? Are your spices new, or do some containers have cobwebs and need to be thrown out? According to Corning, whole spices last three years, and ground spices or blends last one year. If the color has faded, toss them. Or try the sniff test. They should be very fragrant, and if not, then it's time to replace.

Increase your antioxidants, and try your hand at cooking with new spices by preparing Chef Csukor's Biryani recipe. It's absolutely delicious!

Chef John Csukor's Biryani

Biryani is a basmati rice-based dish, made with spices, meat, fish, egg or vegetables. Though this Northern Indian-inspired Biryani heralds from Persia, India has become well known for its many variations and styles. This recipe bears the style of a "Tahari" Biryani, in which the saucy portion is added to the rice rather than the rice being added to the sauce.

Makes 4 hearty portions.

For the rice:

1 cup basmati rice

1½ cups water

For the sauce:

2 tablespoons olive oil or unsalted clarified butter

¼ cup blanched, crushed almonds

½ teaspoon whole cumin seed

½ teaspoon whole fennel seed

1 tablespoon peeled, minced fresh ginger

2 cloves garlic, minced

1½ teaspoons ground coriander seed

½ teaspoon ground cardamom

½ teaspoon ground cumin seed

1 teaspoon ground turmeric

2/3 cup coconut milk

2/3 cup yogurt, plain, whole fat

2 tablespoons raisins

For the vegetables

1 cup small cauliflower florets

1 cup eggplant, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 cup summer squash, cut into 1-inch pieces

2 tablespoons scallion, thinly sliced

¼ cup fresh cilantro leaves

Pinch smoked or flavored salt

Make the rice: Place the rice in a sieve and rinse under cold running water until the water runs clear. Simmer covered on low in measured water. (Or use a rice cooker according to manufacturer's directions.)

For the Biryani: In a medium saucepan with a tight-fitting lid over medium-high heat, add oil and heat until smoking lightly. Add the almonds, cumin seed and fennel seed, then stir until toasted and aromatic.

Add ginger and garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 2 minutes.

Add the rest of the dried spices, stirring, until toasted, about 1 minute more.

Add the coconut milk, yogurt and raisins and stir well, bringing to a simmer.

In a hot sauté pan, sear the cut side of the vegetables until golden brown and caramelized. Add to the sauce, and heat until the veggies are just cooked but still have a little crunch to them, about 8 minutes more.

Remove from heat, fold in scallions and let rest, covered, for a few minutes.

Fluff rice with a fork and serve topped with vegetable Biryani.

To garnish, top with fresh cilantro and a pinch of smoked or lemon salt.

Nutrients per serving: 415 calories, 21 grams fat, 8 grams protein, 48 grams carbohydrate, 3 grams fiber, 99 milligrams sodium, 110 milligrams calcium.

Chef John Csukor, Kor Food Innovation (korfoodinnovation.com)

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