



Spicing up Christmas

Consumer Choice brings you a Christmas spice guide to help make this year's seasonal cooking taste magical.

Recipes for Christmas cakes, puddings and mincemeat can call for a variety of spices from cinnamon and cloves to nutmeg and ginger. So in an effort to make Christmas special consumers often stock up on whatever is needed. However, apart from Christmas baking, they also make nice additions to warming Christmas drinks such as mulled wine and spiced savoury dishes.

Spicy tips

Spices can be something we buy and then only use once or twice. So to get more out of your spices here are a few general handy tips, or see our Christmas spice guide for specifics.

- **Freshness** Buy spices in as small a quantity as possible. The fresher they are the better they taste. Spices lose their pungency with age.
- **Storage** Keep in a cool, dry, dark place. Make sure they are well sealed to lock in their freshness and importantly their taste.
- **Savoury recipes** If looking to use

your Christmas spices in more than one way, check out Bord Bia's (see *Useful websites*) website for savoury recipe ideas such as Moroccan style lamb that uses cinnamon and cloves or red cabbage with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg featured in its 'Christmas Cookbook.'

- **Improvise** If you're not too fussed

about following a recipe to the letter, invest in a packet of mixed spice, which usually contains a variety of spices such as cinnamon, cloves, ginger and nutmeg. Add to recipes where a variety of spice is called for.

- **Shopping for spices** Ethnic food shops and health food stores often have a good range of spices and

fruit and spice muffins

Ingredients

125g plain flour
1tsp baking powder
1tsp spice (any type you like)
100g caster sugar
125g dried fruit (e.g. chopped apricots, sultanas, raisins)
25g melted butter or vegetable oil
100ml milk
1 egg

Method

Line a 12 hole muffin tray with paper cases. Preheat oven to 180°C. Sieve flour, baking powder and spice together. Add the sugar and mixed fruit. Whisk the wet ingredients together, make a hole in the centre of the dry ingredients and mix together. Don't beat or over-mix the batter. Spoon into the paper cases and bake for around 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from oven and allow to cool. Dust with icing sugar or even place a cherry on top.

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- **Allspice** This spice can be confused with mixed spice, which is literally what it says, a mix of different spices. Allspice is a specific spice that got its name because it is said to taste like a mixture between cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg. While it is most often sold ground, the whole spice resembles peppercorns, however is reddish brown in colour. It's a pungent spice and at Christmas we often add it to our homemade pudding or cake. It has a wider range of uses in other cuisine and is the main spice used in Jamaican 'Jerk Pork'.
- **Cinnamon** The bark of the cinnamon tree is harvested in strips, rolled into sticks and dried. It's most often used in baking and puddings and is particularly good with apple or chocolate. Sold either as quills or ground, it has a wide range of uses in non European cuisine such as Moroccan lamb stew or various Indian pilau dishes that combine rice and spice.
- **Cloves** Derived from the flower buds of the clove tree, these are harvested before they open and then dried. Often sold both whole and ground, the most common use of cloves in Ireland is studding the lemon in a hot whiskey. Cloves are strong in flavour and can overpower dishes. They often feature in mince pies and other hot spiced drinks such as mulled wine or cider. Christmas ham is also often pierced with cloves and glazed.
- **Ginger** This spice comes from the root of the ginger plant and is sold in a variety of forms: fresh, dried, candied or preserved in syrup. Each form has its own slightly distinct taste. Fresh ginger is more commonly used in savoury and the dry form in sweet dishes. A versatile spice used in many ways in different cuisines, from baking to stir fries and curries.
- **Juniper** A small blue-black berry not unlike peppercorns in appearance. Juniper gives gin its distinct taste. It is also commonly used in preserves and pickles. Most often sold as whole berries, which can be easily crushed.
- **Mace** This spice comes from the same plant as nutmeg. The plant fruits and mace is the outer part that surrounds the nutmeg stone inside the fruit. This encasing is dried and has a distinct orange-brown colour. Mace can be bought as dried 'blades', which can be ground in a coffee grinder or bought already ground. Again mace is most often added to sweet dishes, or sometimes also to preserves and chutney.
- **Nutmeg** Whole nutmeg looks a lot like the stone from a peach or plum, but grate a small piece and you won't be mistaken as to its true identity. The spice grows on the nutmeg tree and is often used in baking or puddings. However in Italian cooking it can be used to spice up ravioli stuffing. A little nutmeg grated on mashed root vegetables livens them up no end.
- **Star anise** A lesser known Christmas spice, the name gives a lot away about it. The whole spice is star shaped and it has a distinct aniseed or liquorice flavour. It's common in Chinese cooking and found in Chinese five spice powder.



sometimes in large quantities too. However the range in supermarkets has also improved in recent times.

Aromas

Christmas scents include myrrh, frankincense and orange, which can be bought as essential oils and burned in an oil burner to create a Christmas aroma. But if you're not into aromatherapy this can be an expensive route to creating a Christmas atmosphere. Improvise by using cheaper alternatives such as scented candles or incense to create that once off Christmas aroma. Or pop a pot of mulled wine on the stove or make a few Christmas fruit and spice muffins that will no doubt fill your home with real seasonal cheer!

Mulling it over

If you've bought a selection of spices for the cake you made in advance of Christmas, a hot mulled drink is a good way to use them up. Don't feel restricted by our recipe (see right). A

few cloves and a cinnamon stick alone will add enough spice to hot mulled wine. You could even be adventurous and try mulling a few spices with cider or apple juice.

Ready prepared spice mixes for hot mulled drinks can be handy. They can

be sold combined with sugar so follow the recipe on packs. Buying each spice individually can be costly if you don't plan on using them in other ways. A small pack of spice in the supermarket can cost around €1.95 to €2.50, depending on what spice it is.

mulled wine

Ingredients

- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 5 cloves
- ½ teaspoon of chopped ginger
- Rind of an unwaxed orange or lemon
- 2 tablespoons of sugar or honey
- 1 bottle of red wine

Method

Combine all the spices, except for the cinnamon sticks, in muslin and tie with string. Or add the spices and other ingredients directly to the pot, with a bottle of red wine, or the roughly the same quantity of apple juice or cider. Warm over a medium heat for

around 5 minutes. Don't boil unless you want to remove the alcohol. If not using a muslin bag, be careful to remove any whole spices before serving. As you pour into glasses, strain through a sieve to remove them.

Don't be shy to adjust the recipe to your own taste. If you don't have any of the listed spices, leave them out and add a little extra of others. If you can get them, whole spices are best for mulled wine, but ground can be used. They don't need straining and will just sink to the bottom of your glass. But you might get a mouthful of them when taking your last gulp, which is sometimes not the most pleasant.

Indian Spice Catalogue – Spice Board India
www.indianspices.com/html/spicesCatlg.html

Recipes – Bord Bia
www.bordbia.ie/aboutfood/recipes/pages/recipehome.aspx