

Using Local Foods

This leaflet is part of a series intended as a marketing aid for farmers' market vendors.

Topics were suggested by a vendor as a means of informing and educating customers about items that could be locally grown. Herbs, spices, and condiments are the foundation of many healthful cuisines around the world. This series covers oregano, basil, hot peppers, seed spices, and cilantro—all of which are produced in the U.S. and sold at farmers' markets.

Each short, illustrated leaflet can be printed in color or black-and-white. Basic information about each food includes its history and suggested uses. Cookbooks or the Internet should be consulted for specific recipes. For more information about the Local Foods Series and local food systems, contact the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service at **1-800-346-9140** or **www.attra.ncat.org**.



Photo: Janet Bachmann, NCAT

raised in Egypt, Germany, and the United States. (Seeds of the distantly related plant species *Bunium persicum* or *Nigella sativa* are sometimes sold as “black caraway.”)

Ajwain (*Trachyspermum ammi*, *Carum copticum*)

Ajwain is a popular seasoning in the Middle East, North Africa, and India. Closely related to caraway—although decidedly different in flavor—Ajwain has been described as reminiscent of thyme, anise, and cumin. The ajwain seeds are most commonly used for flavoring, but ajwain leaves are sometimes used in marinade.

Ajwain's major essential oil is thymol. Bishop's weed (*Ammi majus* L.) is a closely related ornamental plant.

- 1) Adam, Katherine. 1995. Ajwain: A new spice for American growers. *The Business of Herbs*. September–October.

ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 1 – Seed Spices: Cumin, Dill, Anise, Fennel, Caraway, Ajwain

By Katherine Adam
NCAT Agriculture Specialist
© 2010 NCAT

Tracy Mumma, Editor
Amy Smith, Production

This leaflet is available on the Web at:
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/localfoods1.html
or
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/localfoods1.pdf
IP377
Slot 374
Version 112910

The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, ATTRA (www.attra.ncat.org), was developed and is managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). The project is funded through a cooperative agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Business-Cooperative Service. Visit the NCAT website (www.ncat.org/sarc_current.php) for more information on our other sustainable agriculture and energy projects.

ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 1

Seed Spices: Cumin, Dill, Anise, Fennel, Caraway, Ajwain



The seed spices cumin, dill, anise, fennel, and caraway are closely related members of the Parsley family (*Apiaceae*), familiar to most cooks. Another seed spice, ajwain (*Carum*), originally from The Seychelles (islands near India), is less familiar to Westerners. Although these spices all originate in Eurasia, they can be grown successfully in North America, and you may be fortunate enough to

**Experience the flavors of the world without leaving town—
enjoy local produce!**



Photo: Wendy Domeni

find fresh and flavorful locally grown spices at a farmers' market or farm stand. Seed spices and the powders and blends made from them are common ingredients of curries and are well-known seasonings in many cuisines (1). Distilled essential oils of these same spices frequently flavor commercially prepared foods.

Although seeds are sometimes used whole, they are more commonly ground—or toasted, then ground. A good grinder is an indispensable element in using seed spices. The time-honored traditional grinder is a mortar and pestle, but good results can also come from other types of grinders.

Always follow your recipe because different preparation methods create different flavors. When whole spices are used, they are sometimes steeped in liquid in a muslin bag, or they may be strained out after stock preparation.

Commercial preparations of finely ground spices should be used within a short time. Penzey's, a mail-order spice company, recommends, however, that good-quality spices be kept for a year, as many are harvested only once a year (Penzey's Fall Catalog, 2010).

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*)

Cumin is an Old World spice known since antiquity

that has gained popularity as a key ingredient in Mexican cooking, usually in ground form. In the Middle East and India, this same spice is known as *jeera*, and it is used in whole or powdered form to flavor a variety of dishes and beverages. Cultivation of cumin requires a long, hot summer of three to four months, with daytime temperatures around 30°C (86°F). This drought-tolerant plant is mostly grown in Mediterranean climates from seed sown in spring in fertile, well-drained soil.

Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)

Feathery green leaves of dill are used either fresh or dried to flavor and garnish sauces, salads, soups, and fish. Both the ripe seed and immature seed-heads of this versatile plant are also used in cooking. Dill seed is somewhat like caraway in flavor and can spice a wide range of foods, from meats and breads to pickles. Dill has long been one of a very few seed spices raised commercially in the U.S. for its culinary grade essential oils. Dukat dill is a variety developed especially for its lush, green foliage.

Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*)

Anise is native to the Eastern Mediterranean, the Levant, and Egypt. Like the unrelated but similarly named Chinese Star Anise, this spice has a distinctive, licorice-like flavor. Anise is commonly found as an ingredient in curry, hoisin sauce, sausage, and pepperoni seasonings, and it goes well with pork, fish, or duck. Anise seed can also be used in baked goods and liqueurs, as well as root beer. All the above-ground parts of the plant are edible, although the seed is the portion most commonly available commercially. Like lavender, anise can be used in the linen closet as an insect repellent.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*)

The bulb, foliage, and seeds of fennel are widely used in many of the world's culinary traditions—especially in egg or fish dishes and salads. One type, Florence fennel,

or finocchio (*F. dulce*, or *F. vulgare* var. *azoricum*), with its swollen, bulb-like stem base, is used as a vegetable. In Old English lore, fennel was one of the nine Glory Twigs. Fennel reputedly was an ingredient in some recipes for the infamous absinthe, but today the beverage it is more likely to be found in is fennel tea.

Today, commercial production of fennel seed centers in Syria, India, Mexico, China, Iran, Bulgaria, Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. However, fennel is also a hardy perennial in most U.S. regions, though it is often grown as an annual in warm climates.

Fennel has become naturalized in many parts of the world—growing wild in dry soils on seacoasts and near riverbanks. Early Italian immigrants who settled on Potrero Hill in San Francisco, California, introduced an invasive species of fennel to San Francisco that may be the Giant fennel (*Ferula communis*) of the Mediterranean.

Caution: Wild hemlock, a plant well-established in the Mountain West, has a superficial resemblance to fennel but is extremely toxic, even when simply handled with bare hands.

Caraway (*Carum carvi*)

Caraway has been cultivated since the Middle Ages and is considered to be the spice used longer than any other in Europe. Caraway seed is used whole in breads, fruits, or cakes—as well as sauerkraut—and has long been considered a digestive aid. Native to Asia, as well as northern and central Europe, caraway seed comes from a fall-planted biennial that is hardy to 3°C. Today caraway is produced mainly in Holland, but is also commercially

