

Cheat Sheet

*How to navigate
the food world
like a pro*

THE STRAITS TIMES

Foreword

The Cheat Sheet column was introduced to The Straits Times Lifestyle food pages in May, 2012.

Noticing a growing foodie culture in Singapore, the lifestyle team decided a guide to the booming range of foodstuff as well as the finer points of prepping and storing ingredients would be useful for readers.

Since then, food consultant and author Chris Tan has written some 140 Cheat Sheets for The Straits Times, covering everything from preserved vegetables to kitchen whisks.

With the tagline, “How to navigate the food world like a pro”, each Cheat Sheet offers bite-sized pieces of information that the reader can use.

This e-book compiles 60 of the best columns.

Happy cooking and eating!



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Equipment

- Chopsticks
- Cookie cutters
- Food strainers
- Kitchen brushes
- Kitchen thermometers
- Stemware
- Whisks



Vegetables

- Bittergourd
- Brinjals
- Cauliflower, broccoli & relatives
- Cucumbers
- Preserved greens
- Spring onions, leeks & chives
- Sprouts
- Stem vegetables
- Sticky vegetables
- Vegetable gourds & melons
- Yams & other root vegetables



Fruit

- Apples
- Asian mangoes
- Bananas
- Citrus: Kumquats
- Citrus: Limes
- Citrus: Mandarins
- Citrus: Unusual hybrids
- Tomatoes



Herbs & spices

Basil

Commonly confused
herbs & spices

Chilli: Powders

Chilli: Green

Chilli: Red

Garlic

Ginger

Mustard

Tamarind

Ulam



Fish

Anchovies

Fish and seafood roe

Salmon

Sardines

Beverages

Coffee

Milk Substitutes

Sake

Sparkling wines



Pantry
Staples

Dried beans

Spanning diverse shapes, colours and characters, dried beans are a boon to every cook.

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❖ Black-eyed beans

Also called cowpeas. Thin-skinned, they cook slightly faster than other beans.

Lentil-like in flavour, they are a good all-purpose bean for curries, soups, stews and salads.



❖ Borlotti beans

Dried versions of the fresh cranberry beans sold in their pods in season. Also called rose coco beans (though they are unrelated to coconut or chocolate).

Their plain, neutral flavour makes them a good all-purpose bean for soups, stews and salads.



❖ Broad beans

Large, flat, camouflage-green and assertively beany-tasting. Most often seen as deep-fried snacks or cooked with spices and mashed to make kacang phool, a traditional Arabic-Malay dish.



❖ Anasazi beans

An attractive American heirloom bean sometimes seen at gourmet supermarkets. Needing shorter soaking and cooking times than most other beans, they are pink when cooked. Mild and sweet, almost like boiled peanuts.



❖ Pinto beans

Widely used in Southwestern American cooking, in dishes such as refried beans. Similar to kidney beans in taste and texture, but a tad milder.



❖ Cannellini beans

Also known as alubia or white kidney beans. Creamy-textured and mildly nutty-tasting. A good all-purpose bean for curries, salads and stews.



❖ Butter beans (left)

Large, flattened and ivory-hued. Also called lima beans, they cook up very smooth and creamy. Excellent for purees, soups, and bean pastes for Japanese wagashi sweets and other confections.



❖ Haricot beans

Most recognisable as baked beans in tomato sauce. Small, white and quite bland, but a good backdrop for other flavours in stews, cassoulet and other casseroles, and salads. Also called navy beans.

❖ Soya beans

The world's most ubiquitous bean, eaten in myriad forms such as sprouts, bean milk, tofu, tempeh, fermented sauces and pastes, soya protein and soya bean oil. Cultivars vary widely in colour, size and shape: shown here are Japanese soya beans.



❖ Azuki beans

Small red beans widely used across Asia, mostly in sweet items such as red bean soup, anpan buns and such. Also called adzuki or aduki. Complex and earthy in flavour, they typically need multiple changes of water during soaking and cooking to remove their tannic edge.



❖ Mung beans

Familiar to Singaporeans in many local foods such as green bean soup, dal dishes, tau suan, tau sar piah and as beansprouts. They have thick skins, a yellow flesh that collapses readily once cooked and a distinctive but not assertive taste.





❖ Kidney beans

Thick-skinned, with a robust flavour and starchy texture, these hold their own well in spicy dishes. They take quite a while to reach tenderness. Mashed, they make a good base for veggie burgers and croquettes.

❖ Black beans

Shown here are two different beans, both often sold labelled as “black beans”. The larger, rounder bean is a black soya bean (left), used more in Asian cuisines. It is earthy flavoured and is fermented to make salted black beans that appear in cooked dishes. The smaller, more oblong bean is a black turtle bean, used more in Western cuisines: softer and milder-tasting, it is suited to stews, salads and soups.



Cooking beans

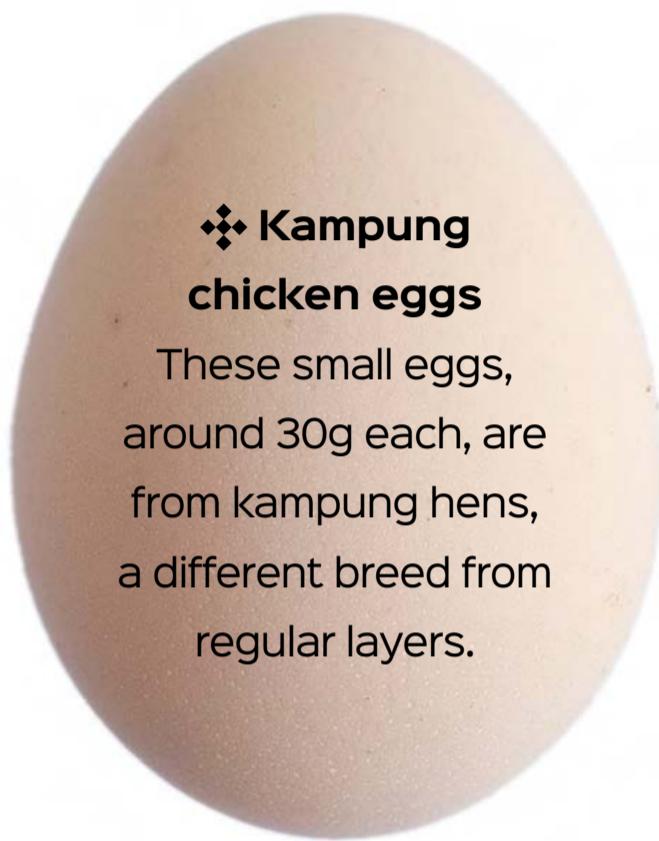
All dried beans cook more quickly and evenly if first soaked in ample water, so they can partially rehydrate. Soak in very hot water for 60 to 90 minutes, or in room-temperature water for four to six hours or overnight. Drain well, cover with fresh water, bring to a simmer and cook gently until done.

Eggs

An overview of the world's
favourite breakfast.

❖ Regular chicken eggs

These vary in size from 40g to 70g weighed in shell. Yolk colour relates to chicken feed make-up and has no predictable bearing on flavour, neither does shell colour. Jumbo eggs often have relatively larger yolks, and sometimes double yolks, which occur randomly, often in younger hens. First-born eggs come from first-time layers, but are not nutritionally distinct from other eggs. Both yolks and whites thin out as eggs age.



❖ Kampung chicken eggs

These small eggs, around 30g each, are from kampung hens, a different breed from regular layers.



❖ Other poultry eggs

Most commonly sold are quail eggs (above), about 10g each, with pale but proportionately large and rich yolks. Local farm stores, such as www.unclewilliam.biz, may stock very limited supplies of eggs from other birds, such as pigeon or guinea fowl. Fresh duck eggs are not sold in Singapore, due to avian flu concerns.



Labelling terms

Battery eggs, the most common kind, are from hens confined to indoor battery cages. **Cage-free or barn eggs** come from hens allowed some measure of freedom to roam in enclosed indoor barn spaces. **Free-range eggs** from hens allowed some outdoor exposure are not produced in Singapore.



Speciality eggs

Some producers raise hens on feed formulated to give their eggs particular nutritional profiles. According to Seng Choon Farm, natural and nutrient-rich feed ingredients are used to produce their speciality lines, such as Carrot Eggs. Nutrition aside, flavour differences among all kinds of regular or speciality chicken eggs are often only very subtle.



❖ Century eggs

Traditionally made by curing duck eggs for a few months in an alkaline mixture of calcium oxide, tea, ash, clay, salt and rice chaff. Modern cures are often modified for faster results though the eggs are still typically sold crusted in rice chaff. Their green-grey yolks and cola-hued, firmly jellied whites have a sulphurous, even cheesy aroma and flavour. The most prized ones have branching crystalline patterns on their surface and creamy-centred yolks.



❖ Salted eggs

Immersing fresh duck eggs for several weeks in brine, sometimes spiked with spices or rice wine, turns their yolks firm and deep orange, their whites viscous and both very salty. The finished, drained eggs are smeared with ash paste for shelf storage and always cooked before consumption. Chicken eggs and quail eggs can also be salt-cured though they are less flavourful.

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❖ Black chicken eggs

Laid by white-feathered, black-fleshed silkie hens, also known as black chickens. Around 30g each, the eggs are mild-tasting, with smooth, rich yolks.

❖ Dried eggs

Chiefly used by the food service industry. Baking supply shops may stock powdered dried egg whites, or meringue powder, a mixture of dried egg whites, sugar and stabilisers. Both products have specific confectionery and patisserie applications.



❖ Unlaid eggs

An increasingly rare sight at wet markets, these are half-formed eggs found inside the bodies of hens slaughtered for meat. Mostly yolk inside a thin membrane, ranging from pea-size to about 2cm in diameter, they taste less rich than regular eggs. Traditionally cooked in soups, curries, stews or congees by many cultures.

❖ Sanitised and pasteurised eggs

Producers may sanitise egg exteriors with ultraviolet light exposure before packing. Some use hot water baths to pasteurise whole in-shell eggs. Look for these in supermarket chillers. Gourmet or health food stores sometimes stock cartons of pasteurised liquid eggs or egg whites (shown here), products more often used by the food service industry than home consumers.

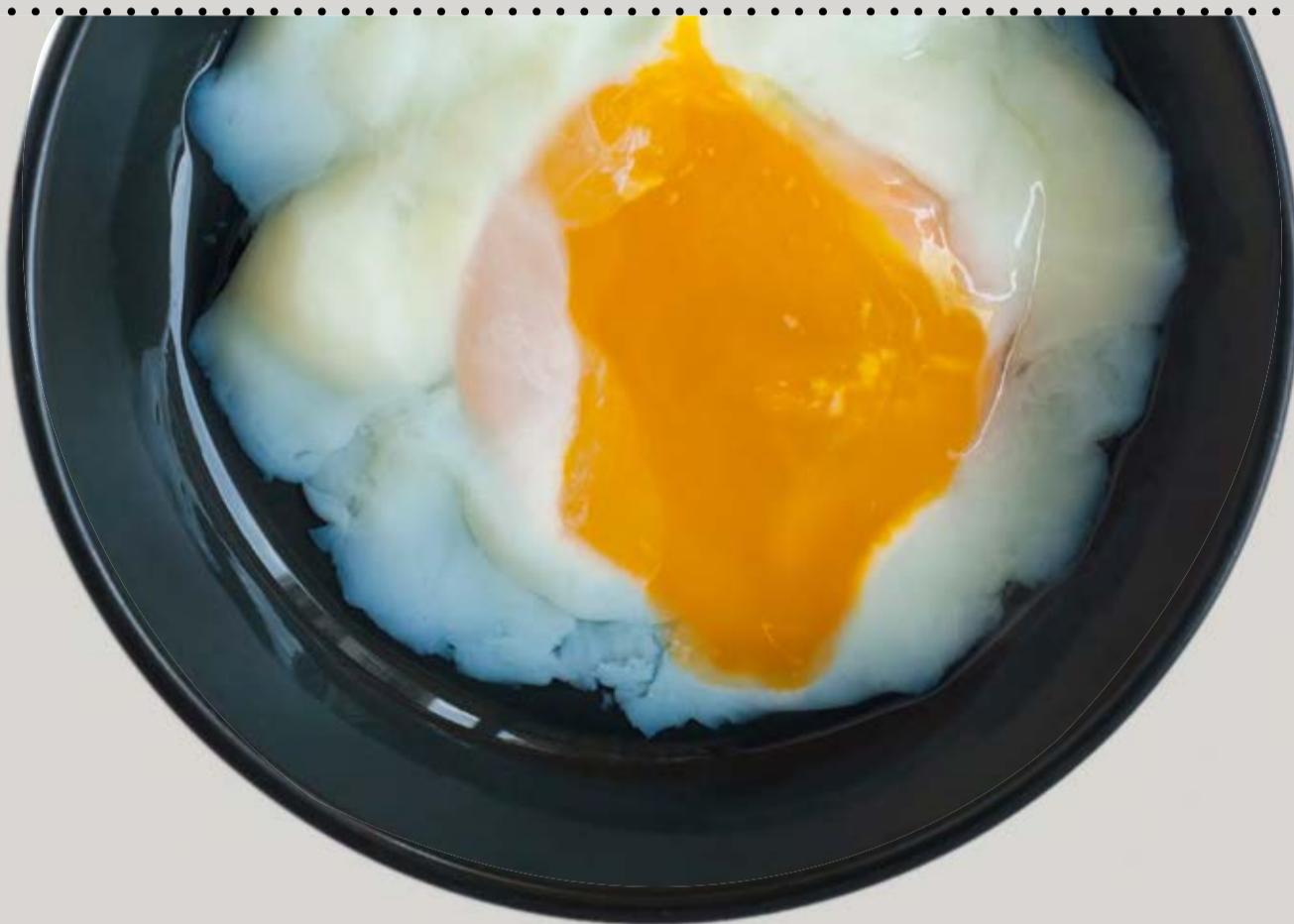


Chilling and storing

Some supermarkets sell chilled eggs to cater to Japanese or other diners who favour raw or partly cooked eggs, and hence prize extreme freshness. For example, Seng Choon Farm packs chilled eggs for Meidi-Ya. Some gourmet supermarkets store all eggs in chillers. At home, store egg cartons on a fridge shelf. Temperatures in frequently opened fridge doors are less stable, and fluctuations may cause condensation on egg shells, which can promote bacterial or mould growth. Always observe use-by dates.

Eggs: How to boil them

To boil eggs to your desired doneness, all you need is a timer and a few simple rules of thumb.



❖ The eggs

All the timings given below are for eggs weighing 60 to 65g each, at room temperature. Fridge-cold eggs cook less predictably. As long as there is enough water to fully submerge and surround all the eggs, with at least a finger's width between them, timings should stay about the same for batches of up to eight eggs or so.

❖ The pot

Place a low trivet or small rack on the bottom of the pot. This allows the hot water to circulate all around the eggs, and stops them from knocking against the bottom of the pot.

❖ The water

Bring it to a gentle boil, then lower in the eggs. Immediately dial down the heat to maintain a gentle simmer, with a few small bubbles rising every few seconds. Start your timer.



❖ At three minutes

Only the thinnest layer of white is set. The yolk is runny.

❖ At four minutes

About half the white is set, the rest runny and clumpy. The yolk is faintly thicker but still runny.

❖ At five minutes

About two-thirds of the white is set, the rest soft. The yolk is slightly thicker yet, but still just runny enough to flow.

❖ At six minutes

All the white and a thin rim of yolk is set. The rest of the yolk is thick and runny.

❖ At seven minutes

The white is set. The yolk is mostly opaque but still slightly translucent and soft in its very centre.

❖ At eight minutes

The egg is fully hard-boiled, with a firm white and yolk just opaque all the way through.

❖ Kopi tiam soft-boiled eggs

These are not cooked over heat, but immersed in just-boiled water in a container, covered and left to stand for seven to eight minutes. This yields a clumpy, unevenly and barely set white, and a slightly thickened yolk.



❖ Onsen egg

Named for the Japanese hot springs they are traditionally cooked in, at a temperature between 64 and 69 deg C. This range is slightly above egg yolk coagulation temperature but slightly below egg white coagulation temperature. After about 30 to 45 minutes of cooking, the yolk is creamy set but not opaque, and the white has a soft, delicate jellied texture throughout. Onsen eggs can be made at home in an electric steam oven (steam for 35 to 45 minutes at 65 deg C), or in a stove-top pot with an attached thermometer, plus careful adjustment of the heat source to keep the temperature constant.



❖ Slow-cooked eggs

When eggs are simmered very slowly for at least six hours, the sugars and proteins in the egg whites undergo Maillard reactions, which are also responsible for the browning of cooked meat, and the white develops a pale brown colour and toasted flavour. The texture of the yolk changes from grainy to creamy. These are traditional to Sephardic Jewish and other Middle Eastern cuisines.



Peeling boiled eggs

Eggs cooked for over five minutes are firm enough to peel. Transfer them to a bowl of cold water and let them sit until cool enough to handle. Tap them all over to fragment the shell, then peel them under the water, or under running water: this helps the shell membrane come away from the egg. Older eggs peel more easily than fresh ones.

Fats for baking & cooking

What makes festive eats so decadent?
Find out with this guide to a baker's best friends.



❖ Shortening

Invented as an alternative to lard and animal fats, shortening is usually pure fat, hydrogenated or treated to attain a solid texture. Can be used in all kinds of baked goods, and for deep or shallow frying. Typically inexpensive but flavourless.



❖ **Rendered animal fats**

Gourmet supermarkets and butchers sell rendered animal fats such as pork lard, duck fat and goose fat. Used alone or in tandem with butter in pastries, cookies, and breads, these yield light and crisp textures, without shortening's often waxy aftertaste.



❖ **Butter**

Arguably the most versatile fat for baking and cooking, able to enhance the flavour, texture, colour, browning, and keeping qualities of many recipes in different ways. Unsalted butter is often preferred for its fresher flavour, though many classic Asian recipes – sugee cake, for instance – use salted butter, which used to be the only kind available.



❖ **Clarified butter**

This is butter with its water and milk solids removed. Used in many cultures around the world, it is occasionally sold at local gourmet stores but is easily made at home by cooking butter over low heat until all its water evaporates, then straining it. Used in shortbread-type cookies, filo pastries, sponge cakes, French butter sauces, and for sauteing and frying.

❖ Ghee

An Indian fat traditionally made by culturing creamy milk for a faintly yogurt-like flavour, churning it into butter, clarifying the butter at temperatures high enough to lightly caramelise the milk solids to improve the ghee's stability and straining it. Stronger-tasting than western clarified butter, ghee is favoured for pastries, cookies, brushing on baked or grilled foods, and high-temperature frying. Vanaspati ghee is dairy-free shortening.



❖ Low-moisture butter

Regular butter is between 80 and 82 per cent fat, versus low-moisture butter's 82 to 84 per cent fat. However, a small difference is enough to make the latter discernibly more malleable for use in puff pastry, croissants and other layered or flaky doughs. Sold by baking supply shops or gourmet stores.



❖ Oils

They lack butter's air-trapping properties, but as they are liquid at room temperature, they make baked goods more soft and moist. Those pressed from flavourful nuts or seeds also add fragrance. Shown here is coconut oil, which solidifies firmly when chilled and can be used in place of butter or shortening in pastry and cookie doughs.



❖ Butter oil

Products with this and similar-sounding names are flavourings synthesised to give a butter-like aroma to baked goods.



❖ Cooking sprays:

Made with vegetable oil, these allow cooks to coat cooking vessels thinly and evenly with fat. Shown here is a baking spray with added flour, for use in baking pans to help cakes unmould easily.

❖ Margarine

An emulsion of fat and liquid originally invented as a butter alternative. Once made with animal fats, it is now more often made with vegetable fats. Skimmed milk may be used as the liquid fraction, for a dairy flavour, and colouring may be added to mimic butter's appearance. Different processing methods tailor its properties. Margarines for pastry and baking are firm, almost clay-like, and shelf-stable at air-conditioned room temperatures, whereas tub margarines for eating and cooking are soft and spreadable. Some kinds of white margarine have a creamy texture somewhere in between those extremes. White margarine is made of beef fat, vegetable fat and water, and is designed for use in frostings.



Gelling agents

What makes jelly set? Many different ingredients, in fact. Here is a guide to those commonly available here.

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❖ Aiyu jelly

A unique gelling agent (above) used to make a popular jelly snack in Taiwan, this is extracted from a fig species by kneading seeds from the dried fruit with water. It sets into a smooth, clear gel at room temperature. This is canned aiyu jelly sold at Chinese stores such as Yue Hwa.



❖ Gelatine

Derived from animal sources, such as pig or cow skin, this gelling agent is sold as thin sheets or in slightly cheaper powdered form. Both sheets and powder must be hydrated in cold water before being dissolved in warm liquid.

Gelatine yields transparent, delicate gels which melt smoothly in the mouth. Fish-derived gelatine is rare and more costly.



❖ Carrageenan

A gelling agent derived from seaweed species different to those used in agar-agar. Shown here is coralline seaweed, which is sold at health-food stores in semi-dried whole form or as processed solid slabs of flavoured jelly mix. Carrageenan is widely used in the food industry, as it can be processed to yield many different textures. Somewhat confusingly, carrageenan jelly products may be labelled "agar" in Japan.



❖ Japanese starch gels

Shown here are warabi ko (left), starch derived from bracken fern roots, used to gel the sticky, soft confection warabi mochi; and kuzu ko (left, below), from kudzu root, used to make translucent gels for Japanese confections and also in savoury items such as sesame “tofu”. Sold in Japanese supermarkets, the coarse granules of both starches must be crushed, then dissolved and cooked. Both are expensive.

Cheap versions may be cut with other starches such as sweet potato or tapioca. The word “hon” on the English-translated label identifies pure kuzu or warabi.



❖ Pectin

Found in all fruits but especially abundant in citrus fruit, apples, guavas and some berry varieties, it is used for setting jams, jellies and conserves. Pectin needs sugary and acidic conditions to properly set. Shown here is powdered pectin. Gourmet supermarkets may sell liquid pectin and also “jam sugar”, a sugar and pectin-powder mix specifically for jam-making.



❖ Konjac

Starch from the tubers of a yam species, used in the konnyaku jelly sold in different formats at Japanese supermarkets. Uniquely firm and resilient, konjac gels do not dissolve in hot water and are often used in savoury applications. Shown here are konnyaku slices coloured and flavoured to resemble smoked salmon.

Real konjac is quite expensive, so many of the mixes for making dessert konnyaku jellies consist partially or wholly of other gelling agents such as carrageenan, treated to yield textures similar to real konnyaku.



❖ Agar-agar

An algae-derived vegetarian gelling agent, sold as powder or in long, frilly strips. Shown above is a bar of agar-agar (called kanten in Japanese), a larger version of the strips, sold in Japanese supermarkets. Making jelly from beach-foraged algae was once a traditional practice in Singapore and the region. The fronds were washed, dried, soaked and boiled to extract and purify the agar-agar. A relative to gelatine, it is more powerful at gelling, and sets and melts at higher temperatures, yielding slightly cloudy gels with a brittle set. It can be combined with gelatine to make jellies of intermediate texture.

❖ Other starch gels

Many jellied textures in traditional kueh and puddings are produced with starches such as rice flour, glutinous rice flour, cornstarch, wheat starch and mung bean starch, blended with liquid and slowly cooked. Precise proportions are important to obtain a wobbly, soft jelly as too much starch results in a firm stodge, while too little yields a sauce.



Labelling confusion

Many ready-made jelly mixes do not carry detailed labels. To be sure of what you are buying, whether it is halal, vegetarian or vegan, for instance, seek out products from health-food stores or gourmet supermarkets, which are usually more stringently labelled.

Legumes

The Indian pantry calls for many kinds of dried legumes.
These are some of the most common varieties.

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❖ **Mung beans or green gram
or paasi paruppu or moong dal**

Sold whole or split, skinned or with skins on. These cook quickly into a smooth, soothing puree, light in texture and flavour and easy to digest. Both Indian and Chinese cuisines use mung beans in savoury and sweet dishes.



❖ **Black gram or ulutham
paruppu or urad dal**

Often sold with their shiny black skin removed and their ivory cores split. Somewhat sticky-textured when cooked, urad dal are commonly used as a main or binding ingredient in starchy staples such as dosai, vadai and idli. They are sometimes roasted or fried to intensify their nutty taste before further cooking.



❖ Moth gram or nari payaru or matki dal

Reddish-brown and very small, these stubby, blunt-ended legumes taste a little like mung beans with an earthier finish. High in protein, they make good additions to mixed vegetable stews, legume and grain salads, kedgeree and such.



❖ Cowpeas or black-eyed peas or thatta payaru or lobia dal

Cowpeas have a firm texture and satisfying, almost meaty flavour which stand up well to spices and rich ingredients such as coconut. Eaten widely across Africa, the Americas and Asia.



❖ Bengal gram or kadalai paruppu or chana dal

These names always refer specifically to split, skinned, small yellow chickpeas. They are almost identical in size and colour to pigeon peas, but chana dal are wrinkled and irregular while pigeon peas are smooth and nearly circular. Their rounded, nutty taste is enhanced by roasting or frying. Chickpea flour (besan) is ground from chana dal.



❖ **Red lentils or mysore paruppu or masoor dal**

Usually sold with their brown skins removed, these salmon-orange lentils soften and cook quickly, turning yellow and nutty-tasting.

They are suited to Western and Asian soups and stews.



❖ **Black chickpeas or karuppu konda kadai or kala chana**

Not truly black, but dark red-brown from their intact skins, these have a sturdier texture and more assertive flavour than white chickpeas.

Usually sold whole.



❖ **White chickpeas or vellai konda kadai or kabuli channa**

These dense, distinctively flavoured legumes are high in protein and fibre. They can be boiled, stewed, pureed, roasted or fried. Usually sold whole.



❖ Pigeon peas or thuvaram paruppu or toor dal or toovar dal

Most often sold skinned and split, as shown here. Robust and mild-tasting, they are versatile players in both complex and simple dishes and, hence, are widely used in savoury and sweet Indian recipes. They are sometimes sold coated with oil, which extends their shelf life. Wash before cooking as pigeon peas usually taste better without the oil.



Preparing dried legumes

Pick them over to remove stones and grit, then rinse to remove dust. Soak harder, denser legumes (chickpeas, cowpeas and pigeon peas) in water for several hours before cooking. Softer lentils such as masoor dal and mung beans need only a few minutes of soaking, if at all.

Sprouting legumes

Indian cooks often let soaked legumes sprout before using them in salads, stir-fries and other dishes. Sprouting increases digestibility and levels of bio-available nutrients, but must be done carefully and hygienically. Optimum sprouting conditions and times differ among legumes, so follow recipes closely.



Natural food colourings

If you are whipping up festive confections and kueh but prefer not to rely on artificial food colours, these natural, traditional colouring agents are your best bets.

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❖ Orange and yellow

Turmeric (above left) is the most intensely hued and commonly sold natural yellow foods, though its earthy taste is not always appropriate. Use peeled and juiced fresh turmeric root for the least intrusive flavour. Filipino and Latin American cooks traditionally use annatto seeds (above) to lend dishes red and orange hues. Its faint aroma has sweet, peppery,

minty and nutmeg notes. In the West, it has long been a common natural colouring in cheeses and prepared food. Ground or whole annatto can be infused in water or oil to extract colour.



❖ Red and pink

The most heat-stable red and pink hues come from red yeast rice (angkak), rice grains inoculated with yeast that produces an intense natural red colour. Sold at Chinese dried goods shops as odourless whole or powdered grains, or in red rice wine lees (top left), which has a wine fragrance and is familiarly used in Hakka braised dishes. Beetroot powder (left), sometimes found in baking supply shops, is quite concentrated but has a distinct scent, so is best used sparingly for pastel garnet and pink shades.

❖ Green

Pandan leaf juice is the most common Asian green colouring, as the sweet aroma of the leaves also works well in many contexts. From a related plant more common in Indonesia and Malaysia than here, daun suji or daun serani leaves yield no aroma but a darker green juice.

The gentle forest hue of matcha green tea powder (right) shows up best in white or pale dishes. Note that “green tea powder”, if inexpensive and not explicitly labelled as pure matcha, may contain artificial colours and aromas. Mugwort juice or powder gives Hakka, Japanese and Korean dumplings a deep moss-green colour and slightly bitter taste, but the fresh or dried leaves are hard to get here.

In French cuisine, green leaves such as spinach are pulped, warmed and strained to get a natural green colouring extract nicknamed chlorophyll after its main pigment.





❖ Blue

Used across Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia, easy-to-grow bunga telang or butterfly pea flowers (left) are one of the world's very few natural sources of true blue colour. Lightly pound fresh flowers with water or soak dried flowers in warm water for an extract. In alkaline mixtures, it yields inky or cobalt shades while in acidic ones, blue-violet tints.



❖ Black

Sold at baking supply stores and increasingly popular in both commercial and home baking to tint items such as mooncakes, cookies, kueh and buns, bamboo charcoal powder (left) is finely ground carbonised bamboo. In Thailand, coconut ash is used similarly. Only a little is needed to darken food considerably.



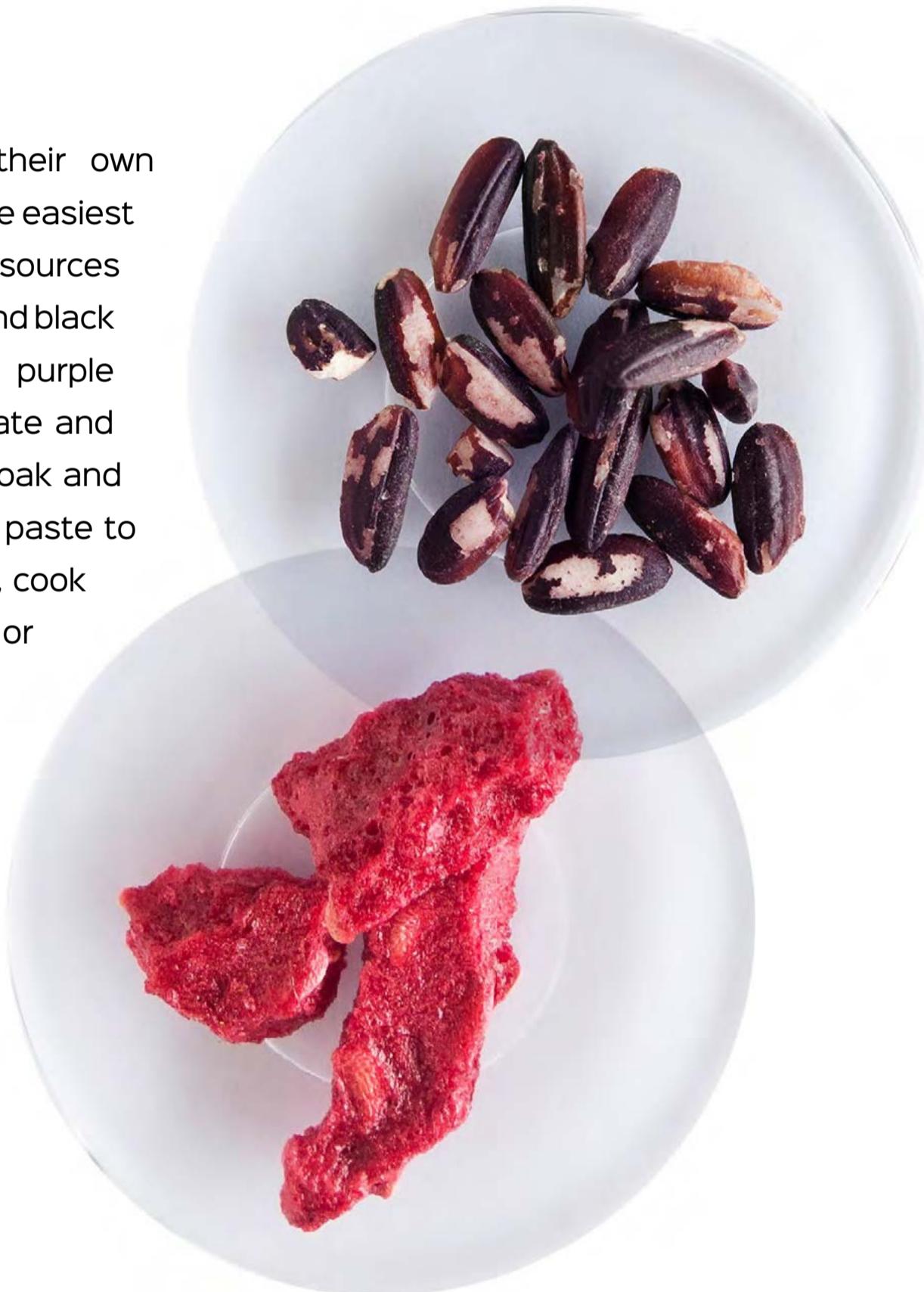
❖ Brown

Caramel-derived brown food colours are common in prepared foods. Home cooks can use dark molasses, dark brown sugar or black treacle to tint dishes brown. These will deepen flavour too, but can impart a slight bitterness if used in quantity. Cocoa powder has a concentrated brown colour, but is principally a flavouring agent.

❖ Purple

Although they do have their own distinct if mild fragrances, the easiest to find and most heat-stable sources are purple sweet potatoes and black glutinous rice, also called purple rice. For a liquid extract, grate and squeeze the potatoes, or soak and strain the rice. For a starch paste to use in kueh or other dishes, cook and puree the potatoes or grind the dry or soaked rice.

For bright pink-purple hues plus berry aromas, pulverise freeze-dried berries (raspberries are shown here), sold at health food shops.



Natural salts

Flavoured salts are all the rage but there are many natural salts with unique character.

Here is a guide to the most commonly available.
All these salts can be found in supermarkets
and gourmet stores.

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❖ Himalayan salt

An “it” ingredient of the moment, this rock salt is mined in Pakistan. Streaked with pink from iron compounds, it has a neutral, light flavour suited to all purposes. It works well in desserts which use salt as a counterpoint. It can be carved into dense blocks and sheets. The blocks can be heated up and used as a “hot stone” to cook food, seasoning it at the same time. The sheets can be used decoratively. Gourmet butcher Victor Churchill in Sydney has a meat-ageing room partially walled with backlit Himalayan salt blocks, which reputedly help to stabilise humidity.





❖ French grey sea salt

Moist, soft salt made from Atlantic seawater, channelled into special ponds and evaporated by sun and wind. Sometimes labelled “Celtic salt”, it has a pleasant, slightly tangy taste reminiscent of the ocean. Sold in various granulations – the medium-fine version is shown here – the most prized is fleur de sel or flower of salt. The small, irregular crystals with an almost fluffy consistency is harvested from the top layer of the salt ponds.

Other salt-making countries have equivalents, such as Spanish flor de sal. France’s most famous sea salt and fleur de sel, from Guerande, has a pedigree of more than 1,000 years and bears a Protected Geographical Indication.

❖ Black salt

An Indian rock salt whose hue and aroma come from iron sulphide residues left by a roasting process. The deep-purple crystals turn rose-pink when ground or crushed. Their sulphurous scent is pungent but plays well with herbs and spices, accentuating the savoury character of dishes. Black salt is essential in masala spice mixtures for chaat snacks, chutneys and other recipes. Try adding a few tiny grains to lemonade or lime juice for an unusual contrast.





❖ Soy sauce salt

A special product sold in limited quantities by local soy sauce brewer Kwong Woh Hing (www.kwh.com.sg), these salt crystals naturally form at the mouth of soy sauce vats during the fermentation process. The large, moist and blockish crystals have a brown tint and a savoury fragrance from soy sauce residues and can be ground in a salt mill.

Great for garnishing plain grilled or steamed meats and seafood, tempura items, French fries and dumplings.



❖ **Maldon sea salt** (left)

From a two-millennia tradition, this English salt is made from Blackwater River water in Essex. It is filtered, boiled and then simmered until the crystals slowly form. This salt is distinguished by its white brilliance, very clean but intense saltiness, and large, crisp pyramidal flakes, which make it an especially fine garnishing and table salt.

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❖ **Murray River salt**

Extracted from the saline waters in the South Australian Murray-Darling river system, this salt is rich in minerals such as magnesium and calcium. Its soft peach-pink crystals have a mild, almost sweet flavour. Excellent as a garnish that will not make dishes aggressively salty. Great on seafood, steamed dishes of all types, fish and chips, salads or just for sprinkling on bread spread with unsalted butter.

❖ **Japanese salts**

Japan's lack of the correct climate conditions to produce sea salt via natural evaporation in ponds has resulted in many alternative methods of salt harvesting. These include collecting salt deposits from seaweed. Some of these traditional methods are still practised. Look out for artisanal salts at seasonal fairs held at Japanese supermarkets. Shown here is yakishio, made by boiling and then slow-roasting seawater to form very small, dry and even crystals.



Noodles: Dried rice

Need to replenish
your stock of
emergency beehoon?
Here are some other
options.

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❖ Dried kway chap noodles

This is often sold in supermarkets as an instant noodle with seasonings. Thai grocery shops sell slightly larger plain kway chap fragments in bags, labelled “rice flake”, as shown here.



❖ Thick dried rice vermicelli

The noodles are made with pure rice, like the short, straight Jiangxi noodles shown here. Some versions are also made with other additional starches like these looped long laksa noodles. These contain sago starch (for firmness) and corn starch (for smoothness). Cooked, both types have the same slippery texture of fresh laksa beehoon.



❖ Pasteurised fresh rice noodles

They are shelf-stable for a couple of weeks without refrigeration and are a familiar sight in supermarkets. Formats include bee tai mak, hor fun, kway teow and kway chap. They are good for stir-frying and braising as they hold their shape well.



❖ Dried Thai rice sticks (sen lek)

These noodles are usually used for pad thai and are 3 to 5mm wide. Good-quality sen lek always retain some elasticity and a bouncy bite after being stir-fried. The best reputedly come from Chanthaburi province.



❖ Pasta

Italian noodles made wholly or partially from white or brown rice can be found in health-food or speciality stores. Cook it in vigorously boiling water, watch closely and taste often – overcooking renders it mushy and awful. Drain and rinse with cold water as soon as it is done. The Vietnamese 100 per cent rice macaroni shown here is from Golden Mile Complex supermarket.



❖ Vietnamese pho rice noodles (banh pho kho)

These are about the same width as pad thai. They are sometimes made with a small percentage of tapioca flour, which adds springiness and gives the dried strands a slight shine.



❖ Kuey Jab Vietnamese Noodles

Look for this at Thai grocery stores. Made from rice, sticky rice and tapioca flour, they are nearly as thick as udon. Popular in north-eastern Thailand, they are related to a Vietnamese noodle called banh canh, and garnished with moo yor, a Vietnamese-style pork sausage. Unusually, they are not soaked or pre-cooked but boiled from dry in a clear soup broth. They release starch that thickens the broth to a consistency like thin lor mee gravy.



Other varieties

Noodles made from brown rice, and occasionally even black sticky rice, are sold sporadically by both supermarkets and health-food stores. Brown rice beehoon soaks up flavours well and has a sturdier bite than white beehoon, though it tends to break up if overcooked. Black rice noodles have a sticky mouthfeel.

Prepping rice noodles for cooking

Most dried rice noodles benefit from a soak in cool water before further cooking by any method. The rehydration helps them subsequently cook faster and more evenly. Soak times range from a few minutes to half an hour, depending on noodle shape and composition. Thinner shapes need less soaking.

Storing rice noodles

Store dried noodle packets in a cool, dark cupboard and in air-tight containers so that weevils cannot get in or out. Respect expiry dates, as stale noodles taste terrible.

Noodles: Dried wheat

Here is a guide to types of these pantry staples.

❖ Sliced and torn noodles

Shown here are dried versions of ribbon-like ban mian and oblong mee hoon kueh, sliced and hand-torn from egg dough respectively. Their irregular thicknesses, surface textures and edges allow them to soak up and hold broth and sauce very well. Both dried and fresh versions can be cooked directly in the broth they will be served in. The starch they release adds body to the broth.



❖ Somen

Very thin, plain Japanese noodles with a delicate, slippery texture, typically eaten chilled. Shown here are mixed somen in plain and vegetable flavours.





❖ Yee fu noodles

Named for its inventor, this Cantonese noodle has a light texture and slightly caramelised flavour. Traditionally made from egg dough that is shaped, boiled, dried, arranged into a round cake and deep-fried, then drained and stored. To serve, the noodles are usually blanched, stir-fried and sauced.



❖ Mee sua

Extremely fine, pale, plain noodles originally from Fujian and associated with birthdays and festivals. Very fragile and quick to cook, dried mee sua is usually sold in boxes.



❖ Eggs

Fat and protein from eggs give noodles a richer colour and flavour and a more substantial texture. Shown here are dried flat egg noodles.



Instant noodles

Steaming, cooling and drying fresh noodles so they can be stored is a traditional Chinese practice. Food manufacturers modified this process to make instant convenience products. Shaped noodles are steamed, portioned, air-dried or deep-fried to dry out the strands, then packaged.



❖ Durum wheat

This European strain of wheat gives Italian pasta and other European noodle types a distinctive golden colour and more robust flavour than white or bleached wheat flour. Artisanal pasta shaped with bronze dies – look for this on labels – has a rougher surface which sauces and seasonings cling to more tightly. Shown here is fettuccine.

❖ Wholewheat flour

This gives noodles a higher fibre content, visible speckles and a nubbly texture. Supermarkets and health-food stores now sell many wholewheat formats, including mee sua, ramen and pasta. Shown here are instant noodles made with atta wholemeal flour, sold at Indian stores.



❖ Vermicelli

Durum wheat vermicelli (also called angel hair pasta) appears in many cuisines, from the



Mediterranean to the Middle East and all the way to Asia. The broken vermicelli shown here appears in dishes like Spanish fideua (noodle paella), Indian payasam (dessert soups), and Iranian soups.



❖ Flavoured noodles

Very diverse nowadays, these are spiked with vegetables, such as mushrooms, beets, purple sweet potato, corn and carrot; herbs and spices,

such as chilli or thyme; seasonings that include black sesame or red yeast rice; and many other ingredients.

Shown here are Cantonese noodles flavoured with dried shrimp roe.



❖ Udon

Thick, chewy Japanese noodles with an almost square cross-section, made from a stiff, plain dough well-kneaded to develop gluten. Japanese supermarkets typically sell a measure of udon. It absorbs a lot of water during cooking.

Categories

Do not be confused by the diverse names. It is easier to mentally group noodles first by ingredient type, then by dimensions or processing method. For example, egg-enriched noodles share similar flavours, wholewheat noodles take slightly longer to cook than regular noodles, and flat noodles will behave similarly when tossed with sauce.

Alkaline agents

Adding alkalis such as potassium carbonate or calcium hydroxide to noodle dough yields yellow-tinged noodles with a springier texture, faintly soapy flavour and more satiny mouthfeel. Fresh noodles made with mineral-rich or hard water are similarly affected.



❖ Harusame

Japanese vermicelli, typically made with potato starch and sometimes added cornstarch, about 12cm long and 2 to 3mm thick. They cook through in three to five minutes. Different forms are sold for use in soups or cold salads. Very smooth, slightly resilient. They can also be deep-fried into a puffy garnish.

Noodles: Glass

Sometimes called cellophane noodles, these transparent or translucent Asian pantry staples are sold in many different forms and gauges in Chinese, Japanese and Korean supermarkets.

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❖ Potato-starch noodles

Noodles made from potato or sweet potato starch take longer to cook than mung-bean noodles, but maintain their slightly chewy texture for longer when immersed in hot soups or cold dressings. Large Korean supermarkets usually stock a few different types of curly or straight potato-based noodles. Shown here are two different Chinese sweet-potato noodles: sturdy and rustic “steamboat noodles” (left), about the size and thickness of small shoehorns, which take upwards of 10 minutes to cook through and are good at absorbing and conveying flavours; and unusually-shaped vermicelli (above), 60cm long and slightly knobbly like strings of beads, the better to cling to seasonings, dressings or thick soup broths, which cook through in six to eight minutes.



❖ Arrowroot-starch noodles

Look for these, labelled as “mien dong”, in shops selling Vietnamese products. Shown here are two arrowroot vermicelli types: a small coil (above), 25 to 30cm long and 2 to 3mm thick when cooked and textured like firm laksa beehoon; and a long skein (left), about 60cm long and just under 2mm thick when cooked, much like tanghoon, but a tad more delicate. Both cook through in three to five minutes.



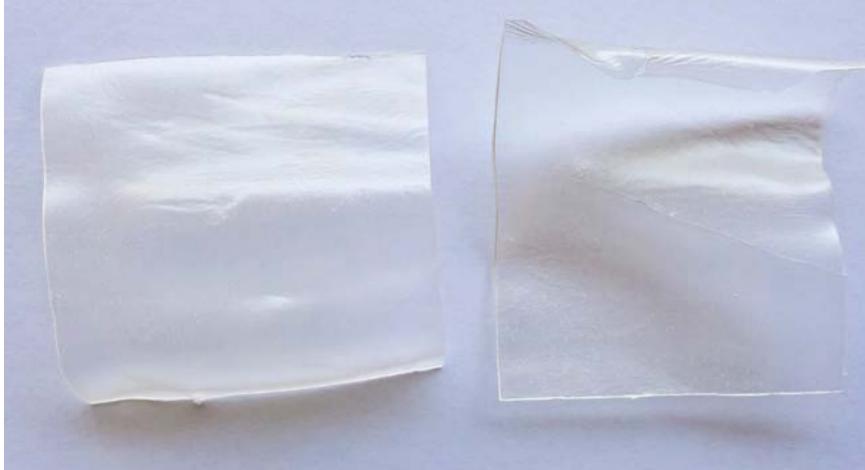
❖ Semi-dry glass noodles

Labelled “crystal vermicelli”, these Chinese potato-starch noodles are only partially dried, with a soft, rubber band-like texture, and are used in cold salads. About 35cm long and 2mm thick when cooked, they need only a minute’s blanching, turning clear as glass, stretchy and very slippery.



❖ Tanghoon

Mung-bean vermicelli, the most familiar glass noodle, used across South-east Asia in many different dishes. Usually sold in individual wiry skeins, clear and springy and just under 2mm-thick when cooked. Soak in cold water until flexible, then drain before stir-frying or braising. You can also blanch them quickly in boiling water, then drain and rinse before using in cold salads or adding to soups. They soak up seasoning very well.



❖ Other mung-bean noodles

Shown here are two other forms – flat square Thai mung-bean sheets (above), about 5cm across, which cook through in about five minutes. They roll up into scroll shapes as they simmer and are best savoured in kway chap, braises and soups; and flat Chinese noodles (left) made of mung bean and potato starch, the same size as kway teow (large stores such as Yue Hwa in Chinatown may sell different widths), which cook through in seven to nine minutes, suitable for hot and cold dishes.



Cooking glass noodles

Cook all glass noodles in vigorously boiling water, stirring occasionally. Watch them closely so they do not clump or become too soft. When done to your liking, drain and rinse in cold water to wash off excess starch. You can help thicker forms hydrate and shorten their cooking time by soaking them in cold water for several minutes before boiling. Cooked noodles continue to absorb liquid as they sit, so do not wait too long before eating them.

Rice: Cooking methods

Before electric rice cookers were invented, rice-eaters around the world developed many ways of preparing the beloved staple. Here is a survey of the most common methods.



❖ Pre-soaking

For the most even results, white and black sticky rice, brown rice and basmati rice need to be soaked for several minutes to hours before cooking as they are slow to hydrate.



❖ Absorption

This method simmers measured quantities of rice and liquid together while covered until the liquid is absorbed. Suited to most rice types, for example Japanese rice. Generally, aged rice needs more water than recently harvested rice, sticky rice often absorbs more water than non-sticky rice, and brown and unpolished rice need to absorb water during a pre-soak (see above) as well as during cooking.

❖ Excess water

Used for basmati and other long-grain rice types. The grains are boiled in water ample enough for them to float in freely, then are drained before serving. The rice can also be partially cooked this way, then drained and left to finish cooking in residual moisture in a covered vessel over low heat.

❖ Steaming

Pre-soaked rice can be finished by steaming, either in a dish or tray with added water, or in a perforated steamer tray so it can absorb water from the steam. Although slightly slower than absorption cooking, steaming can yield very even results, particularly for sticky rice.



❖ Pilaf method

The rice is sauteed with fat and aromatics, measured liquid is added and cooking is completed by absorption. This yields tender, discrete grains in recipes such as Hainanese chicken rice, Chinese savoury glutinous rice and the family of pilaf, pilau and related rice dishes.



❖ Dum briyani

An Indian method. Rice, soaked and sometimes partially pre-cooked by boiling or frying, is combined with spices and marinated and/or pre-cooked vegetables or meat in a vessel. This is then tightly covered, often sealed with dough, and set over controlled heat. Some variations also top the lid with hot coals. As it cooks, the rice slowly absorbs steam and flavours exuded by the other ingredients. Shown here is a modern restaurant version cooked in a serving bowl under a dough lid.

❖ Baking

Essentially the absorption method, but in an oven. Used in English rice pudding recipes and in some easy risotto and pilaf formulas.

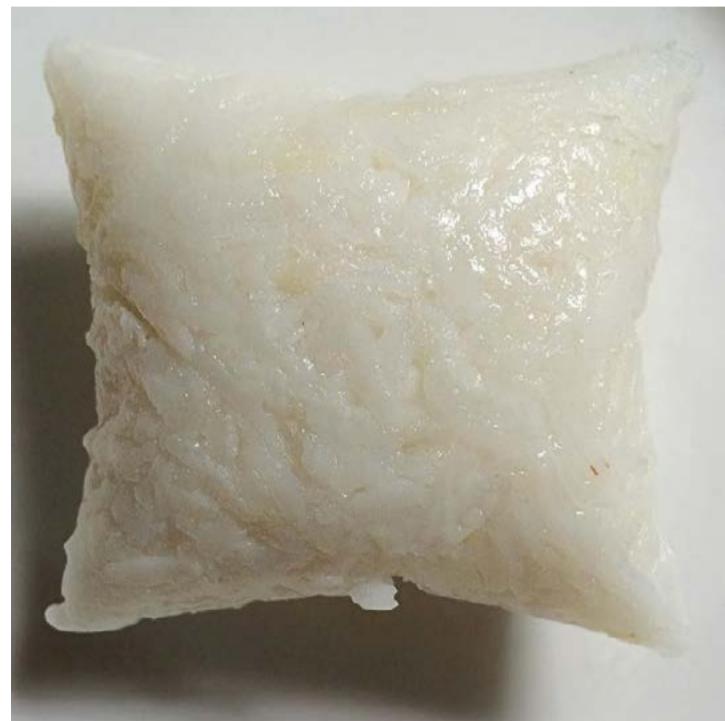


❖ Risotto

Raw short-grain risotto rice is toasted dry or with a little oil, then constantly stirred while small quantities of wine and stock are added in increments, the grains releasing their starch to form a creamy matrix. Constant stirring is not strictly necessary. Some recipes simmer the rice undisturbed in all the required liquid. Either way, the correct final texture is always reached by giving the risotto a final hard stir, usually with butter, and sometimes rich elements such as grated cheese or mascarpone, before serving.

❖ Enclosed boiling

Cooking regular or sticky rice in a confined space makes the grains stick together. Examples of confinements include leaf wrappings, as for rice dumplings and traditional ketupat; plastic sachets, such as the modern ketupat; animal flesh, like squid tubes or deboned poultry; bamboo sections, as in Malay and Indonesian lemang rice; and hollowed-out vegetables, such as the capsicums and zucchinis popular in the Middle East.



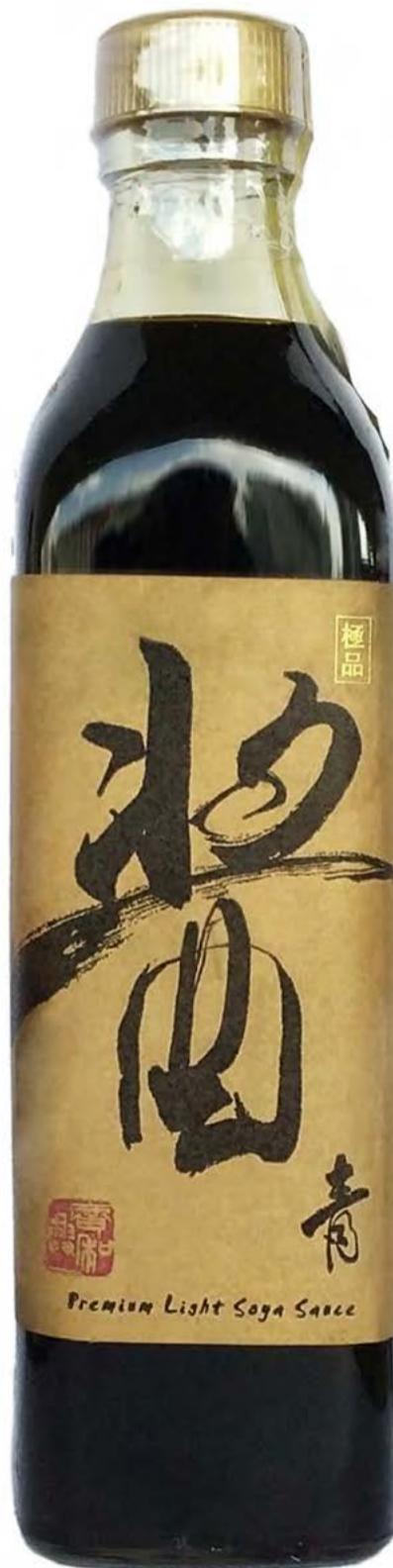


❖ Rice crusts

Some recipes, such as Chinese claypot rice, Japanese kamameshi and Spanish paella, control heat and moisture levels to form crisp crusts at the bottom of the pot. Iranian cuisine particularly celebrates rice crusts, called “tahdig”. They are encouraged to form with added butter and/or yogurt and are sometimes accentuated by lining the pot with thinly sliced potato, bread or even pasta.

Soya sauce

This essential Asian condiment has many faces.



❖ Light soya sauce

Usually from the first pressing of the fermented beans, this is clear and salty with subtle floral, grassy and nutty aromas. The best grades are typically reserved for garnishing or table use, while lesser ones are used for cooking.



❖ Dark soya sauce

Made by tweaking fermentation parameters for a darker, heavier result, or by ageing light soya sauce. It may contain sweeteners and/or thickeners as well as caramel for colour. Usually milder and less salty than light soya sauce.



❖ Black soya bean sauce

Fermented from black soya beans, this has an earthy, full-bodied flavour. The light, dark and paste versions sold locally are mostly from Taiwan.



❖ Tamari

Originally a liquid by-product of Japanese miso-making, the name now usually refers to a dark soya sauce made with little or no wheat and having a mellow, rounded flavour.



❖ Flavourings

Flavouring ingredients can be added during or after fermentation. Read labels carefully. Artificial taste enhancers are common. Common natural additives include sugar, mushroom extract, liquorice and other herbs, red rice, palm sugar and spices in Indonesian kicap and, in Japanese sauces, seaweed and dashi stock extracts. Shown here is a Taiwanese multigrain soya sauce fermented from soya beans, rice, sorghum, buckwheat and Job's tears, which add complex umami notes.



❖ **Unpasteurised soya sauce**
Not heat-treated after fermentation to preserve its most delicate aroma nuances and, hence, more perishable than other kinds. Shown here is an unpasteurised Japanese whole-soy-bean, low-salt soy sauce.



❖ **White soya sauce**
Most Japanese shoyu are made with more wheat than Chinese soya sauce, but shiro shoyu uses an especially high wheat proportion for an extra-pale, sweeter result. A niche product used mainly in restaurants to contribute flavour with little colour.



❖ **Soya sauce paste**
Soya sauce thickened with added starch, used where flavour without excess moisture is desired. Shown here is a Taiwanese soya sauce paste infused with red yeast rice.

❖ Double-fermented soya sauce

Made by fermenting soya beans with already-made soya sauce instead of salt brine, yielding a premium sauce with a layered, intense flavour. Produced in Japan and China, but seldom seen here.

❖ Synthesised soya sauce

Made using quick chemical hydrolysis instead of slow fermentation to break down the soya beans. More common in the West than in Asia. Cheap and fast to produce but lacking in subtlety.



Production

Fermenting cooked soya beans with salt brine yields a liquid condiment rich in amino acids and flavour compounds. Its myriad versions come from variations in soya bean quality and processing, the microbial fermentation starter, added wheat or other grains, moisture levels, fermentation temperatures and times as well as post-fermentation processing and flavouring. The basic process is thought to have originated in China, from where it spread to the rest of Asia. For example, in the 13th century, Chinese techniques reached the town of Yuasa in Japan's Wakayama province, where Japanese-style soya sauce started. Shown here is traditional shoyu fermented for more than a year in open wooden vats by Kadocho, a Yuasa producer founded in 1841.



Storing soya sauce

Soya sauce is best bought in small quantities, kept refrigerated and used up promptly once opened.



Sugars: Unrefined Asian

Unrefined sugars contribute more complex aromas and flavours to food than refined white sugar. Here is a guide to Asian kinds.



❖ Myanmar sugars

In Myanmar, palm and cane sugars are used in cooking and nibbled as snacks. Shown here are tablespoon-sized, round palm-sugar cakes (above), soft, crumbly and slightly smoky; smaller, harder blocks of palm sugar flavoured with sour-plum powder (right), which can be made into syrups or beverages; and a cane sugar slab (left), impressed with the pattern of the woven-fibre tray in which it was moulded. Look for these in Myanmar grocery stores.



❖ **Thai palm sugar**

Usually made from palmyra palm sap, this has a pale brown or buff colour and a floral, honeyed sweetness. It can be dry and solid or sticky and malleable. Sold at Thai stores and supermarkets in tubs, plastic bags, flattened mounds or the forms shown here: flat round cakes moulded in confining circles of dried leaves and small spiral-shaped mounds.





❖ Indian sugars

Many different kinds are consumed in India, where unrefined sugar is called vellam (Tamil), gur (Hindi) or jaggery. They are essential to many traditional, festive, ceremonial and medicinal recipes. They can be cane- or palm-based; dark or pale; and solid, crumbly, paste-like or liquid in texture. Shown here are small blocks of sugarcane jaggery (left), commonly found at Indian grocery shops, and hard palmyra sugar crystals (right); the latter are often crushed and added to home-made remedies.



❖ **Gula melaka**

The most familiar palm sugar sold here, named after its historical hub of Malaysian production, is made from coconut palm sap. It has a rich aroma and a caramel sweetness balanced by faint savoury and mineral notes. Often melted with some water before use and strained to remove extraneous matter and fibre from the manufacturing process.



❖ **Japanese black sugar**

Called kurozato or kokuto, this cane sugar is traditional to Okinawa. Usually sold in rough chunks and sometimes granules, it has an earthy quality and pleasant traces of bitterness. Look for it at Japanese supermarkets and fairs.

❖ **Granulated palm sugar**

Palm sugar processed into granulated, easily dissolved form is increasingly available at local supermarkets.

Shown here is granulated gula melaka. The “coconut flower sugar” sometimes sold in health-food shops is the same product.





❖ Indonesian palm sugar

Indonesian coconut palm sugar, typically slightly darker in hue and flavour than Malaysian gula melaka, is sold here in supermarkets and baking supply shops. Stores around Geylang Serai and elsewhere that stock Indonesian ingredients may sell other kinds, such as the chocolate-brown gula aren shown here – made from arenga palm sap, it has smoky overtones and a finely balanced acidity.



Types

Unrefined Asian sugars are most commonly made from sugarcane juice or sap tapped from the inflorescence of palm trees. Such trees include date, coconut, palmyra, nipa and fishtail palms, among others, though the species is rarely specified on product labels.

The simplest way of turning juice or sap into sugar, still practised by rural and cottage industries, is to boil it down until thick, then pour it into moulds and allow it to set. More extensive processing may include filtration, adding flavours or refined sugar, and other steps.

Storing unrefined sugars

Most unrefined sugars readily absorb moisture from humid air and must be kept in dry conditions lest they dissolve. Stash packages in single or double layers of airtight, resealable bags or containers and keep in a cool cupboard away from light and heat. Very moist sugars may keep better in the fridge.

Sugars: Unrefined

Go towards the dark:
Add depth to your cooking
with unrefined sugars.

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❖ Sugar refining

Sugar is extracted from beet and cane juices. These are filtered of impurities, concentrated by boiling, then centrifuged to separate sucrose crystals from syrupy molasses. The crystals are further washed and refined to remove more residual molasses and yield pure white sugar.

Unrefined sugars retain a portion of the molasses, hence their brown colours and soft textures.





❖ Raw sugar

This term has different definitions in different countries: the “raw sugar” or “golden sugar” sold in supermarkets here usually consists of pale crystals from the first centrifuging. Available in different grain sizes, from granulated to caster to icing sugar, it has a light but distinct molasses taste.



❖ Muscovado & molasses sugar

Moist, fine-grained sugars crystallised from cane molasses. In order of increasing molasses content, darkness of hue and complexity of character, they are – light muscovado, dark muscovado and molasses sugar. Among the most intense-tasting unrefined sugars, with caramel, fruity and smoky notes.



❖ Demerara sugar

A coarse granulated raw sugar named after its original source, Demerara in Guyana. Popular as a sweetener for drinks. Turbinado is the American equivalent of demerara. It looks similar but is often slightly milder in taste.

❖ Brown sugar

Products labelled “brown sugar” without the word “unrefined” are in fact refined white sugar tinted with a little molasses. They taste much less complex than true unrefined sugars.



❖ Chinese slab brown sugar

Chinese cane jaggery, also called peen tong or pian tang. Its flavour resembles muscovado sugar. The best sweetener for soya sauce-based braised dishes, gravies and marinades.

❖ Jaggery

Cane juice or date palm flower sap, reduced and solidified without centrifuging. An important sweetener in the cuisines and traditional medicine systems of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. Usually sold in moulded rounds or blocks.



❖ Panela

Cane jaggery from South and Central America, also known as rapadura and piloncillo. Its Filipino cousin is called panocha or panutsa.

❖ Kurozato

A “black” jaggery made from Okinawan sugarcane (now produced outside Japan as well). Sold in rough chunks or slabs, with a mineral-tinged, bittersweet flavour from its high molasses content. Cooked with water, it becomes kuromitsu, brown sugar syrup used in many Japanese desserts.



❖ Palm sugar

Jaggery-type sugar made from the flower spadix sap of various palm species across Asia, for example nipa, buri or arenga palms. Gula melaka comes from the coconut palm. Sold in moulded blocks and, these days, it is also granulated. Palm sugars vary widely in colour, sweetness and flavour nuances.



❖ Date sugar

Not strictly a sugar but pulverised dehydrated dates. High in fibre, it does not properly dissolve in liquid and so cannot easily be substituted for regular sugar in baking or drinks. Suitable for items in which its graininess would go unremarked, such as brownies, smoothies, oatmeal cookies or bars, fruitcakes or granola.



❖ Maple sugar

Crystallised concentrated maple syrup, with an intense maple flavour. Delicious simply sprinkled over yogurt, cereal, oat porridge or fruit compote. Try it in rum or whisky cocktails.



Storing

All unrefined sugars tend to absorb water from the air and clump up, so store them in air-tight containers in a cool place. They keep indefinitely if protected from humidity and temperature extremes.

Tofu

Bean curd is much more than plain and white. Look for these tofu varieties at local and Japanese supermarkets, and gourmet, health-food and vegetarian product stores.

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❖ Silken tofu

Letting soya bean milk coagulate in a mould, with no straining or pressing, yields a soft, very smooth tofu that may be light or rich, wobbly as jelly or as firm as a steamed custard, depending on the thickness of the milk and the coagulant used. Best eaten with minimal further handling, to showcase its native texture.



❖ Fresh soft tofu

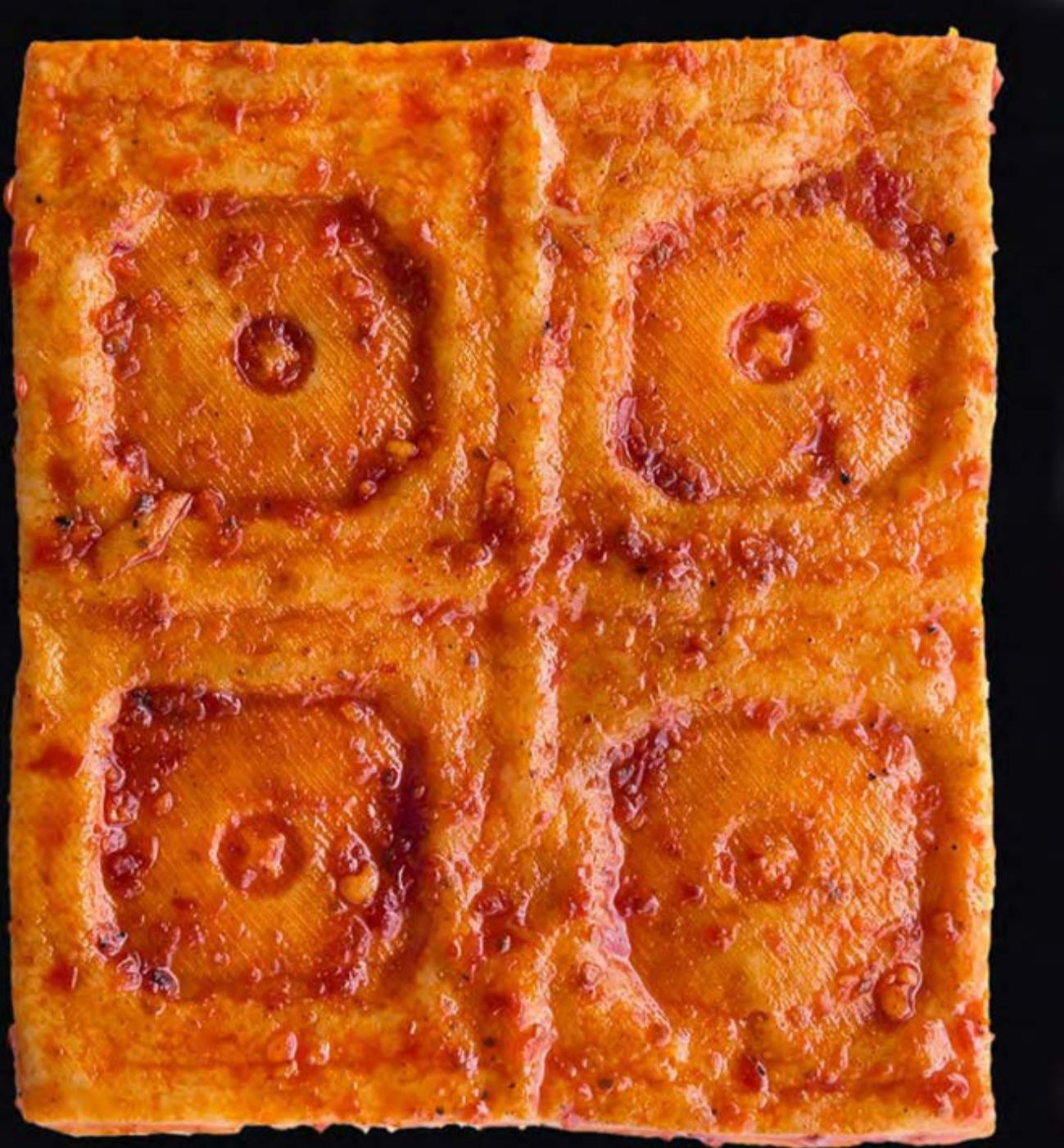
The most common format made to be eaten fresh here is Chinese dou hua, very softly set silken tofu sold at snack chains and hawker stalls. Typically dressed with sugar syrup and sweet garnishes across the Chinese diaspora in South-east Asia, but also served with savoury condiments in China and Japan. Shown here is freshly-made soft Japanese tofu from Meidi-Ya Supermarket in Liang Court, slightly firmer than dou hua but similarly scooped in thin layers. Very perishable.

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❖ Pressed tofu

Collected, drained curds are pressed to extract moisture and compacted into moulds, yielding a more substantial and often grainy texture. Formats often have a surface texture imparted by fabric wrappings used in pressing, as is visible in the black soya bean Chinese taukwa. Pressed tofu stands up well to cooking methods such as braising, frying, grilling and smoking.





❖ Dry tofu

Called dou gan in Mandarin, this has been pressed to expel enough water and air pockets to give the tofu a dense, resilient, almost meaty texture. It may be sold cut into noodles or jerky-like pieces, or pre-seasoned. Shown here is a chilli-spiced dry tofu snack.





❖ Okara

The ground soya bean remnants left after the milk has been extracted. Sold at fresh tofu shops such as at Meidi-Ya Supermarket. High in fibre, the fluffy flakes have a mild flavour. Use okara to add bulk and texture to croquettes, meatballs, or meatloaf mixtures, doughs, batters, and stir-fries, or dry it to make vegetarian floss.



❖ Fried tofu

Tofu pieces may be deep-fried once just to form a brown crust, or double-fried at a low and then high temperature to make them puff up, forming spongy, hollow puffs or pouches, like the Japanese sushi-age pouch shown here.



❖ Egg tofu

Silken tofu made with added egg, for a custard-like hue, taste and texture. Typically set and sold in plastic cylinders.





❖ Freeze-dried tofu

Called koya-dofu or kori-dofu in Japanese. Once traditionally made by exposing tofu to frigid winter air, it is now commercially produced. As light as rusks, the dried slabs are soaked and/or simmered, rehydrating to become springy and porous, with a spongy bite. Shown here are dried (left) and rehydrated slabs (right).



Production process

Dried soya beans are soaked, ground with water, cooked and strained to make soya bean milk, which is coagulated to make tofu.

Tofu texture and flavour is chiefly determined by the concentration, quality and protein content of the soya bean milk. Speciality tofu items may be made from earthy-tasting black soya beans, or sprouted soya beans, which may taste more complex and faintly sweet. Labels such as “soft”, “Chinese”, “firm” and “extra firm” are differently defined and made by different countries and manufacturers.

Coagulants

The most common setting agents are calcium sulphate (gypsum), magnesium chloride (nigari), and the organic acid glucono delta-lactone. The different coagulants give tofu subtly distinct texture and flavour nuances.

Equipment

Chopsticks

The most versatile of
eating implements comes
in many forms.

❖ Chopsticks for eating

These are usually 20 to 28cm long. The most common materials used for these are wood, bamboo, melamine and plastic. Unglazed wood or bamboo chopsticks are the most secure to hold and to pick up food with but may absorb grease and odours and can rot if left damp.

Lacquered wood is hence more popular, although plastic is the least expensive option.

Uncommon and expensive materials such as bone, jade, porcelain and ivory are more for ornamental or occasional use, as they are too delicate to handle the rigours of everyday use and washing.



❖ Training chopsticks

Chopsticks for children or novice users are often modified to help them acquire the technique or to circumvent the need for it until they become more dextrous. Modifications usually form some sort of hinge connecting the sticks: The example shown here also incorporates a finger-ring that teaches proper finger placement.





❖ Metal chopsticks

Washable and durable, these are most favoured in Korea. Shown here are a pair of flat Korean chopsticks (far left) with decoratively engraved ends and a pair of round metal chopsticks with grooved ends, which facilitate the gripping of food items. Both are for eating and are made of stainless steel. The other pair of extra-long metal chopsticks (left) are used for frying Japanese tempura, with sharp and incised tips to aid the grasping of oil-slippery items, and wooden grips.



❖ Cooking chopsticks

These are typically longer and slightly thicker than eating chopsticks: The Japanese pairs shown here range between 45 and 27cm in length. Most often made of wood, they frequently are tied together with string, which can be removed or left in place during use. Useful for everything from beating eggs to frying keropok.

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❖ Disposable chopsticks

The production of disposable chopsticks strips land of forests and, where regulation is lax, may use chemicals that harm people and the environment. Responsible consumers would do better to refuse disposables and carry their own reusable and washable personal pair of such chopsticks. Carrying cases are widely available at \$2 shops and department stores.

❖ Fusion chopsticks

Modern designs add useful and whimsical touches to chopstick formats. For example, the double-ended plastic set shown on the right integrates a spoon and two-pronged fork, plus non-slip grooved silicone tips. The long silicone or metal tweezers currently favoured by many chefs for plating and manipulating food also resemble Asian cooking chopsticks.



Chopstick technique

Orthodox chopstick wielding, from a right-hander's perspective: nestle the lower stick in the crook between thumb and index finger, supporting it against the folded third finger. This stick should not move.

Grasp the upper stick between thumb tip and the side of the index finger and move it so that its tip acts as a pincer together with the lower stick tip.

Chopstick etiquette

Graceful, precise movements are the ideal, with minimum contact between chopstick tips and lips.

Heinous to most chopstick-using cultures are these taboos: leaving chopsticks vertically stuck into a bowl of rice or food, taking food from another person's chopsticks with your own pair, rummaging for food in a communal serving dish with your personal chopsticks, pointing or gesticulating with chopsticks, spearing food with a single chopstick and wielding one chopstick in each hand to dissect food.

Cookie cutters

Gearing up for festive seasons? Get your cookie-cutting equipment in order:



❖ Wooden cookie moulds

Many old-fashioned Chinese biscuits or piah require carved hardwood moulds. So do many traditional cookies from other cultures, such as this Middle Eastern mould for date-stuffed maamoul (cousin to Malay biskut makmur). Plastic versions are common nowadays, though more prone to sticking than well-seasoned wood. Dust the dough pieces well with rice or wheat flour before pressing them into the mould.

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❖ Pineapple tart cutters

The traditional open tarts are made with a particular type of stamp cutter. It has an outer metal cutting ring plus a snug-fitting inner wood or plastic stamp. They yield round, oval or diamond shapes with plain or fluted rims around a central well that holds the jam.



❖ Handles

Cutters may have simple metal handles attached for ease of use. Modern cutters often have grippable edges padded with plastic or silicone.



❖ Compacted cookies

Some recipes compact crumbly, loose mixtures into moulds before carefully turning them out onto trays for a subsequent bake (or sun-drying). Examples include kueh bangkit, kueh koya or Macau almond biscuits. An exception are Filipino polvoron cookies, shaped instead after cooking with the spring-loaded press shown on the left – it compresses a toasted flour mixture into neat but fragile oval cookies.

❖ Metal cookie cutters

Stainless steel cutters are the most durable and their sharp edges cut crisply outlined cookies.



❖ Cookie stamps

Made out of wood, resin or plastic, these are firmly pressed onto dough before or after cutting, to emboss it with a design. Some stamps, like this diamond one, come paired with a cutter of the same shape.



❖ Spritz presses

Cookies squeezed out from a piping bag and icing nozzle, or a plunger-type press, are called spritz in Europe and America and semprit in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The small old-school press (left) is stainless steel, with a wooden plunger. The larger one is a modern pump-action press with interchangeable discs for squeezing out different shapes (below).



❖ Springerle and speculaas

Two kinds of European cookies with fine, intricate details. Springerle dough is rolled over an incised wooden board or rolled out with a carved rolling pin, and the designs are then cut around to separate the cookies. Speculaas dough is pressed into deeply carved individual cookie moulds, and commercial versions like the one shown on the right are less well-defined.



❖ Plastic cookie cutters

If made of rigid plastic, these are less easily bent out of shape than metal cutters. Dip their edges in flour between cuts to prevent sticking. Wash them immediately after use to avoid them absorbing aromas from the dough.



❖ Spring-loaded cutters

Some cutters have internal spring-loaded plungers to help you push out the cut dough. These are handy for cookies with complex outlines or internal holes, such as the pretzel shape shown here or detailed embossed surfaces, such as modern plastic mooncake moulds.



Food strainers

Drain without strain by matching the tool to the job.
Here's a guide to culinary strainers.





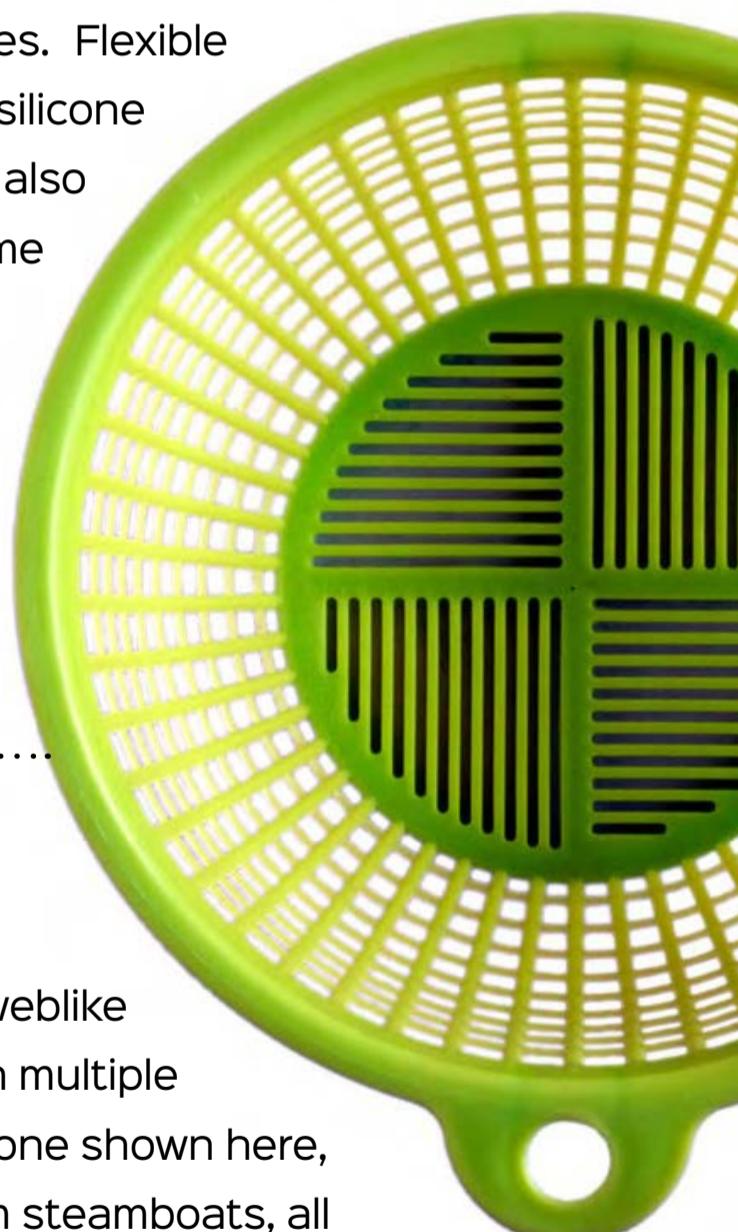
❖ Conical strainers

Their tapered shape concentrates the pressure applied to the food in them, as it moves towards the narrow tip under its own weight or by added force from a plunger or ladle. This speeds up the straining. In the French kitchen, a conical strainer made of fine metal mesh is called a Chinois; one made of a cone of perforated metal is called a China cap.



❖ Colanders

Used mainly for washing and draining raw ingredients, these strainers with large perforations were made of natural fibres, metal or enamelled metal in past times. Nowadays, those have been largely supplanted by plastic colanders because of their light weight, ease of cleanup and convenience. They come in many scales and sizes. Shown here is a small colander for shredded slaw vegetables. Flexible or collapsible silicone colanders have also recently become common.



❖ Spider strainers

Nicknamed for their weblike weave, these come in multiple sizes, from the small one shown here, used to lift items from steamboats, all the way to the large wood-handled spiders with which Chinese chefs handle deep-fried whole fish and other items which are sizeable but also delicate.

❖ Natural fibre strainers



Basket-like strainers woven from bamboo, rattan and other natural materials are traditional to most Asian cultures. They are used for many purposes, such as draining and moulding fresh tofu, winnowing and washing rice and other grains, washing vegetables, straining tea and coffee, among other uses. Shown here is a Japanese bamboo strainer.



❖ Paper strainers

Besides commonplace coffee filters, there are bags and sachets made of sturdy paper, or very thin fabric with a paper-like weave, which can be found at speciality tea shops and home goods stores such as Daiso. They can be filled with tea leaves, coffee grounds, spices or stock ingredients such as dried anchovies and mushrooms, and left to infuse in hot liquid. Shown here is a paper sachet with an added cardboard collar that lets it sit on top of a cup, for easy removal once the steeping is done.

❖ Fabric strainers



Cloth sheets or sewn bags are used to strain many things in traditional kitchens around the world: milk, coconut milk, soymilk, wet-ground rice, coffee, tea and pandan juice. The fine weaves of cotton, muslin or nylon can separate extremely small particles from liquid.



❖ Specialised strainers

Some strainers have specifically purposed designs. Shown here is a misokoshi strainer with accompanying ladle. Japanese cooks immerse the deep strainer in soup and press miso paste through it with the ladle, thus dispersing the miso while filtering out any coarse bits of soybean.

❖ Drum sieves

Named for their snare-drum shape and tautly pulled wire screens, these are most familiar to home cooks as flour sifters. Large versions, some sold with interchangeable screens of different gauges, are used in restaurants to reduce ingredients to purees. Both Chinese and French cuisines force ground meats and seafood through drum sieves to make perfectly smooth pastes for dim sum or terrines, for example. Drum sieves with horsehair or wire screens are also essential for the silky-fine bean paste in Japanese confectionery.



Kitchen brushes

Glazing, basting,
slathering,
mopping.

Brushes are
constant sidekicks
for cooks and
bakers.

.....



❖ **Lemongrass brush**

Nature's own inexpensive, biodegradable brush, which subtly adds its own aroma to the food it touches. Ideal for basting satay and all barbecued items. Simply trim the woody base off a lemongrass stalk, make a few vertical slits through its thickest 3cm and lightly bruise the slit portion with a pestle or rolling pin to splay the slit layers.

❖ **Natural-bristle
brushes**

Most often made of boar hair, these excel at picking up and distributing liquids and at brushing flour on or off pastry. However, they are usually less easy to clean than synthetic brushes and may require soaking and even combing to be restored to their pristine state.



❖ Silicone brushes

Heat-resistant, easy to clean and currently very popular for both baking and barbecuing. Silicone bristles and handles can be moulded seamlessly together, eliminating ferrules. As silicone is non-stick, some liquids do not cling well to it. Some brush designs try to get around this with grooved, ridged or perforated bristles that maximise liquid pickup. Thicker bristles often cannot deposit liquids with precision.

❖ Teflon brushes

Teflon bristles are sturdy, lasting and high-heat resistant. Use these brushes to apply fat or batter to hot frying pans, griddles, hotplates or waffle irons, or to dislodge crusted-on bits from the same.

❖ Nylon brushes

Thin, fine nylon bristles pick up liquids well and glide smoothly over food without disturbing it. These brushes are cheap, but often not very durable or heat-resistant. Bristles can be hard to spot if they fall out. Best suited for brushing items before, but not during cooking.

❖ Cotton brushes

Mop-style brushes with heads of cotton fibres are traditionally used for sauce-basting in American-style barbecues and sometimes for oiling griddles. Increasingly supplanted by silicone brushes, which are much easier to maintain.

❖ Feather brushes

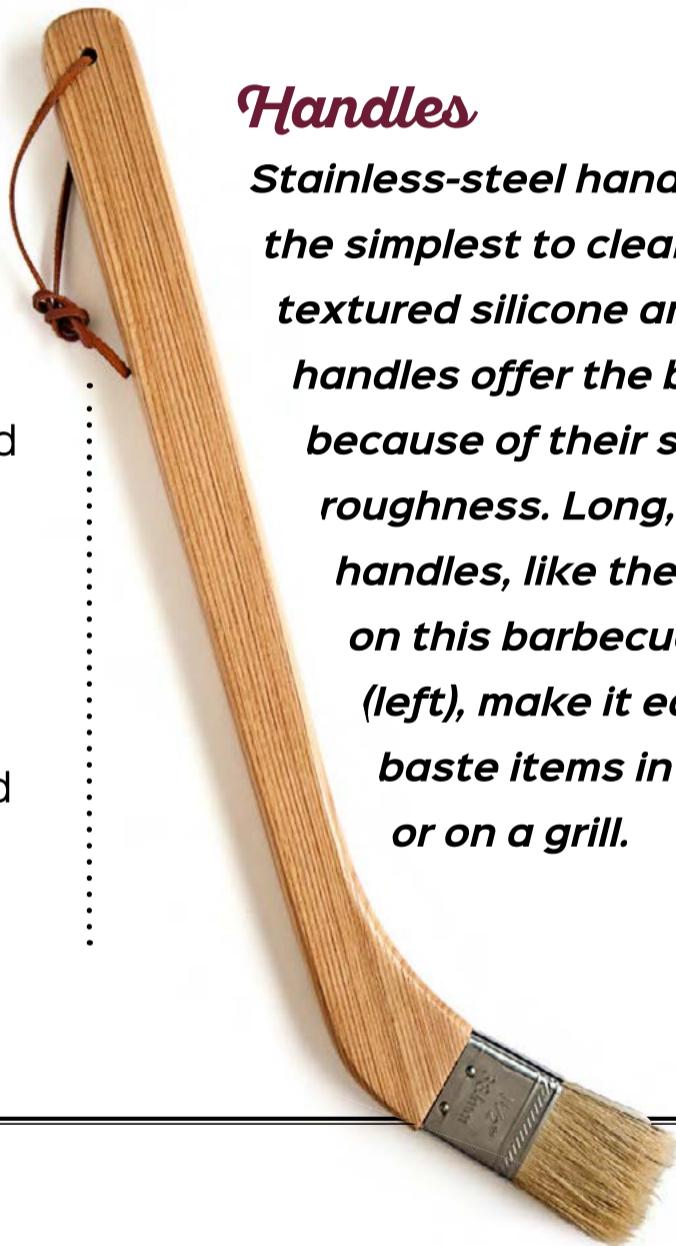
Goose and duck feathers are traditional brush materials favoured by old-school pastry chefs. They can apply thin glazes very evenly and pass over moulded or embossed pastries or cookies without marring fine details. Do not reach for your chapteh though. Feathers must be processed and sterilised properly for use. They are sold online.

Ferrule

The metal ring that binds bristles to the handle in many brushes. Take care not to dent or damage the ferrule or bristles may come loose. Clean around it scrupulously to ensure foods do not get trapped inside it.

Handles

Stainless-steel handles are the simplest to clean, but textured silicone and wood handles offer the best grip because of their slight roughness. Long, angled handles, like the one on this barbecue brush (left), make it easier to baste items in an oven or on a grill.



Cleaning brushes

During use, never dip the full length of a brush's bristles. Stop short of the ferrule or bristle-handle junction, so that food does not get trapped there. Wash brushes as soon as possible after use. Soak very greasy brushes in warm soapy water, a mild vinegar solution or a mild bleach solution. Brushes made entirely of silicone can be briefly immersed in gently simmering water to dispel grease and odours. Air-dry all brushes fully before storing.

❖ **Canning thermometer**

Designed to monitor water baths for processing homemade jams and other jarred and canned preserved items, this traditionally has a protective metal sleeve, a long probe to reach into the deep baths used for canning and a narrow temperature range – only 60 deg C to 110 deg C. This is because of the precision required for food safety and achieving correct jam and jelly textures.



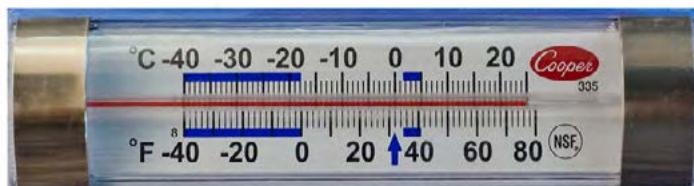
Kitchen thermometers

It is getting hot in there – or is it? These kitchen gadgets will help you cook with precision.



❖ **Oven thermometers**

These are meant to be hooked onto oven racks or sat on oven trays, and left there during baking to double-check whether an oven's internal temperature truly corresponds to its calibrated settings. Particular useful with older ovens which have become inaccurate or inconsistent with age.



❖ Fridge and freezer thermometers

These cover the low and sub-zero end of the temperature scale, allowing you to verify at a glance if your fridge, freezer or cooler boxes are correctly cold enough to keep your food fresh. Usually hung on a shelf or mounted on an inner wall of the fridge.



❖ Wine thermometers

The most common kinds can be pressed against or, like the one shown here, draped around a wine bottle body or neck to take its temperature. Other wine thermometers attach to the cork of an opened bottle or have probes that can be dipped into the wine itself.

❖ Infrared thermometers

Expensive but often preferred by professional kitchens and chefs for their speed and accuracy, these measure the infrared radiation emitted by the surface of the object or substance at which they are pointed, without requiring contact with it. They are thus good for monitoring items with which contact might be messy, such as deep-frying oil and melted chocolate. They are not as suitable for items whose surface and internal temperatures differ – such as hot water, which is always cooler at its surface – and for thin, highly conductive surfaces such as shiny metal baking sheets, which may register as cooler than they really are.





❖ Digital probe thermometers

A common sight nowadays in professional and dedicated-amateur kitchens. Their thin metal probes take accurate readings, are easily inserted into foods such as cakes or meat cuts to gauge internal temperatures, and their digital displays are easy to view. Some types have a thin wire linking the probe to the thermometer body, so the probe can be left embedded in, for example, a beef roast while it cooks, with the wire trailing out through the oven door seal into the thermometer body on the kitchen counter.

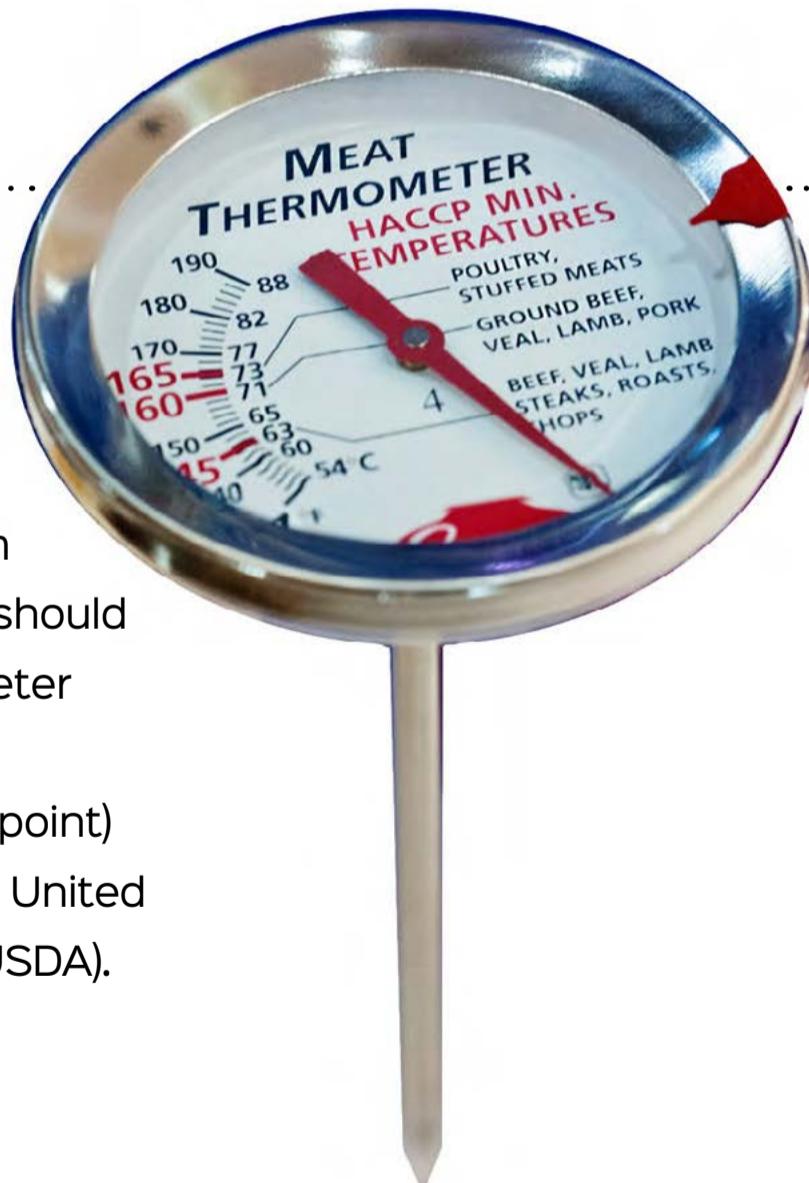
Some modern oven models have temperature probes that plug into an internal socket in the oven wall or are wireless.

Shown here are two kinds of digital probe thermometers: a simple one and a foldable multi-purpose one with both infrared and probe functions.



❖ Dial-face thermometers

These have needles which move against dial markings. Somewhat slow and sometimes inaccurate, they nonetheless have a long history of use and are typically the least expensive type of thermometers. Different models have temperature ranges specific to categories of foods. There are thermometers for candy-making, for coffee and milk, and so on. They often come with mounting clips that fix to the rim of a pot, allowing hands-free use. Shown above is a deep-frying thermometer.



❖ Meat thermometers

These are marked with the minimum temperatures which cooked meats should reach for food safety. The thermometer shown here is labelled with HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control point) temperatures recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

All thermometers (except oven thermometer and thermometer) photographed at Tools Of The Trade, 896 Dunearn Road.

Stemware

Stocking up on tableware
for the first time?

Here's a guide to one of
the most important
accessories – wine glasses.

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❖ White wine glass

White wine glasses tend to be curvy but slim, with a smaller rim circumference than red wine glasses, to help funnel wine aromas towards the nose.

❖ Red wine glass

Red wine glasses tend to have large, rounded bowls. If you're on a budget, a general red wine glass is suitable for most wines of any colour.

❖ Burgundy glass

This vessel's wide, voluptuously curved bowl allows for maximum contact between wine and air as the former is poured into and swirled around the glass. Suited to aromatic, complex red wines which need room to unfold.

❖ Bordeaux glass

This is both slightly taller and slightly wider than a regular red wine glass and can be used not just for Bordeaux but also most full-bodied and fruity reds.



❖ Martini glass

The inverted cone shape of this glass lets wine aromas dissipate too quickly but is fine for martinis and other cocktails made with higher-proof beverages. Its width also accommodates garnishes better than a slimmer glass.



❖ Sherry glass

This petite shape – the pictured glass may look tall but is under 20cm high – usually has a shorter stem and a smaller, slightly tapered bowl that helps to focus the aroma of its contents. It can be used for other full-fragranced wines besides sherry, such as port and marsala.



The shape

The bowl of a wine glass should allow room for the “opening” of a wine’s bouquet. Generally, more complex wines, whether white or red, are said to fare better in larger-bowled glasses. These have more space for a wine’s volatile aroma compounds to evaporate, separate and move around, and also let you dip your nose further into the glass to experience them.

Some shapes are said to direct wine towards tongue tastebuds of a particular type, for example, so that sweet tastes are encountered first.

However, it is a popular myth that tastebuds are thus segregated – tastebuds for sweet, salty, acid and bitter sensations are in fact distributed all over the tongue.

❖ Champagne flute

Tall, skinny and tapered, a champagne flute's shape controls and slows the release of bubbles in sparkling wine, prolonging its fizzy mouthfeel. The flute shown here also has an "effervescence point" – an etched point in the deepest part of the interior of the glass – and this promotes a steady stream of bubbles that rises elegantly through the champagne.



The glass

This should be clear, permitting a wine's true colour to show. It should also be strong, holding a thin-rimmed shape that lets wine flow easily into your mouth. Thick rims deposit wine clumsily. The stem should also have a comfortable grip.

Lead crystal was once a common wine glass material but health concerns have led modern glassware companies to develop better, lead-free alternatives.

Caring for stemware

Wash glasses promptly to prevent residue build-up that could taint wine aroma and flavour. Ideally, hand-wash with mild detergent and a soft sponge, gently scrubbing all the way into each glass. Dry with a lint-free cloth or let air-dry before putting them away. Rinse and dry before use to remove any dust.

Glasses pictured are from the Cru Classic, Vina, Fortissimo and Diva ranges of Schott Zwiesel stemware.



Whisks

With this guide to whisk types and their applications, you can stop beating around the bush.

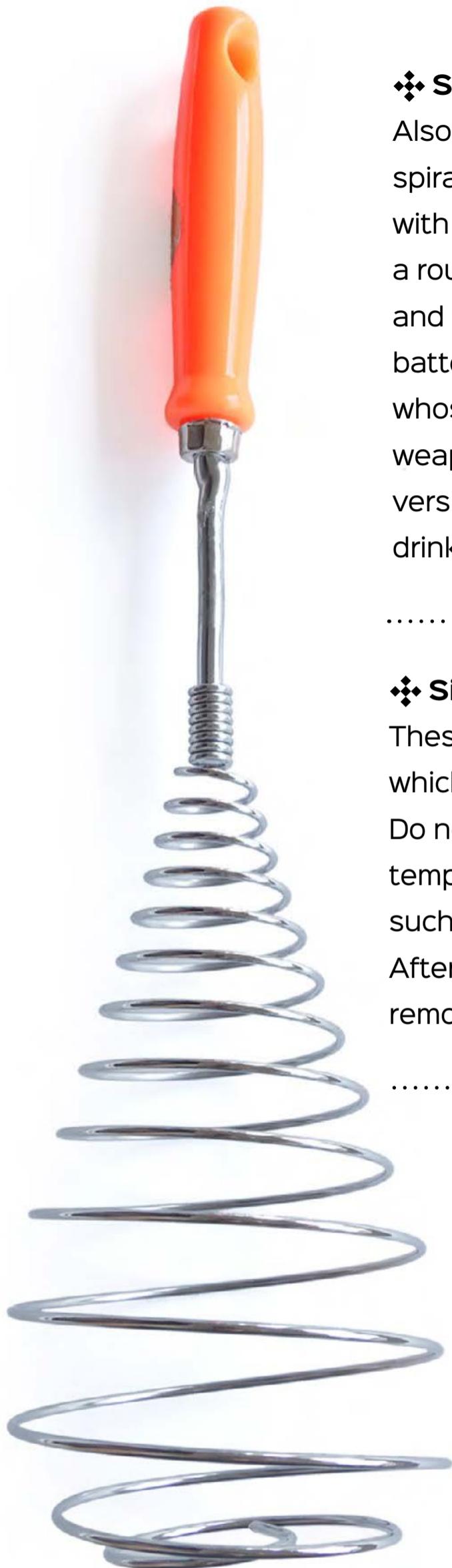
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❖ Coil whisk

Formed from a thin wire coiled closely around a thicker guide wire. Similar uses as flat whisks, and slightly better at aerating, though best suited to thin mixtures. Shown here is a mini version, useful for salad dressings.

❖ Ball

A spray of wires tipped with metal balls. The one shown here has silicone-coated balls. Tailored for beating in awkward or confined spaces. Odd-looking but effective and easy to clean.



❖ Spiral whisk

Also known as a spring whisk. Made from a single spiralling wire, this old-fashioned design is wielded with an up-and-down pumping action rather than a round-and-round motion. Most suited to eggs and thin liquids. The spiral does not aerate thicker batters as efficiently. Shown here is a large version, whose spiral head is 17cm long (left), yesteryear's weapon of choice for egg sponge cakes. A small version with a 3cm head is useful for foaming drinks, milk or small quantities of eggs.

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❖ Silicone whisks

These have wires coated with silicone rubber, which will not scratch non-stick pan surfaces. Do not assume they can tolerate high temperatures if they are not labelled as such – cheaper models may not be able to. After use, wash well in hot soapy water to remove fatty residues and aromas.

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❖ Mini whisks

Cookware shops now sell many whisk designs in mini versions (right), useful for mixing small and precise quantities of ingredients, for example, when making elements for cocktails, spice blends, confections or cake decorations.





❖ Electric whisk beaters

Shown here are whisk beaters from a typical handheld electric mixer (above). What they lack in number of loops they make up for in motor-driven revolutions per minute. Also, because their loops are widely spaced, they can handle batters and sauces containing chunkier ingredients, such as fruitcake batter.

❖ Flat whisk

Made of nested wire loops arranged in a narrow plane, for stirring in shallow pans, for instance when deglazing a frying pan to make a sauce. More for mixing than aerating. Sometimes called a gravy whisk or roux whisk. A silicone model (right) is shown here.



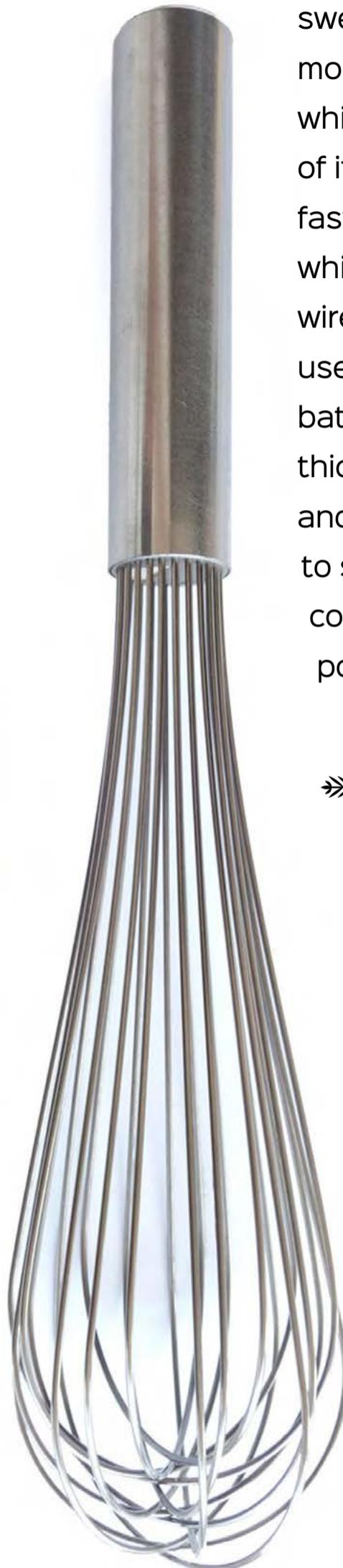
❖ Hybrid whisks

Modern whisks often incorporate extra loops or wire shapes to improve efficiency, albeit sometimes at the expense of being easy to clean. An example of hybrid design is a “cage whisk”, a balloon whisk with a free-moving looped wire ball that rolls around inside the whisk head. Shown here (left) is an unusual design featuring extra coils in each loop.



❖ Natural-material whisks

In the pre-modern era, whisks were made of tied bundles of sturdy but springy wood twigs. Shown here is a traditional Japanese whisk (below) made by splitting and shaping a single section of bamboo, used to froth matcha green tea in a tea ceremony.



❖ Balloon whisk

Named for the way its wire loops swell into a rounded shape, the most common and multi-purpose whisk type can handle a wide range of items. The more loops it has, the faster it aerates. Elongated balloon whisks with slightly heavier-gauge wires are called French whisks (left), used in that cuisine for sauces and batters. They are good for beating thicker mixtures, their long handles and slimmer tips also enable them to sweep more effectively into the corners of deep or large-capacity pots.

Whisk handles

When shopping for whisks, look for tight or covered seams at the joining of the whisk head or wires to the handle – these prevent food from seeping and collecting in between, which could cause hygiene issues.

Vegetables

Bittergourd

We look at a vegetable with several faces
but one signature taste: bittergourd.



❖ **Medium-sized
bittergourds**

Shown here are
spindle-shaped Indian
bittergourds, from 7 to 10cm long,
probably the most common kind
sold in Indian groceries.



❖ Large bittergourds

Shown here is a 30cm Japanese bittergourd (above) and a 20cm Indian bittergourd (below). The latter has sharper, more pronounced warty ridges, almost fin-like in shape. The former has more rounded protrusions. Flavour-wise, they are virtually identical, with a light, cucumber-like flavour that has a cleanly bitter edge.



❖ Small bittergourds

As tiny as 4cm long, these Indian bittergourds have thin but firm flesh and skin, and take a little longer to reach tenderness than larger gourds. Fiddly to deseed or stuff, they can be cooked and eaten whole.

❖ Kantola

This bittergourd cousin, known as teazle gourd, is about 5cm long and covered with small, soft spines. Look for it in Little India. It does not need deseeding. Its pith is sweet and nutty-tasting, with a bare hint of bitterness. Wash, skim over with a vegetable peeler to remove discoloured spines, cut into slices or chunks. Then pan fry, deep fry or cook in dry curries.



❖ Chinese-type bittergourds (left)

Varying from 20 to 35cm in length, these have smooth, pale green skin, punctuated with grooves. They have crisper, more juicy flesh than wartier bittergourds, and are usually less bitter, requiring little or no salting. They can even be eaten raw if cut paper-thin. If slowly braised or simmered with meat and salty condiments, their already mild bitterness mellows pleasingly.



❖ White bittergourds

Only occasionally seen in Singapore, white-skinned bittergourds are cultivated in Taiwan, where they are used in drinks and juices as well as hot dishes. They are slightly less bitter than green varieties.

❖ Bittergourd tea

Dried sliced bittergourd can be steeped in hot water to make a cooling, palate-cleansing, lightly bitter tea. It is enjoyed across Asia, notably in China, Vietnam and Japan.



Preparation and cooking

Sliced bittergourd can be rubbed with salt and left to stand for a while to leach out some bitterness. Most recipes discard the seeds and white pith, though some Indian recipes include the seeds for textural contrast.

Bittergourd lends itself well to frying, steaming, braising or stewing. It can be halved or sectioned, stuffed with meat or seafood mixtures, then steamed or pan-braised. A popular Indian preparation stuffs the slit and hollowed gourds with a spicy masala; thread is then wound around them to keep them closed and they are pan-fried and braised until very tender.

❖ Flavour

Their characteristic bitterness comes from many unique compounds, several of which are active substances that may have health benefits. All bittergourds are eaten while still green and unripe. As they ripen, their skin turns to a golden hue, their seeds change from white to red and their bitterness intensifies to an unpleasant and inedible degree.

❖ Health benefits

Bittergourd has long been a folk medicine for many illnesses, such as stomach upsets, obesity, malaria and, most notably, diabetes. It appears able to increase a diabetic's insulin sensitivity. Research is ongoing to determine exactly how its effects are mediated.

Brinjal

This vegetable, actually a berry, has many names (aubergine, eggplant), faces and fans.
Here is a guide.

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❖ Large oval and pear-shaped brinjals

In Europe, the Americas and the Middle East, large oval, globular or broad-bottomed cultivars in solid or striped purple hues are the most common types. Some have defined lobes, resembling beef tomatoes. These brinjals are meaty and succulent, suited to frying and stewing. Very large ones can have leathery skin and should be peeled before or after cooking.



❖ Small round and oval brinjals

These can range from grape-sized, like the green and purple ones shown here, up to the size of large eggs, like this yellow specimen. They all tend to be firm-fleshed and mild-tasting. Green and white ones can have many seeds and are often eaten raw in Thai cuisine. In India, egg-sized purple fruit are often stuffed with a masala paste and fried or braised.



❖ Long brinjals

These familiar slim Asian varieties come in yellow and white skins as well as purple and green, and may be as petite as 12cm long, like Japanese cultivars, or more than 30cm long at the other end of the scale. They are generally sweet and spongy-fleshed, often with few obvious seeds and suit all cooking methods.





❖ Hairy brinjals

Grown across South-east Asia, these brinjals are the size of large calamansi limes and can be eaten raw in salads or cooked. Look for them at shops which stock fresh Thai produce. Shave off their fine, fuzzy hairs with a sharp knife (or razor) before washing and using, lest they irritate the mouth. Soft and pulpy, the flesh, when ripe, has notes of tomato, apricot and passionfruit and is sour-sweet, hence its Malay name, terung asam.





❖ Pea brinjals

With their thick skins, crunchy seeds and bracing bitterness, these pea-sized brinjals sound unpalatable, but are employed cannily by Thai cooks to provide refreshingly bitter bursts of flavour cooked in rich curries or raw in spicy nam priks (sambals).

Origin and variety

Native to India, brinjals have been cultivated in China and South-east Asia for well over a millennia.

Traders took them further west and to Europe half a century ago. There are now hundreds of cultivars, many specific to the area where they are grown, running a huge gamut of shapes and sizes.

Colours range from purple-black, purple and green to yellow, orange, red and white. The oldest varieties resembled white eggs, hence the name eggplant.

Cooking whole brinjals

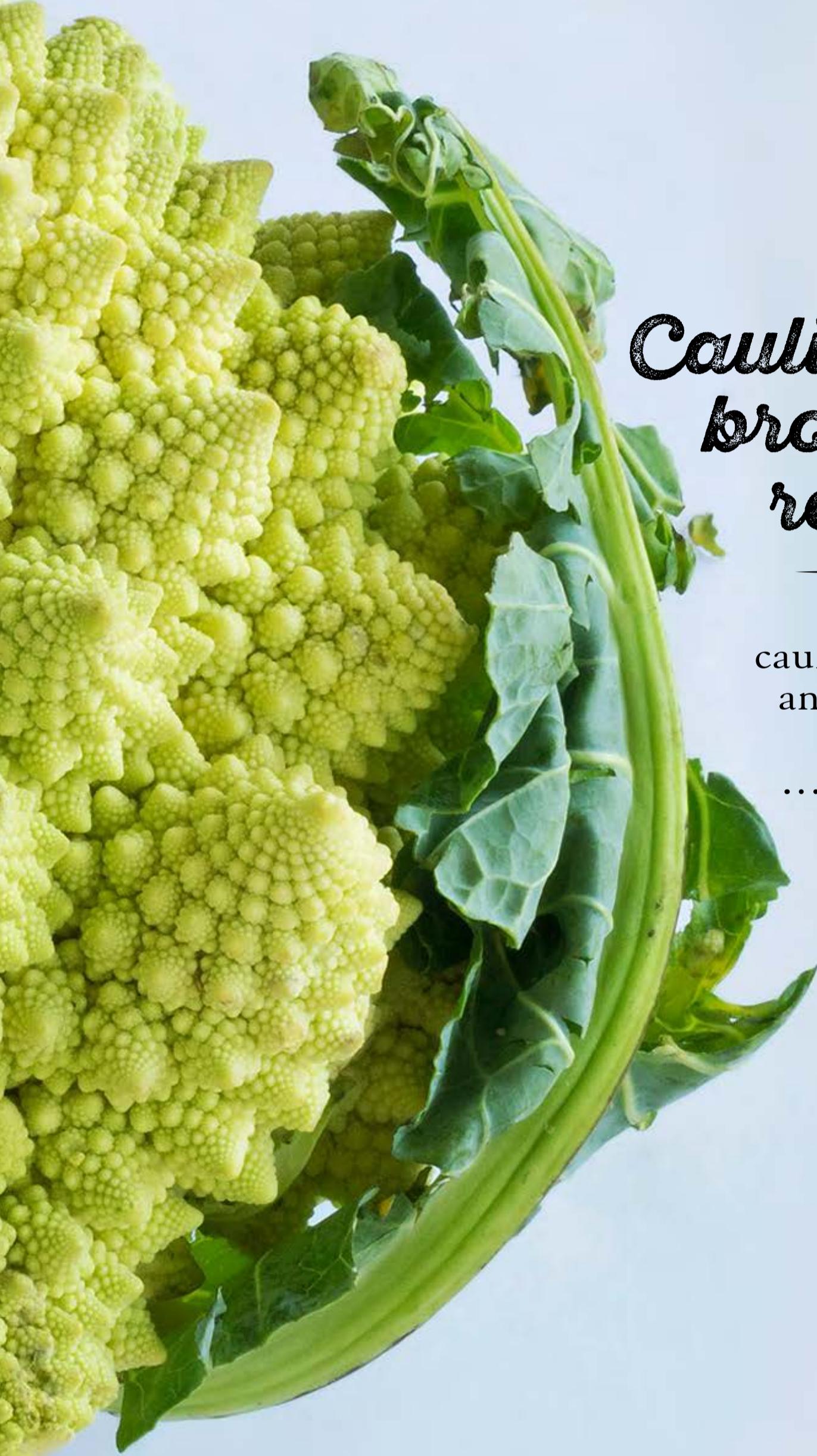
Steaming, grilling or baking whole uncut brinjals until soft is a good way to render them tender without using any oil. They can then be peeled or halved and then scraped out to harvest their flesh for further cooking or dressing.

Salting brinjals

Older recipes recommend rubbing salt into sliced brinjals and letting them stand for a while to leach out their bitter juices before rinsing and squeezing them dry. Most modern cultivars are sweet enough not to need this treatment. However, salting's other useful effect is to reduce brinjals' absorption of oil, so apply it to slices destined for frying.

Frying brinjals

Unquestionably one of the most popular ways of cooking brinjals worldwide. For pan-frying and stir-frying, make sure the pan is hot and the oil is very hot when the slices go in. Do not crowd the pan or the brinjals will steam in the moisture they release. For deep-frying, cut the slices or chunks as evenly as possible and keep the heat high and steady so they brown quickly.



Cauliflower, broccoli & relatives

A guide to
cauliflower, broccoli
and their similar-
tasting kin.

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❖ Cauliflower

Choose heavy, tight heads unflecked by discolouration or damp, and cook them while at their freshest.

Young leaves are edible, but discard thick ones. Steam, roast, braise or stir-fry; blanching for prep is fine, but boiling saps them of taste.

Gourmet supermarkets sometimes stock seasonal green, orange or purple cauliflower varieties, which can be cooked just like white types.



❖ Chinese cauliflower

Sold at wet markets and supermarkets in season, sometimes labelled “Taiwan cauliflower”, this Asian cultivar has flatter, looser heads and longer, thinner, more green-tinged floret stalks than regular cauliflower. Sweet and flavourful, needing little seasoning. Good for sautes or fritters.

❖ Asparation broccoli

Better known under trademarked names such as broccolini or broccolette, this is a hybrid of broccoli and kai lan, which is obvious when you taste and observe them all side by side. Choose slim, fresh specimens, which should not need trimming. Blanch, steam or stir-fry. You can also marinate them in salad dressings after cooking.



❖ Broccoli

So common that it gets unjustly overlooked, broccoli remains a delicious vegetable as long as it is very fresh and lightly cooked.

Avoid yellowing or shedding heads, slice it as uniformly as you can and steam, blanch or stir-fry quickly.





❖ Kai lan

The flower heads and leaf shapes of kai lan point to its kinship with the other brassicas here. Whether regular or baby (left), it is one of the sweetest and most succulent-stalked of the bunch, with a pleasing bitter edge. Its mix of thick stalks, thin tips and leaves are most evenly cooked by a fast blanching followed by a high-heat stir-fry.



❖ Brussels sprouts

These European brassicas grow on thick stems, like long, giant bunches of grapes. Choose those with tightly-packed leaves, heavy for their size and free from discolouration. Halve, quarter or shred large ones. Wash well and soak briefly to remove dirt (or bugs). Cook lightly, by steaming, stir-frying with a dash of liquid or sauteeing. Small sprouts can be eaten raw, julienned. Overcooking, especially by boiling, brings out the noxious aromas that give them an undeserved bad rap.



❖ Romanesco cauliflower

Seemingly designed by an architect, this cultivar's spiralling points are pretty pastel green.

Less dense and more perishable than regular cauliflower, it has a nutty, delicate taste that is ruined by over-cooking. Cut into small florets and steam, blanch or stir-fry. Very fresh romanesco can be eaten raw.



❖ Kohlrabi

This cultivar has a swollen, bulbous stem, its long-stalked leaves usually removed before sale. Pare off and discard its thick skin to reach its sweet, crisp core, tasting much like an elegant version of broccoli, with no bitterness. Shave thinly or cut into batons to eat raw in salads or slice more thickly to stir-fry, braise or steam.

A very good partner for seafood. Look for heavy, smooth samples without cracks or browned edges.

Shown here are small Indian kohlrabi, sold in Little India.



Brassica oleracea

All the above items are cultivars of this single but enormously diversified species, which also includes cabbages and kale. The different forms have been grown and bred over centuries to variously accentuate their stems, flower heads or leaves.

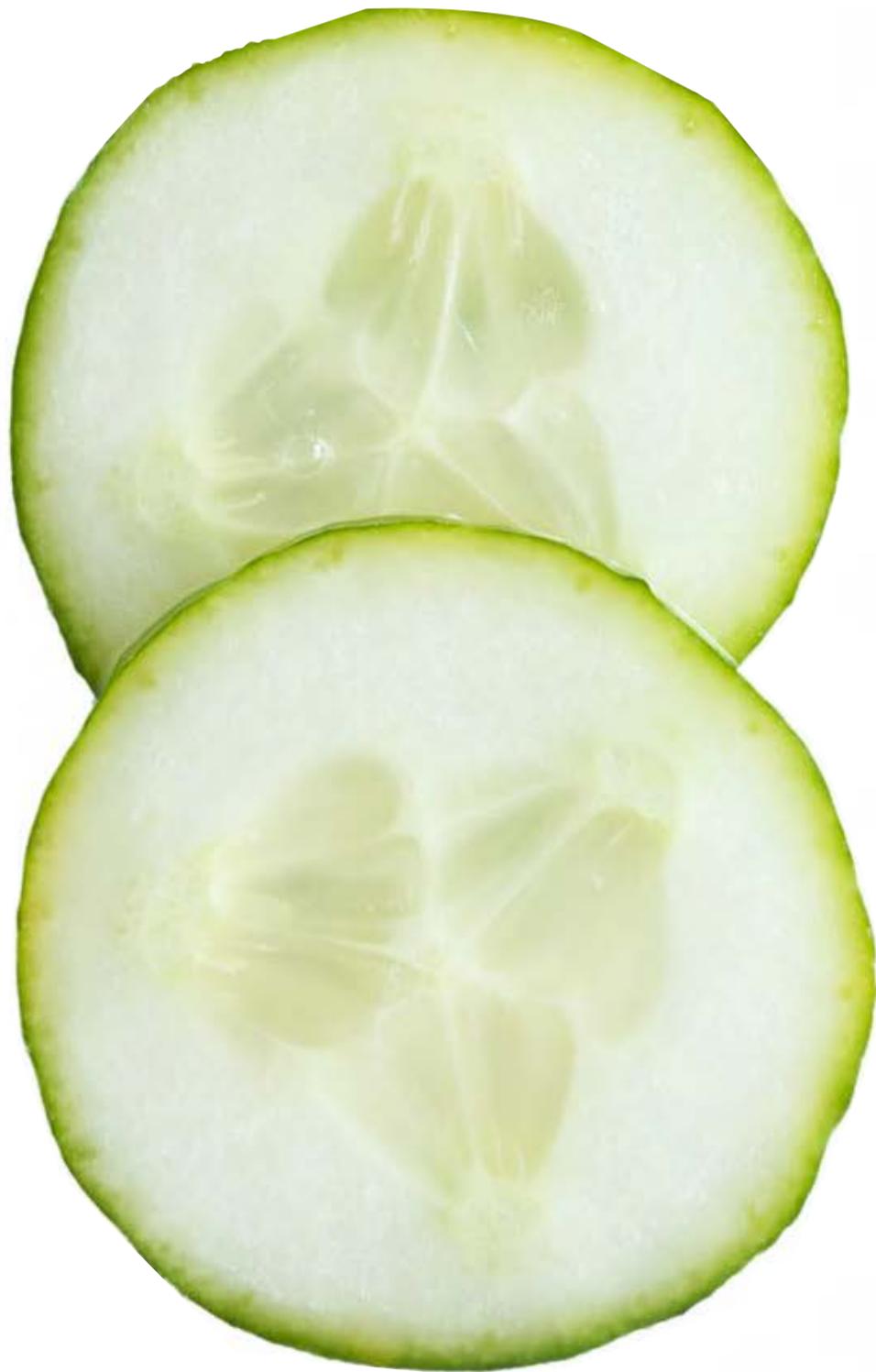
Storing

Wrap loosely in paper towels or a dry cloth, then loosely in a plastic bag and refrigerate. The flavours of all the above vegetables quickly deteriorate with prolonged storage, so use them promptly.

Cucumbers

Mild-mannered cucumbers often get overlooked, but their diversity deserves more attention.

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❖ Malabar cucumber

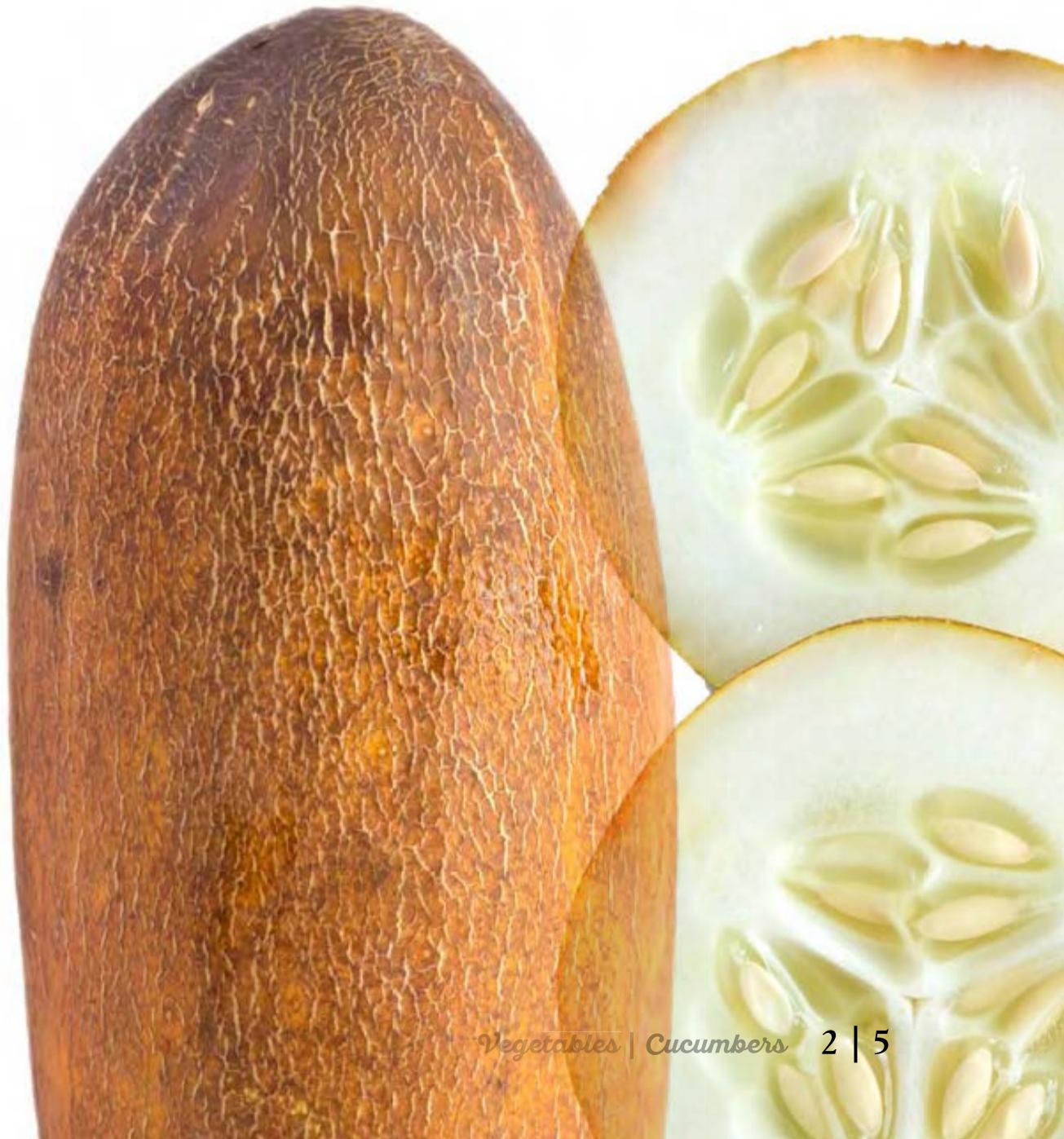


Closely related to the dosakai, this also shares melon and cucumber traits. Large at about 25 to 30cm long and 8 to 10cm wide, it has a cool, sweet cucumber aroma, but its flesh is more like a winter melon's, becoming smooth, translucent and soft when cooked. Discard its skin and seeds before cooking. Simmer in rasam or soups, cook in yogurt-based or coconut-based curries, or stir-fry with some liquid. Look for them in Little India grocery stores.



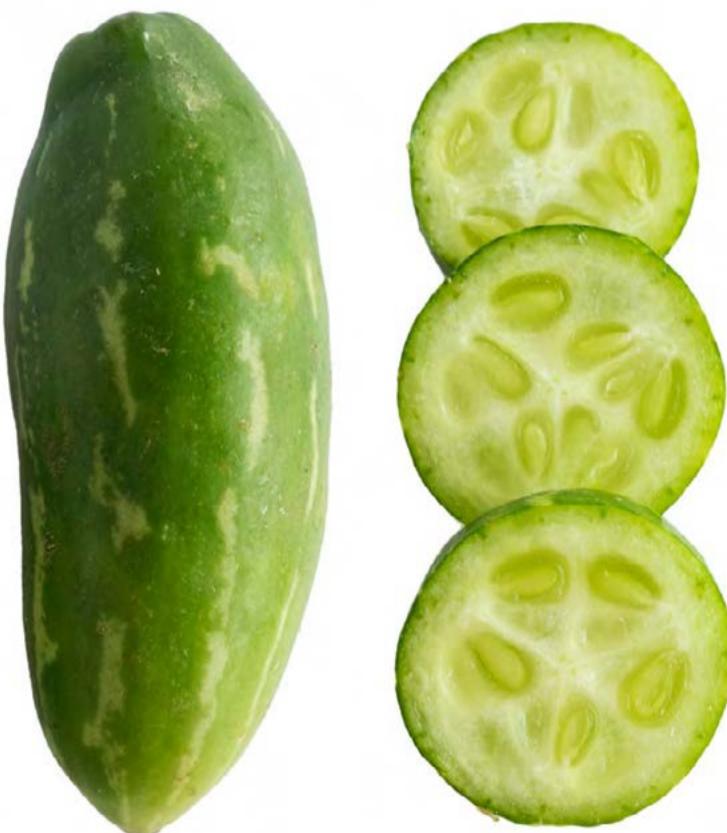
❖ Old cucumber

This is a mature fruit, 8 to 10cm wide and 20 to 25cm long. Most often used in Chinese soups. Considered a cooling ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine, it is good for clearing internal heat. It is thickly sliced and deseeded before cooking, but its hard yellow-brown skin is usually left on as its pale flesh becomes very tender and might otherwise disintegrate.



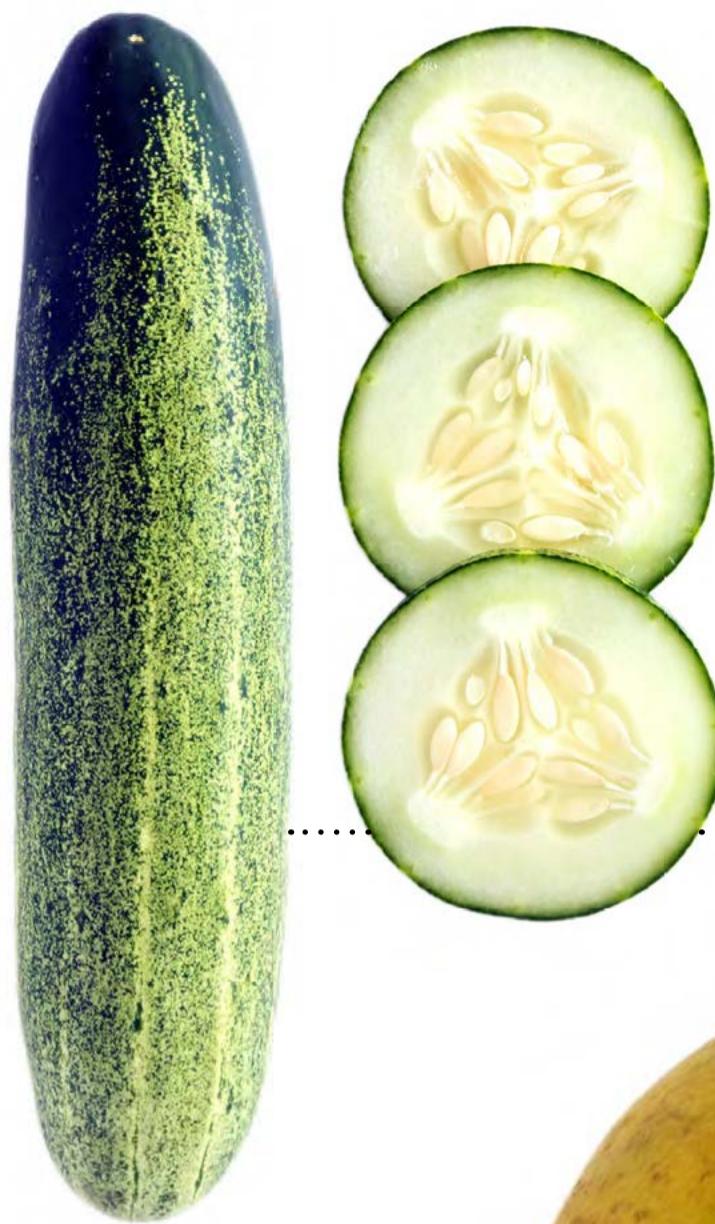
❖ Ivy gourd

You have probably had lady's fingers, but have you tasted "gentleman's toes"? This Indian gourd is so nicknamed for its stubby form, about the size of a big toe or thumb. Firm-fleshed but with a soft, edible skin and seeds, it has a light cucumber flavour and absorbs dressings and sauces well. It can be eaten raw, braised or stir-fried. Especially good in dry-fried spicy dishes. Also known as kovakkai or tindora, and sometimes mislabelled as a gherkin. Available in Little India grocery stores.



❖ Japanese cucumber

About 15 to 20cm long and 2 to 3cm wide, this has a relatively thick but tasty skin and small, soft seeds. Its crunchy texture and clean flavour make it excellent for eating raw and plain, marinating or pickling.



❖ Local cucumber

The most common and widely sold kind, with a thick skin mottled and striped in dark and light green and dense flesh. Discard its seeds and skin if they are hard and/or bitter. Essential in dishes such as Chinese and Indian rojak, chicken rice and ngoh hiang as its mild crunch contrasts with roasted and fried flavours.

❖ Dosakai

This tennis ball-size Indian fruit is really a melon – the cucumber's close botanical cousin – but it is not sweet.

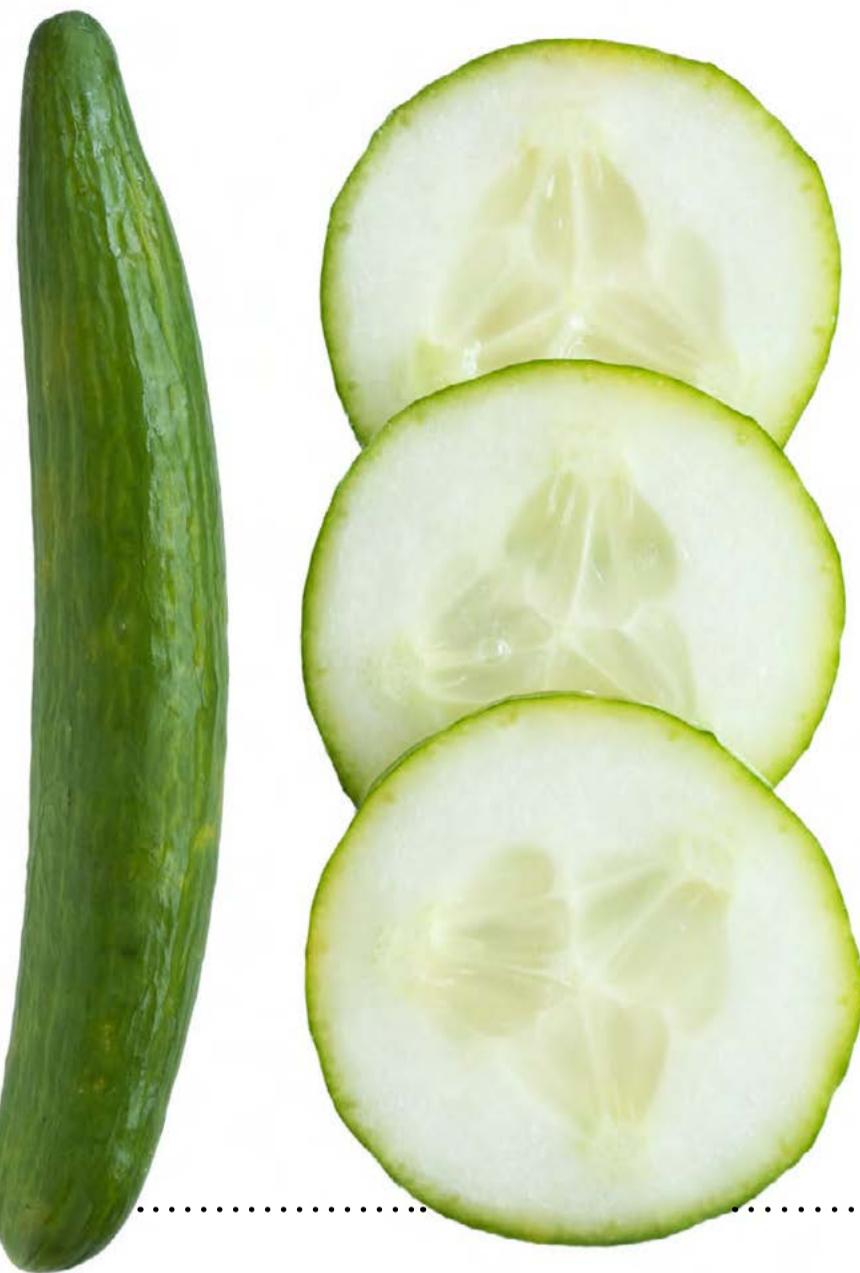
The crisp, juicy flesh has a refreshing flavour midway between that of a cucumber and honeydew, and is equally at home in a fruit salad or vegetable dish. It can be eaten raw, sauteed, pickled or cooked in curries, sambars and dals. Discard its tough yellow skin before use. The seeds are edible.

Available in Little India grocery stores.



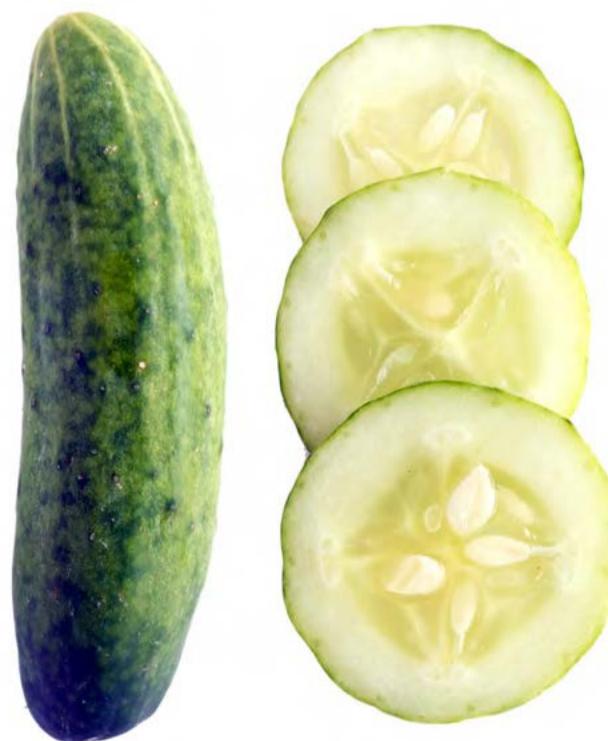
❖ Telegraph cucumber

The classic English cucumber, 25 to 35cm long, 4 to 5cm thick, with dark green skin, virtually no seeds and a very mild, slightly sweet taste. Sometimes described as “burpless” as it is purportedly easier to digest than other varieties. Best in salads and cucumber sandwiches and as a cocktail garnish.



❖ Baby cucumber

Look for this at wet markets and supermarkets selling Thai ingredients. From 7 to 12cm long, it has a thin skin and fine-grained, juicy flesh, tasting much like a local cucumber. Best for snacking, salads and quick pickles. Great accompaniment to deep-fried food.



❖ Pickling cucumber

Developed and grown specifically for pickling, this is on the short and stubby side, ranging from the “cornichon” cucumber the size of a small thumb to an American-style dill pickle about 12cm long. It typically has a bumpy skin and uniformly dense flesh. Usually seen in Singapore already pickled in a jar.



Preserved greens

Chinese preserved greens can be confusing in their sheer variety. Here is a guide to the main types.

.....



❖ Chinese toon or xiangchun

The salted leaf shoots of a tree in the mahogany family, with a pleasant, chive-like floral funkiness. Usually very salty, so rinse and soak well. Try them stir-fried with rice, eggs or beancurd.

❖ Salty mui choy (meicai)

A large-leaved brassica juncea cultivar, with olive-green stems and a light coat of salt crystals. Classically braised or steamed with pork and other fatty meats.



❖ Mustard greens

Brassica juncea, a mustard leaf species whose many cultivars vary astonishingly widely in form and flavour, is grown across China. Different permutations of salting, drying, steaming and fermenting transform it into a wide array of preserved vegetables, including those below.

❖ Xiancai (salty kiam chye)

A thick-stemmed brassica juncea cultivar, salted and fermented. Soak and rinse well so that its cleanly pungent tanginess can come through. Usually cooked with other ingredients to balance its intensity.

❖ Suancai (sour kiam chye)

A fresher, less salty kiam chye, tasting a bit like kimchi or sauerkraut, with a light mustardy bite. Can be eaten on its own as a side dish.



❖ Pak choy kon

Dried unsalted bok choy, with long pale stalks and dark leaves. Mainly used in soups. To use, soak until soft, then simmer slowly until tender. It has a gentle, sweetly musty vegetal flavour.



❖ Ganlancai (olive vegetable)

A moist, oily, ready-to-use pickle of mustard greens and Chinese olives, small fruits unrelated to Western olives but akin to them in looks and taste. Can be stir-fried or braised with meats, or cooked with rice.

❖ Dongcai (tung chye):

Dried chopped cabbage preserved with salt and garlic or leek, chiefly used to flavour stir-fries and as a condiment for congee.

❖ Zhacai (char choy)

A succulent, peppery Sichuan pickle made from a bulbous-stemmed brassica juncea cultivar. It is brined, dried and cured in a chilli-spice paste. The pickle is often labelled "kohlrabi" (really a totally different but similar-looking vegetable) or "mustard tuber". Rinse off excess pickling mixture before slicing for use. Ready-chopped versions are sold in sachets.



❖ **Meigancai**

This Hakka-style dried mustard leaf bundle (left) has an earthy, woodsy fragrance similar to mui choy, though it has thinner stems and is drier overall. Use as for mui choy.



❖ **Sweet mui choy
(meicai)**

Preserved with both salt and sugar, this has a yellow- brown tint and mellower taste than salty mui choy.



❖ Gancaisun

Mei cai preserved with bamboo shoot slivers, sold in boxes. Nutty and fragrant, the fine shreds need only brief rinsing and soaking. Use in braises or soups, especially with rich meats.



❖ Yacai

A mild pickle made from the upper stems and leaves of the same plant used for zhacai. Usually sold chopped and ready to use. Essential to Sichuan dishes such as dandan mian and fried long beans.

❖ Xuecai

Made from a brassica type called xuelihong, this wet pickle is lightly sour, with thin, juicy stems. Rinse and pat dry before use. It needs no further cooking, but can be stir-fried with meat or used to garnish noodles; it complements rich items such as pork and seafood.

Soaking and prepping

The saltier and more dehydrated the preserved vegetable, the more thoroughly you should rinse it, and the longer you should soak it. Once soaked, drained and cut up, leafy dried vegetables can be dry-fried over medium-low heat first, to drive off some moisture, so they will subsequently soak up more of their cooking liquid.



Spring onions, leeks & chives

Spring onions, chives and leeks are often confused around the world as species and cultivars can look alike. Here is a guide to the most common kinds.

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❖ Naga negi

Japanese “long onions” 2 to 3cm thick and up to 50cm long. Quite pungent when raw, hence their use as a garnish for rich dishes and ramen. They mellow considerably when cooked. Good for grilling, braising and stir-frying. Their Chinese equivalents are called da cong (big onions) and are similarly used as a raw garnish, notably for Peking duck and in cooked dishes.



❖ Chinese leeks/green garlic/qing suan

Somewhere between Western leeks and naga negi in size and appearance, but more bulbous at their root end. Their sweet flavour combines leek and garlic notes. Great for stir-fries, such as Sichuan twice-cooked pork and braised dishes. Mostly sold at wet markets.

❖ Yellow chives/ jiu huang

Koo chye grown away from light turn pale yellow-green, sweet and fragrant. Often seen in fried ee-fu noodles and stir-fries. Very perishable, so use promptly after buying. Like regular chives, lifeless when overcooked.



❖ Chive roots

Koo chye roots are as juicy and crisp as slim beansprouts, with a mild, peppery chive flavour. Sold in Myanmarese and Thai stores. In Myanmar's Shan cuisine, they are used as a garnish or accompaniment for savoury dishes.





❖ Western leeks

Up to 4cm thick and 40 to 50cm long, their layers are thicker than those of Asian leeks. The green parts can be tough, so discard them if they are very fibrous. Slow-cook by sauteing, braising or roasting to tone down their sulphurous side and enhance their natural sweetness for soups, purees, savoury tarts and side dishes. Wash well after slicing to remove any dirt trapped between layers.

❖ Western chives

Very slim at 2 to 3mm wide. Smooth and mild-tasting, lacking any acrid or acid notes. In European cuisine, favoured for adding green speckles for garnishing and a hint of onion scent to dishes.

❖ Nira

Japanese chives. Stronger in flavour and sweeter than local koo chye, and larger, at about 6 to 7mm wide and 40 to 50cm long. Better cooked than raw, they go well with eggs, tofu, seafood and organs. Nira reba is a popular Japanese stir-fry of chives with pig liver.

❖ Koo chye/jiu cai/ Chinese chives/ garlic chives

Flat-bladed and dark green, 3 to 4mm wide and 30 to 40cm long. Juicy and mild, with a garlic edge. Best cooked quickly and lightly, if at all. Chives are commonly used in noodle dishes such as pad thai and mee siam; dumpling fillings, egg and tofu dishes and stir-fries. In South Korea, they are made into aromatic buchu kimchi.



❖ Spring onions/ scallions

A group of closely related species which differ from round onions by not forming a root bulb. Around the world, spring onions are used in similar ways – raw, pickled and cooked. These methods exploit their sweetness and pungency. Shown here are bannou negi, extra-slim spring onions sold at Japanese supermarkets. They are especially good for garnishing and in salads as they are full-flavoured but less sharp and biting than the larger spring onions more common at local supermarkets.



Storing

Thicker, harder leeks can survive a day or two outside the fridge.

Remove any tape or rubber bands as close packing can spread rot quickly. Wrap thinner onions and chives loosely in newspaper or brown paper and keep in the vegetable drawer in the fridge.



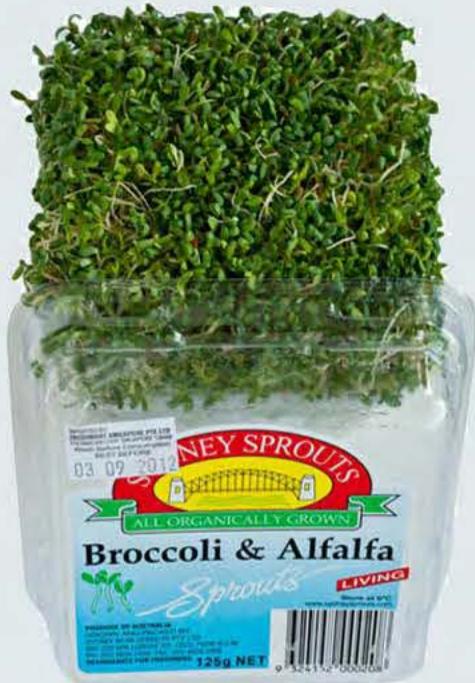
Sprouts

They don't get sweeter
and younger than
these. Here's a primer
on sprouts.

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❖ Soybean sprouts

Richer-tasting than mung bean sprouts, and best lightly blanched or stir-fried. Good in salads, soups and quick pickles. Korean recipes often season them with spicy condiments to accentuate their nuttiness.



❖ Alfalfa

The workhorse sprout for sandwiches and salads. Nearly hair-thin, with a sweet, faintly grassy flavour, they play well with most other ingredients and should only be eaten raw.



❖ Radish sprouts

These may have pretty white, pink or purple stems and green or purple leaves, depending on the source radish seed. Peppery and sharp, they complement eggs and rich meats and seafoods. Delicious on buttered bread.

❖ Broccoli sprouts

These sport a mild, radish-like bite with a slightly metallic edge. They hold their own as the star or co-star of a sandwich filling, particularly with whole-grain breads.



❖ Wasabi sprouts

Slim, fragile, and not as pugnacious as wasabi root, though still able to clear sinuses. Add to nigiri sushi or handrolls for a twist, or use in seafood-based sandwich fillings and salads. Or try them in a roast-beef sandwich instead of horseradish.



❖ Sunflower sprouts

Large sprouts with long, sturdy stems and soft leaves, tasting like a blend of taugeh, dou miao and romaine. Eat them raw – they are great in popiah and rice paper wraps – or cook them very lightly at most, by sauteing or stir-frying.



❖ Mung bean sprouts

We all know taugeh, but sprouted mung beans can be eaten when much smaller, like those shown here. Sweet and lightly crunchy, they can be added to soups, dals, salads or stir-fries.



❖ Pea sprouts

Thin-stemmed, small-leaved pea sprouts are xiao dou miao: Da dou miao, with larger leaves and curly tendrils, are the shoot tips of more mature pea plants. Their labelling sometimes gets mixed up, but the two types can be visually distinguished by size.

❖ Daikon sprouts

Sweet and crisp, with the same clean bite as the full-grown radish. Serve with sushi or use as a pungent accent in vegetable and grain salads. They do not survive cooking.



The sprouting process

The seeds, legumes or grains are first rinsed well, then soaked for a short while to kickstart germination and the enzyme activity which produces flavourful sugars and amino acids. They are then drained, but kept moist with regular rinsings, until the shoots emerge. Each kind of sprout has slightly different optimum growing conditions. See www.sproutpeople.org for more information.

Hygiene and health

Sprouts should be grown and stored in sterile, clean conditions. Wash all home-sprouting implements and vessels with boiling water.

Contaminated supermarket sprouts have caused food poisoning outbreaks in the United States.

Some legume sprouts contain small amounts of compounds which are toxic or which interfere with absorption of nutrients; cooking may reduce these. Many health authorities hence recommend the thorough cooking of such sprouts, though not all traditional cuisines or raw food diets heed these guidelines.

❖ Other sproutable seeds

These include fenugreek (bitter and fresh-tasting), mustard (hot), onion (sweet-pungent), rocket (peppery), celery (aromatic), carrot, fennel, amaranth, quinoa and buckwheat groats.

❖ Other sproutable legumes

Besides the above legumes, these include black chickpeas, yellow chickpeas, masoor dal, black-eyed peas, azuki beans and peanuts. Sprouted legumes are widely used in Indian and other South Asian cuisines.

❖ Other sproutable grains

These include wheat, millet, rye, hulled oats and spelt, kamut, barley and ragi (finger millet). Best eaten when the sprout tips are still small and pale. If left unharvested, they eventually become grass.



Stem vegetables

The value of some veggies lies in their flavourful stems.
Here is a list of those sold in local wet markets and supermarkets.

.....

❖ Broccoli, cauliflower and broccolini

The main bulk of a head of broccoli or cauliflower is stem. Broccolini, a broccoli-kailan cross, has the stalks of broccoli and the tiny flower buds of kailan. It is sweeter and more brightly vegetal than either, though also pricier.

❖ Celery

Western celery stems are prized most for their crunch and distinctive taste. For example, thinner Chinese celery stems have a herbal fragrance. Cooked or raw, both kinds can add pleasant aroma and subtle savouriness to dishes.



Layers of thickened stems comprise this plump white vegetable, which tastes like sweet, anise-infused celery.

It is crisp and aromatic when raw, mellow and plush when cooked until soft. Choose bulbs under 10cm wide as larger ones can be woody.



❖ Kohlrabi

This swollen-stemmed vegetable can be sized anywhere between a child's toy top and a bowling ball. Needing only peeling before being enjoyed raw or lightly cooked, it is firm and crunchy with a fresh, broccoli-like flavour.

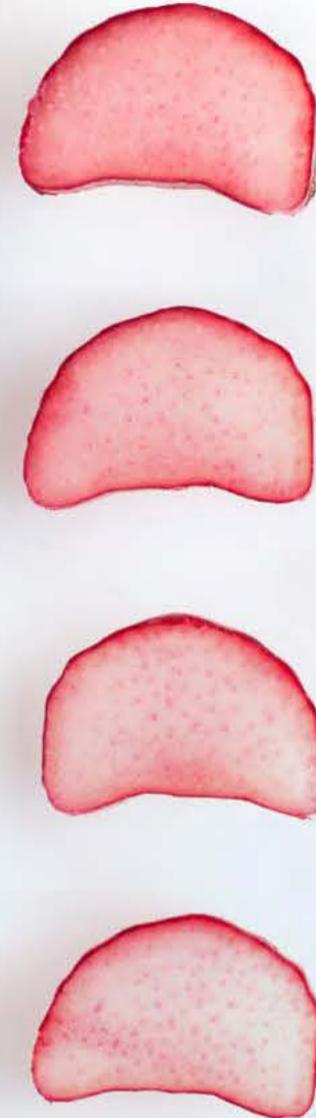


❖ Lotus root

Despite their hefty size, botanically speaking, lotus roots are actually stems. More obviously stemlike are the baby lotus rootlets shown here, only 1cm thick and around 50cm long but with the same patterned cross-section as larger specimens. Tasting a little like white asparagus, they can be blanched, stir-fried or pickled. Look for them at shops selling Thai or Vietnamese fresh produce.

❖ Rhubarb

About 30 to 40cm long and 2cm wide, these pink to deep red stems are traditionally made into jellies, compotes and desserts in British cooking. Their refreshing acidity is also good in savoury food. In Iran, lamb is stewed with rhubarb and herbs. Try adding thinly sliced rhubarb to seafood curries and soups as a sour accent. Discard rhubarb leaves, which are toxic.



❖ Lettuce stem

True to its name, this is a cultivar bred for a succulent stem about 4cm thick and 40 to 50cm long, tasting like cos lettuce. It is typically peeled, sliced into coins and stir-fried, often as a light, crunchy foil for rich ingredients such as lup cheong (Chinese sausage).

❖ Garlic stems (suan tai)

The juicy green stems sent up by a Chinese garlic cultivar, topped with paint-brush-like heads. About 30cm long and sold in bunches, they can be prepped as for long beans. Strongly garlic-scented when raw, milder when cooked, they are best blanched or stir-fried until just tender.



❖ Kailan stem

Bred for small leaves and a sturdy, knobbly stem, it is sometimes whimsically labelled “kai lan bone”. About 3 to 4cm thick and around 30cm long. Peel thinly if skin is very thick, slice as desired and cook as you would regular kailan.



❖ Taro stem

From a taro species, this is about 3cm thick, and usually trimmed into 40 to 50cm lengths for sale. Look for them in Tekka market. They have a distinctive lacy-membraned interior and mild flavour. They are usually peeled, salted, left to stand for a while, then rinsed well before cooking to remove some of the juices, which can irritate skin. Eaten in curries, soups and plain vegetable dishes across India, Asia and the Pacific islands. A red-skinned variety is pickled in Japan.



Sticky vegetables

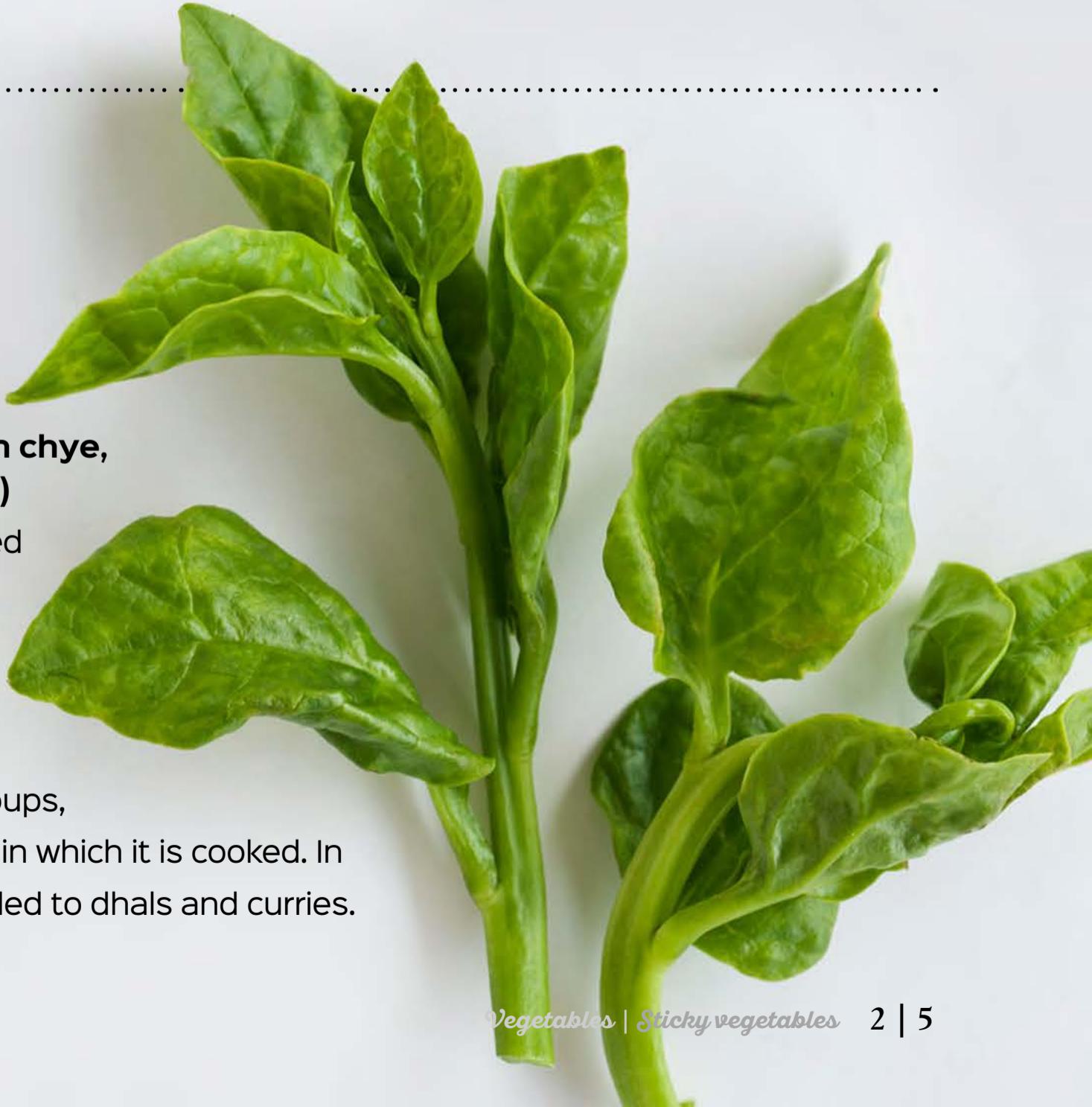
In Asia, vegetables with sticky, slimy textures are prized – and sometimes hated. Here are those most common to us.

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❖ Okra

Ladies fingers' sap has a distinctive glueiness, valued in dishes like Cajun gumbo, but not universally loved. It cannot be totally eliminated. However, to reduce its sliminess, wash the whole pods well, then dry them completely. Cut into pieces, then spread these on a tray to air-dry in a well-ventilated place for several minutes. Fry them over high heat with minimal stirring, as this releases more sap; alternatively, deep-fry them briefly. To cook okra whole, trim the stem into a point as if you were sharpening a pencil, without cutting into the body of the pod, then blanch or steam until tender and pat dry. This keeps all of the sap inside the pod.



❖ Basella (ti wan chye, Malabar spinach)

This thick-stemmed vine vegetable exudes mucilage that usefully thickens and smoothens the soups, sauces or gravies in which it is cooked. In India, it is also added to dhals and curries.



❖ **Huai shan** (left)

This slender yam's white flesh exudes slimy, sticky sap – lightly when sliced, profusely when grated. Used most often in dried form for medicinal soups and tonics, fresh huai shan is now widely available. It has a fine, potato-like texture when cooked and can be added to soups, congees and stir-fries, or used as for nagaimo.



❖ **Nagaimo or yamaimo**

Japanese cultivars of the same yam species as huai shan, frequently thicker and crisper in texture than the latter. Eaten raw, grated or slivered, and pan-fried or braised. It is traditionally used to bind okonomiyaki (vegetable pancake) batter. If eating it raw, soak in vinegared water for a few minutes to reduce slipperiness and counteract its slightly irritant properties.

❖ Water shield

Usually only seen at posh Chinese and Japanese restaurants, the tiny leaves of this water vine plant wear a slippery gel cloak and slide down the throat in a pleasant way. Hangzhou is famous for water shield, which is typically served in soup.

❖ Mozuku

This Japanese seaweed is sold in tubs at Japanese supermarkets, usually dressed with a sour or sweet-sour marinade. Its tendrils have a slurpy, gelid texture like very fine agar-agar threads and a subtle seawater flavour.

❖ Basil seeds (biji selasih)

These tiny black seeds form a gelatinous coating when soaked. Popularly seen in iced desserts and drinks across south and south-east Asia.

❖ Satoimo (baby taro)

These small tubers' starchy flesh (right) has a uniquely dense, glutinous texture. Scrub, then peel, rub well with salt and rinse: This seasons the taro and also removes some sticky juice. Simmer in water, stock or soup broth until tender. A traditional Japanese staple.





❖ Tapioca (cassava)

Cassava (left) is rich in starch with strong thickening properties. Grated, it can be used to bind batters, doughs, and mixtures of cut-up or minced meat or vegetables. Like nagaimo, its sap may irritate skin, so wear gloves when prepping.



❖ Aloe vera

The slippery gel inside this succulent plant's fleshy leaves is a popular dessert and drink ingredient. When preparing fresh leaves at home, be sure to rinse off any and all green sap from the aloe's cut skin, as this can upset the stomach.

❖ Cactus

Fresh cactus paddles, now sold in supermarkets, have jellylike flesh that tastes a bit like lettuce and kai lan stems. Usually already trimmed for sale, but be wary of residual hair-fine needles. Carefully shave off the small needle beds with a vegetable peeler, then cut off skin and slice flesh into small pieces. Braise or simmer in soups.





Vegetable gourds & melons

A guide to a visually varied group of vegetables valued for their soft, mild tastes and textures.

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❖ **Tinda/apple gourd** (above)

Indian grocery stores stock this gourd, which looks like a squat guava. It has a faint cucumber scent and dense white flesh that absorbs flavours obligingly and keeps its shape well when slow-cooked. Pare off and discard skin. Leave small, soft seeds in, scoop out hard seeds and surrounding pith. Leave plain or stuff, then sauté or cook in dry or wet curries.

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❖ **Bittergourd**

Crisp and juicy eaten raw; slippery-firm when lightly cooked; buttery-tender when cooked longer; meltingly soft when slow-simmered. Japanese and Indian bittergourds with warty skin and tapered ends are potently bitter; smoother-skinned, club-shaped Chinese green bittergourds are milder; white bittergourd, sometimes sold at local supermarkets and shown here, has a fine-edged and subtle bitterness. Bittergourd seeds are edible, but only Indian cooks tend to leave them intact, in deep-fried or dry-fried dishes.

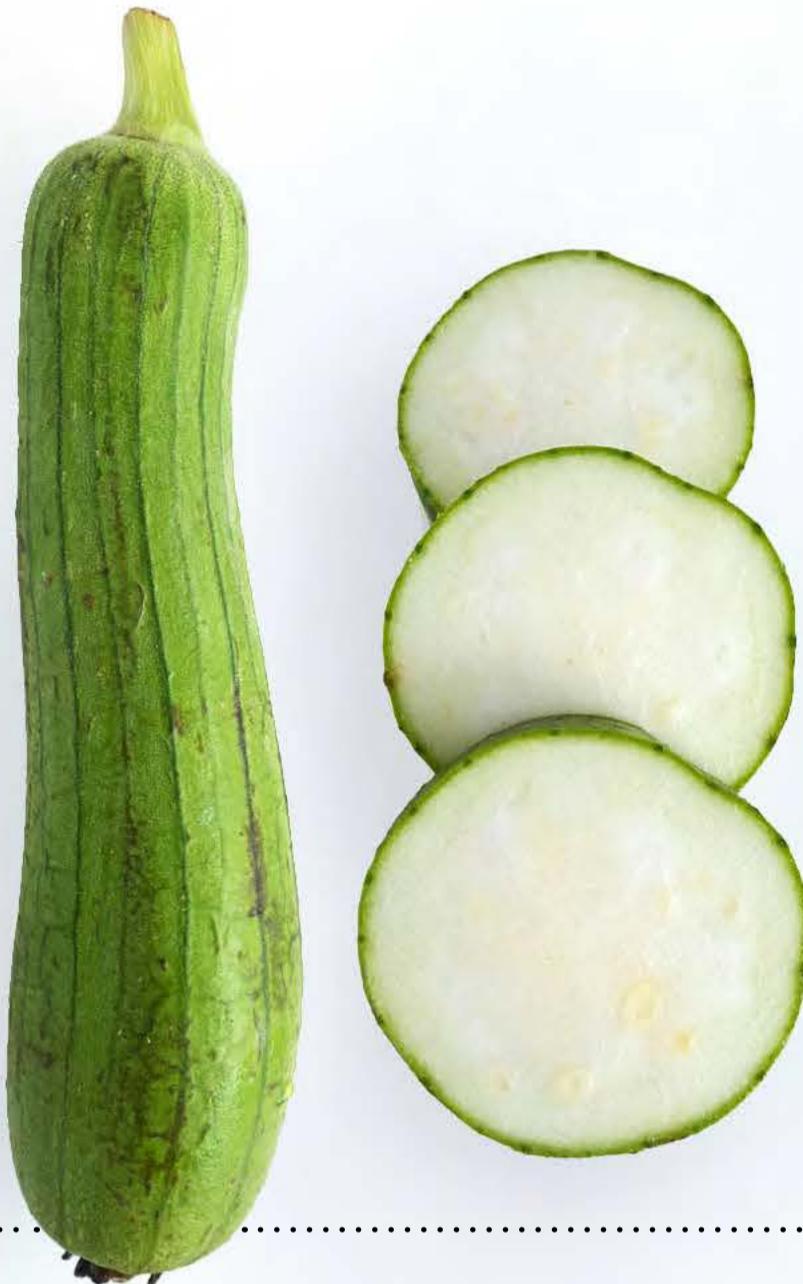


❖ **Bottle gourd**

Shown here is a bulbous Thai bottle gourd, the other commonly sold cultivar looks like a large, long-bodied, short-necked wine bottle. Discard its hard skin. Its firm and neutral-tasting flesh is enjoyed across Asia in soups, stir-fries, curries, stews and fritters. In Japan, it is made into kanpyo, sweet brown gourd strips used in sushi.

❖ **Sponge gourd/silk gourd**

This soft-bodied, courgette-sized gourd has spongy flesh that is silky-soft when cooked, with a cucumber-marrow flavour. Simply peel and slice, then stir-fry, braise or simmer. Mature sponge gourds develop a network of tough internal fibres and are made into scrubbing loofahs.



❖ **Shark fin melon**

A very old squash species native to the Americas, its raw flesh looks solid white, but collapses into slim shreds when cooked, resembling shark fin in appearance if not texture. Slice thickly, cut off skin, pick out seeds, then cut flesh into large chunks and simmer in water or broth until it separates into tender strands. In Spain, Portugal and some South American countries, it is made into jams, preserves and traditional desserts.





❖ Snake gourd

This comes in a spectrum of shapes. Shown here are a 50cm curvy cultivar and a 15cm straight cultivar. Scoop out its seeds and pith, and slice its pale green flesh to saute, stir-fry, braise or simmer. Its dense, smooth texture is somewhat like bittergourd, but its mild cucumber flavour has no bitterness.



❖ Angled luffa/ gourd

Distinguished by soft but sharp-edged spines running along its slim body. Textured like sponge gourd, but milder-tasting. Trim off spines and any hard skin, remove seeds if tough and large, then slice and simmer in soup, braise or stir-fry.



❖ Parval/pointed gourd

Sold in Little India's grocery shops, these gourds are the size of a large thumb and have thin but succulent, courgette-like flesh. Leave skin on if it is thin, pare it if it is tough: slice and scoop out yellow pith and black seeds. Simmer, sauté or braise flesh in curries or soups. You can halve parvals lengthwise and stuff them with meat or spice mixtures before cooking.

❖ Hairy gourd/winter melon

This species is sold as hairy gourd when young, about 20cm long, and covered with short brown hairs. As it matures, it becomes rounder and thicker-fleshed, and its hairs are replaced with a white bloom resembling frost, hence the name winter melon (and its other nickname, ash gourd). Its flesh has a neutral flavour at any age, but can be cooked to a more melting softness when mature. In China and India, winter melon is used for sweet confections as well as savoury dishes.



Yams & other root vegetables

We call many local vegetables “yam”, but only some really deserve the name. Here is a guide.





❖ Chinese and Japanese true yams

Dioscorea opposita, called huai shan in Chinese and yamaimo (plus other names for different cultivars) in Japanese. They vary in exact size and shape. Long shapes are most common, but Japanese types can be fan- or ball-shaped. Those sold here are typically distinguished by smooth skin with evenly spaced freckles and root hairs. When cut, their crisp flesh exudes sticky sap; when grated, it forms a glutinous mass, enjoyed raw in Japanese cuisine, and also used to bind batters and meat or seafood patty mixtures. Cut up and cooked in clear soups or stews, they lend a slight shine and body to gravies.



Oxalates

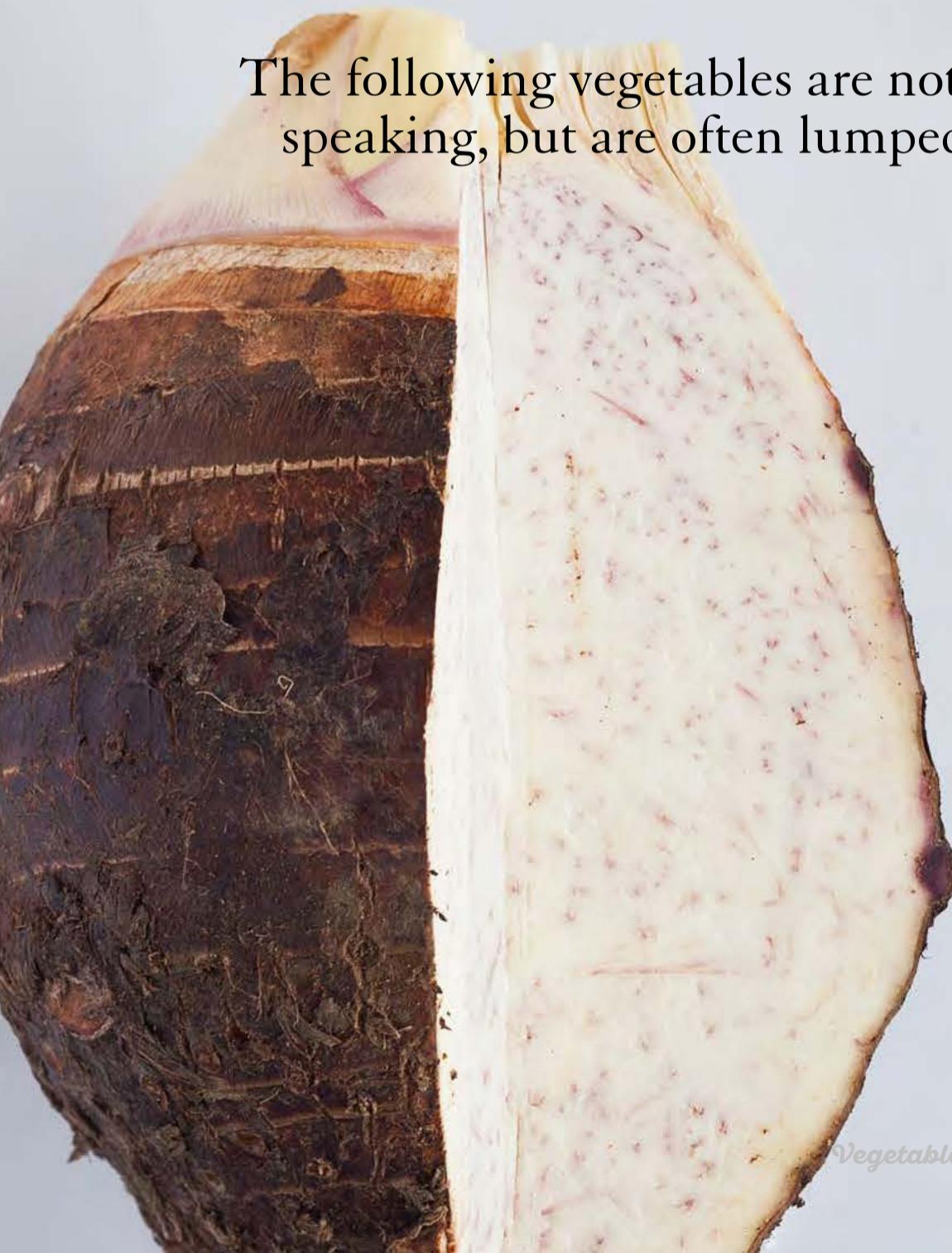
Yams and other roots contain oxalate compounds which can irritate skin on the hands or around the mouth. Cooking neutralises them. When destined to be eaten raw, Japanese yams are soaked in vinegared water to remove some of the oxalates.

❖ White and purple true yams

These look similar on their ruggedly brown outsides, because they are variants of the same species, *dioscorea alata*. Inside, white yams are snowy-pale, while purple yams (shown here) can be anywhere from palest lavender to deep, vibrant amethyst purple when cooked. Depending on how old and starchy they are, white and purple yams can have a texture ranging from subtly powdery to moist and fluffy. Cooking them with liquid or coconut milk smoothens them out beautifully, hence their frequent use in kueh-kueh and desserts across South-east Asia.



The following vegetables are not true yams, botanically speaking, but are often lumped together with them.



❖ Taro

These large tubers have a starchy consistency and contain oxalates, but are not closely related to true yams. Familiar to Singaporeans in Teochew orh nee, fried snacks and dim sum items, it is eaten around the world in many different preparations, from curries to sautes.

❖ Eddoe

A taro type with small corms, sometimes labelled “baby taro”. Called satoimo in Japanese, their cooked flesh is supple, sticky and more moist and smooth than large taro. Widely eaten in India as well as South-east Asia.



❖ Elephant foot yam

Part of the same family as taro. Sold at Indian vegetable shops, these squat, knobbly roots can be as small as a tennis ball or as big as a seat cushion. Indian cuisine prepares them in many ways, in curries, fritters, stir-fries, vegetable cutlets and so on. Their apricot-coloured flesh has a bland, slightly milky flavour, and should not be eaten raw because of its oxalate content. Cut up and cooked in clear soups or stews, they lend a slight shine and body to gravies.



❖ Burdock

These slender roots (above) often sit next to Chinese yams in markets and are sometimes verbally or visually confused with them. They have a completely different texture and taste to true yams: hard, dense and subtly bittersweet. Good in stews, stir-fries and soups.

❖ Konjac yam

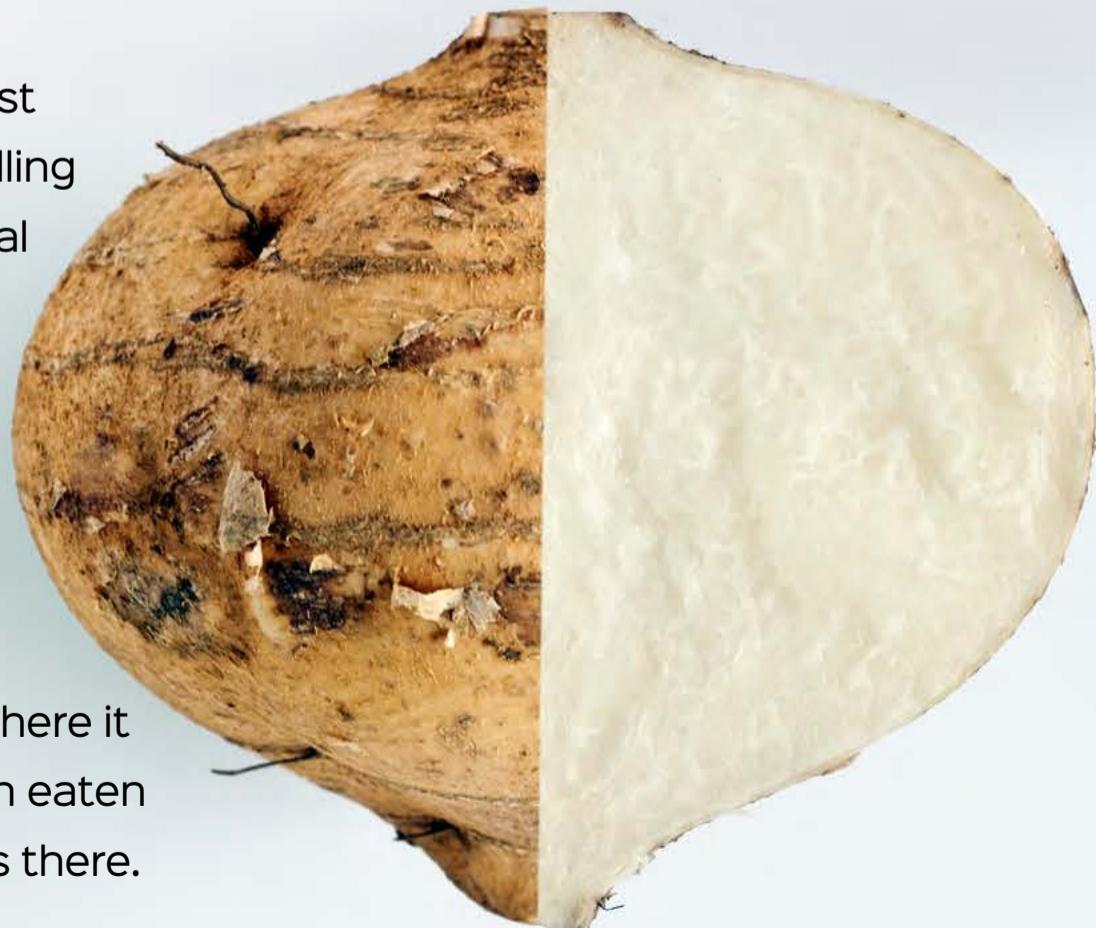
Related to elephant foot yams, these large roots are not sold fresh locally, but are processed to yield konnyaku jelly products. The natural gums and fibre they contain give the jelly its signature firm, bouncy texture.

❖ Sweet potato

Older American cookbooks and recipes often call sweet potatoes yams. Modern ones more often strive to avoid this confusion.

❖ Bangkwang

This tuberous root is most familiar to us in popiah filling and stir-fries. Its colloquial name, yambean, belies the fact that it is neither yam nor bean. Nor is it a turnip, another vegetable it is often confused with. Originally from Mexico, where it is called jicama, it is often eaten raw in snacks and salads there.



Fruit



Apples

Granny Smiths, Fujis and Royal Galas are readily available in supermarkets, but stores now stock many more apple varieties. Here is a round-up of recent discoveries.

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❖ Ambrosia

A Canadian apple with yellow and red skin. Juicy, with open-textured rather than dense flesh, but still crisp – almost like a water chestnut. A honeyed sweetness and short aftertaste. Chill it well before serving to highlight its cool, melon-like character.



❖ Antares

A French apple streaked with red and gold. Crisp and tender, with a gentle acidity and subtle, slightly pear-like flavour, it suits both cooking and eating. The apple's taste weakens and texture softens as it ages, so use it promptly.

❖ Candy

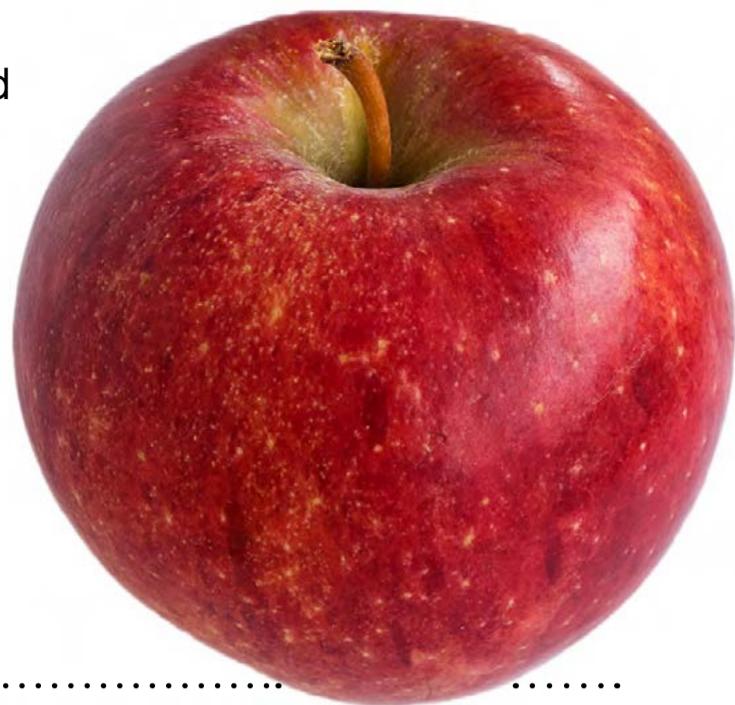
Not a confection but an apple bred principally for its small size. About 5 to 6cm across, it is very convenient for packed lunches and light snacking. Often descended from the Royal Gala, it looks and tastes very similar.



❖ Envy

This apple from New Zealand is very hard, crisp and crunchy. It has dark wine-red skin and, to match, an intense, almost wine-like flavour at first bite. Best enjoyed on its own, so you can savour its unusual taste and finely balanced sweetness. Once exposed to air, its flesh turns brown much more slowly than most apples, so it can be cut ahead of time for lunchbox or picnic use.

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❖ Jazz

Also developed in New Zealand, it has dense and juicy flesh crisp and crunchy to the bite and a berry-like balance of sweetness and acidity. Lots of character, reminiscent of a good-humoured Granny Smith. Very good for eating it as is, in fruit salads or in recipes requiring little or brief cooking.

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❖ Kanzi

Developed in Belgium, it has a pretty skin marbled with pink and yellow and an appealing fragrance. Brightly tangy without being sharp, with a rounded sweetness. Best eaten au naturel and well chilled.



❖ Pacific Rose

This blocky-shaped apple has a beautiful deep-pink skin. Inside, the yellow-tinted flesh has a coarse, juicy texture and mild but well-balanced flavour. If you prefer less tart apples, you will like this one.



❖ Queen

A fine-textured, very juicy apple from New Zealand. Not hugely sweet, but it has a light and lilting aroma with notes of pear and banana – it would work very well with those fruits in a mixed fruit salad. Best when slightly chilled.



❖ Royal Beaut

This apple from South Africa is a variety of the Royal Gala, with a more intense dark red colour and often distinct stripes. Small and a touch more dense and fragrant than the Royal Gala, it is better for eating than cooking.



❖ Smitten

A New Zealand hybrid of Gala, Braeburn and other apples, this has attractively speckled and striped skin. It has springy-crisp and juicy flesh, with a light, sweet flavour and short aftertaste. A great snacking apple which does not suit cooking.



Choosing and storing apples

Choose apples with a firm texture. Avoid those with soft spots and suspicious discolouration and check the stems and opposite ends for mould. Keep them in a brown paper bag or perforated plastic bag in the main compartment or vegetable drawer of the fridge. Wash them just before serving. If an apple has a mealy texture and bland flavour, it was probably stored for too long or at the wrong temperature.



Asian mangoes

The Asian mango season stretches from April to August, with different varieties peaking at different times. Watch out for these as they pass through supermarkets and wet markets.

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❖ Alphonso/Hapoos

India's most famed mangoes have a blunt oval shape with deep golden skin which crinkles faintly when ripe. Very fragrant, it has notes of candyfloss, citrus and coconut. The smooth orange flesh is not super sweet, but it has a complex flavour, with hints of papaya, coconut and citrus. Best enjoyed on its own. They are available early- to mid-season.



❖ Banganapalli

This large, curvy, slightly flattened mango from India smells of apples, cream, coconut and passionfruit. Sometimes marketed as Benishan. Orange-yellow flesh, abundantly juicy and sweet but not sharp, with papaya, pear and rich, buttery coconut nuances. Great for eating plain or blending into drinks. They are available mid-season.



❖ Dasherri/Dussehri

From India and Pakistan comes this small- to medium-sized oval mango. Its juicy, slightly fibrous sunny-yellow flesh has hints of orange in its otherwise straightforward mango flavour. This is available mid- to late-season.



❖ **Kesar**

Golden-yellow when ripe, this medium-sized and oval mango from India is scented with passionfruit, citrus and toffee notes. Its burnt-orange-hued flesh has an intense, gorgeous papaya-like sweetness well-balanced with acidity. Best enjoyed on its own, and available early- to mid-season.



❖ **Lal Baug**

Small and heart-shaped, these mangoes from India have a green hue which turns reddish as it ripens. It has an unusual spicy and celery-like aroma. Deep-orange flesh, only slightly sweet and with robust acidity. Good for desserts, lassi, mixed juices, salsas and savoury dishes. They are available mid-season.



❖ **Langra**

This mango from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is fist-sized and yellow-green when ripe. Its light orange flesh is slightly fibrous. The fruit has a mild, tangy flavour with lemon and floral nuances and a turpentine note reminiscent of thyme. Available mid- to late-season.

❖ Rainbow mango/Maha Chanok

Long and slim, this Thai mango has a small, flat seed and pale yellow skin often blushed with red. Its spicy lime aroma with pine and resin notes is similar to that of local Kuini mangoes. The juicy yellow flesh is smooth, cool and extremely refreshing, tasting of pear and lemon. Available early- to mid-season.



❖ Rajapuri

This hefty Indian mango weighs anything from 500g to over 1kg, but it has a small seed. It is useful if you need thick slices or big chunks. Used in pickles when green and for desserts, preserves and eating plain when ripe. Its slightly fibrous, butter-yellow flesh has a light, clean and uncomplicated flavour, much like mango cordial. Available mid-season.



❖ Sein Ta Lone

Medium-sized, with evenly yellow skin when ripe, this mango from Myanmar has bright yellow flesh with a honeyed sweetness and low acidity. It is good for eating or in desserts.

Very soft flesh but fairly thick skin, so slice carefully.

Available mid- to late-season.



❖ Totapuri

Long and flat, this mango from India has tapered, beak-like ends – hence its name, which means “parrot”. It is yellow and faintly blushed with red when ripe. Its firm, mild-tasting flesh has a delightful jelly-like texture.

Eat when slightly underripe for more tang.

Popular in salads and pickles when still green and firm. Available mid-season.



Storing and ripening

Buy mangoes when still slightly underripe. Never wrap them in plastic.

Store in a shallow, open cardboard box or paper-lined basket at cool room temperature. As they ripen, most mangoes will smell increasingly fragrant at their stem end.



Bananas

Yellow, yellow, tasty fellow.
Here is a guide to common
banana types sold here.



❖ Pisang mas

About 8cm long, these bananas are very thin-skinned and fragile when ripe. Their golden-yellow flesh is sweet and honey-like and faintly gelatinous. Best eaten fresh, not cooked. The “baby bananas” marketed as children’s snacks are often pisang mas hybrids.



❖ Pisang lemak manis or 40-day bananas

Named for their quick maturation period, these bananas are the same size as pisang mas. They are distinguishable by their tapered tips, which are green when unripe. Sweet and creamy-textured, they are suitable for eating and cooking.

❖ Cavendish

The most common supermarket banana cultivar, these are widely grown and exported globally, more because of their uniformity and durability than flavour. They are 20 to 25cm long, with smooth and creamy but bland flesh. Fragrant only when extremely ripe.





❖ Pisang raja

Considered the king of bananas for eating and cooking. About 10 to 15cm long, with a thick skin and faceted shape. Robust, with slightly coarse flesh and a full, almost custardy flavour with well-balanced sweetness and acidity.



❖ Plantains

Starchy and very firm, plantains are mainly cooked for snacks and savoury dishes. Shown here is an Indian green plantain, 15 to 25 cm long, good for curries and banana chips. The other common local plantain is pisang tanduk, 25 to 35cm long and yellow when ripe.



❖ Pisang rastali or kelat

These are 10 to 15cm long. Best when fully ripe, signalled by reddish-black mottling on their thin skin. They have creamy flesh with a jelly-like core and a bright, apple-like acidity. Good for eating and for goreng pisang.



❖ Pisang kepok

These are 8 to 10cm long, flattened and sharply faceted. Their pale flesh has a cottony texture when underripe, and starchy and mildly sweet when ripe. Often used for goreng pisang, jemput-jemput (mashed banana fritters), in kueh or steamed and eaten plain with grated coconut.



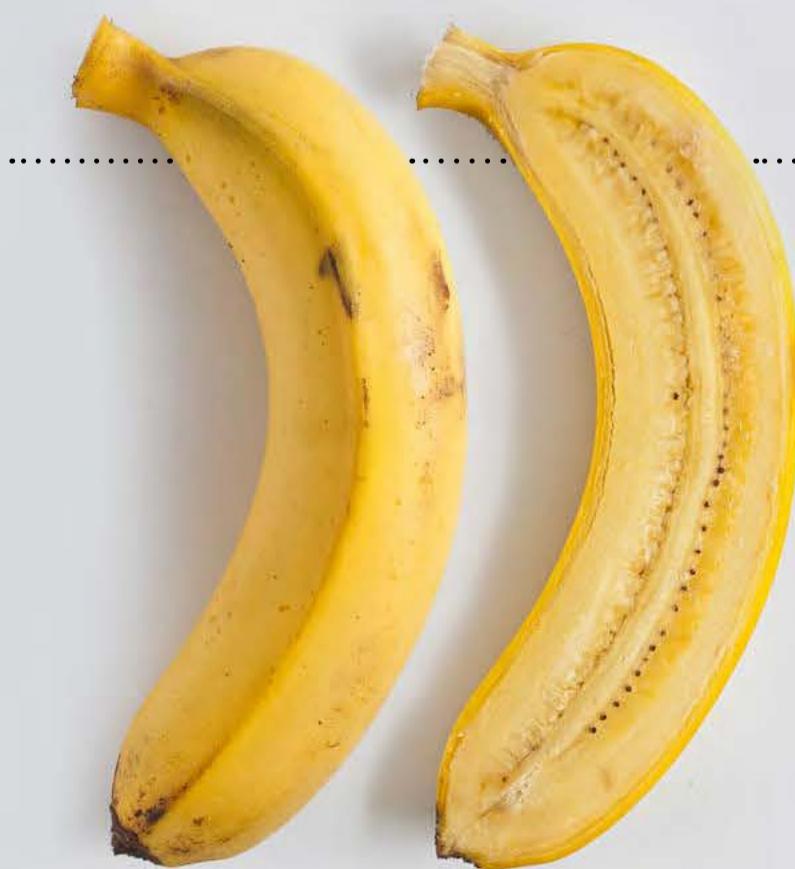
❖ Pisang merah

Plump and turgid, they are 12 to 15cm long. They taste similar to pisang rastali, although they are milder and creamier in texture. They blacken only faintly. Softness indicates ripeness.



❖ Kerala bananas

Also called nendrampazham or rajali kela, these are sold by Indian grocers. They are 15 to 20cm long and pointed. Great for cooking and eating. When very ripe with black patches, their golden flesh is pulpy, fragrant and very sweet, tasting like a raja-rastali cross.



❖ Pisang berangan

About 10 to 12cm long, these bananas are also called ang bak chio, which means red-fleshed bananas in Hokkien. They have a pleasing acidity and slightly dry, starchy texture. Better eaten fresh than cooked. Let them ripen fully for the best flavour.



Citrus: Kumquats

These small,
attractive citrus fruit,
their English name
loaned from the
Cantonese kam kwat,
or golden tangerine,
can be consumed in
various ways.

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❖ Candied kumquats

Many styles are made around the world. At shops selling Vietnamese products, such as those at Golden Mile Complex, look for flower-shaped mut tac (right). Before being candied in thick syrup, these kumquats may be soaked in slaked lime (kapur) solution, which makes them firm, translucent and deep orange in hue. Also shown here are soft Taiwanese kumquats (left) candied with maltose and a hint of salt, which, like mut tac, can be added to baked items such as fruitcakes for bright bursts of colour and flavour. The small, pale, sweet-sour kumquats sold as ye shan lemons (right) by Chinese shops are best for snacking only.





❖ Kumquat sauce

Taiwanese Hakka cooks make kumquat sauce for pantry use.

Look for it at Taiwanese product fairs or make your own.

Quarter and deseed tart kumquats, place in a pot with sliced fresh red chilli to taste, add water to barely cover and simmer until tender. Puree kumquats and chilli and season with sugar and salt as well as rice wine if desired. Bring puree to a boil and simmer for a couple of minutes, then cool and store in sterilised jars in the fridge. Use as a dip, dressing or condiment.

❖ Preserved kumquats

In the Chinese kitchen, kumquats are traditionally preserved in brine or salt.

To do this, wash and dry kumquats, halve or slit them and pack them in a sterilised jar, interspersing them with generous sprinklings of sea salt. Cover and let sit at room temperature for at least two months. Shake the jar occasionally to redistribute the juices as they slowly seep out. Salted kumquats will keep indefinitely in the fridge. To use them, wipe off excess salt or juice then add to stews, soups or braises, as you would use salted plums, or steep in boiling water and sweeten to make a throat-soothing drink. Kumquats can also be made into marmalades, conserves and chutneys. They contain moderate amounts of pectin and hence should be mixed with other citrus fruits to obtain a more firmly set preserve.



Hybrids

Producers have crossed kumquats with other citrus species to yield fruits such as limequats, mandarinquats and so on. None is farmed on an extensive scale, but may turn up occasionally in gourmet supermarkets here.

❖ Calamondins

Kumquats are very often confused with calamondins, also known as calamansi limes, limau kasturi or “four-season tangerine” in Mandarin and Cantonese. While their precise origin is unknown, calamansi limes are thought to derive from a mandarin and kumquat cross and the aroma of their zest and juice does resemble



both of these. Distinctly more sour than kumquats, calamansi contain more pulp and have tougher skins. They ripen to golden yellow (left) if plucked while green and turn orange if fully tree-ripened. The sweetened, preserved limes commonly sold in Singapore and Malaysia (above) may be mistaken for kumquats, but are calamansi limes.



Types and shapes

Species and cultivars range in shape from perfectly round (top right) to oval (bottom right) and slightly oblong to pear-shaped. Round kumquats may be referred to as Marumi and oval ones as Nagami, after established Japanese exemplars. A third type, Meiwa, is a cross between the two. Nagamis are the most intense-tasting and Meiwas are often the sweetest. All kumquats (kinkan in Japanese) have sweet rinds enclosing sour innards, with more membrane than pulp, and can be eaten whole, bar their few seeds.



Storing

Keep kumquats in the vegetable drawer in the fridge, loosely wrapped in a paper bag or swaddled in paper towels in a ventilated container. They spoil quickly if they get damp. Never eat kumquats from an ornamental tree unless you can confirm that they are edible and pesticide-free.



Citrus: Limes

More varied than
you might think,
limes help all kinds
of cuisines to
stay sharp.

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❖ Finger limes

The size and shape of gherkins, these native Australian limes come in many colours, most often green, yellow-brown and red. Beloved by chefs and food stylists for their tiny round sacs, which look like caviar and pop on the tongue to release sour, bitter-spicy juice. Usually only sold here through speciality foods suppliers.



❖ Limau nipis

Often called “big limes” locally to distinguish them from calamansi, these have cleanly sour juice and zippy-smelling zest. They are used all over South-east Asia as a source of cool tartness in dishes and drinks.



❖ Yellow limes

These sunny-hued, longan-sized limes are a fixture in Little India grocery shops and are functionally the same as the fruit known as key limes in the West. Their zest has a mellow, sweet aroma and their juice is brightly sour, with a faint bitterness. Excellent for making lime juice drinks, pickles and marmalades.



❖ Seedless limes

At first glance, these look nearly identical to limau nipis to which they are related and can substitute for them. However, they have larger juice sacs and thicker skins. The zest also smells a touch more floral and these limes often have a heftier price tag.



❖ Shauk tee

Large, grapefruit-sized limes from Myanmar, with thick white pith and many seeds. Their flesh, used in salads, has a mild sourness which hints at both lime and pomelo. Their zest does the same, with an added herbal kaffir-lime-like note. Look for these in Peninsula Plaza.

❖ Long limes

Occasionally spotted in Little India, these elongated limes have tart juice that is considerably outshone by the intense lemon-lime-soda fragrance of their zest. A wonderful lime for salad dressings, cocktails and drinks.

❖ Calamansi

An indispensable garnish for many noodle and hawker dishes and the most common lime sold locally, it has green skin and orange pulp. Sweeter and fruitier than most limes, with a high juice yield, it is native to the Philippines.





❖ Kaffir limes

One of Thai cuisine's most recognisable ingredients. These warty limes have a keenly refreshing, balsam-like edge to their aroma and flavour. Across South-east Asia, their zest is used in curry pastes and their leaves to infuse many kinds of dishes. Their juice has fewer applications, being very bitter. In Thailand, it is used as a traditional conditioning hair rinse.

❖ Sudachi

Resembling large calamansi, these Japanese limes have tough skins, sharp-sweet juice and zest with a vibrant, floral-citrus aroma. In Japan, sudachi juice appears in sauces and salad dressings in summer and enlivens clear hot soups in colder months. Sold here briefly and seasonally in Japanese supermarkets.

❖ Sweet limes (mosambi)

The size of navel oranges, these Indian limes yield juice that is barely acid at all, with a gentle sweetness reminiscent of pomelo and unripe melon, which in India is drunk as a cooling panacea in hot weather and for dry throats. Sold seasonally in Little India here.



Buying and storing

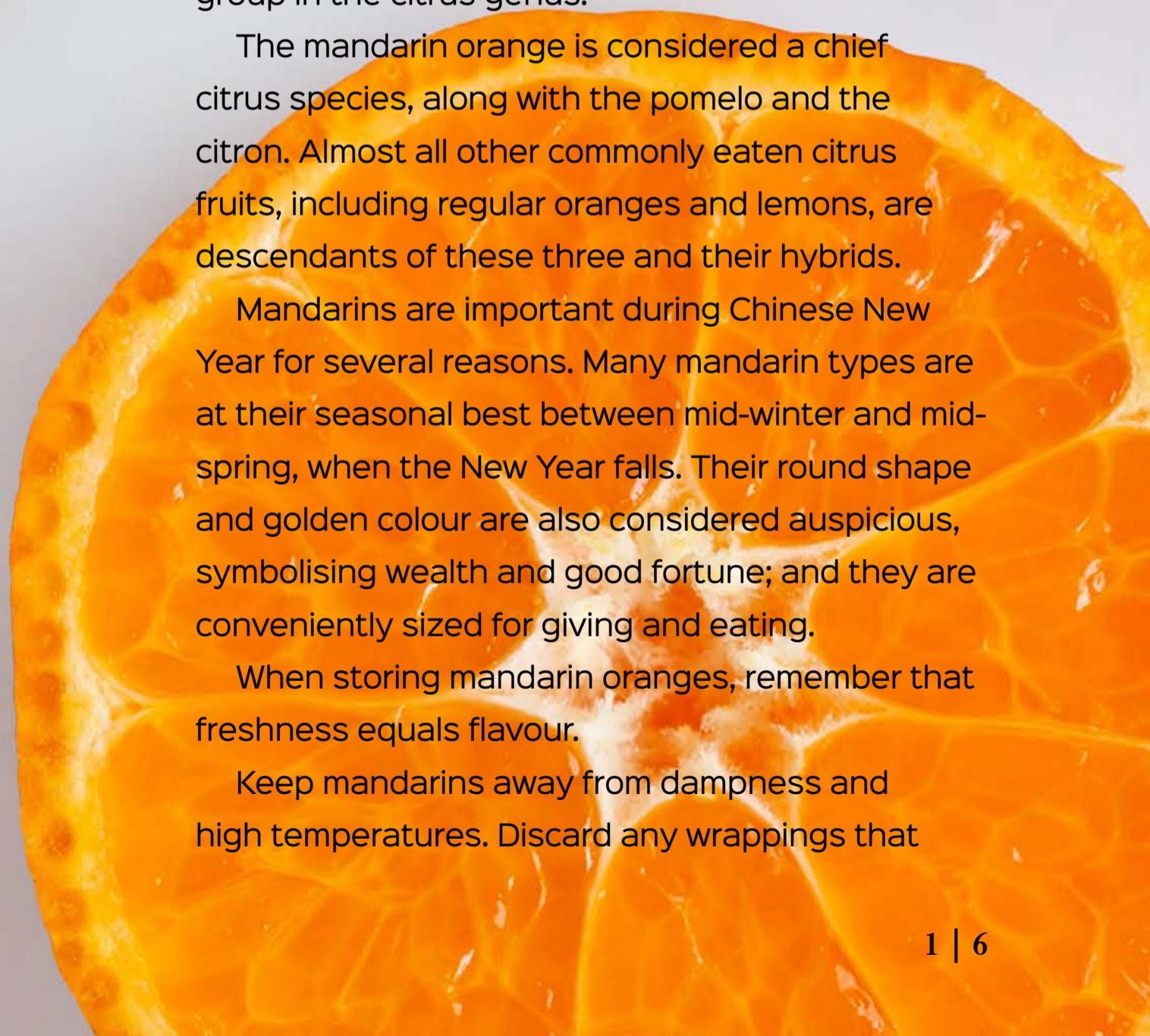
Choose limes that are heavy for their size, without brown or soft spots.

Keep in a well-ventilated place like a basket on a tabletop, away from direct sunlight, and use within a few days, while fresh.



Citrus: Mandarins

Native to South-east Asia and originally cultivated in large quantities in China and Japan, mandarin oranges spread further around the world only from the early 19th century. They have since become so widely and successfully grown that mandarin varieties and hybrids together form the largest group in the citrus genus.

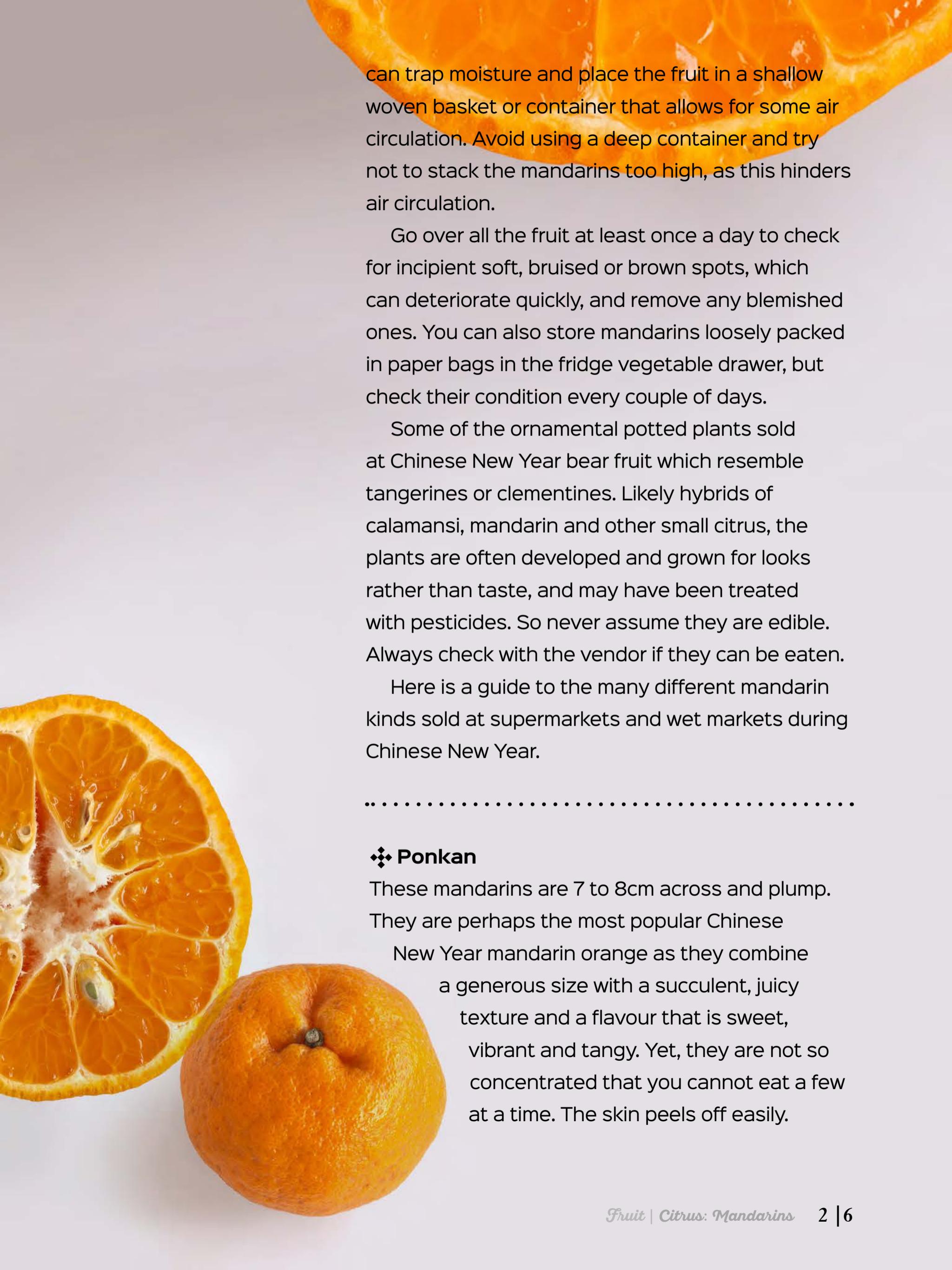


The mandarin orange is considered a chief citrus species, along with the pomelo and the citron. Almost all other commonly eaten citrus fruits, including regular oranges and lemons, are descendants of these three and their hybrids.

Mandarins are important during Chinese New Year for several reasons. Many mandarin types are at their seasonal best between mid-winter and mid-spring, when the New Year falls. Their round shape and golden colour are also considered auspicious, symbolising wealth and good fortune; and they are conveniently sized for giving and eating.

When storing mandarin oranges, remember that freshness equals flavour.

Keep mandarins away from dampness and high temperatures. Discard any wrappings that



can trap moisture and place the fruit in a shallow woven basket or container that allows for some air circulation. Avoid using a deep container and try not to stack the mandarins too high, as this hinders air circulation.

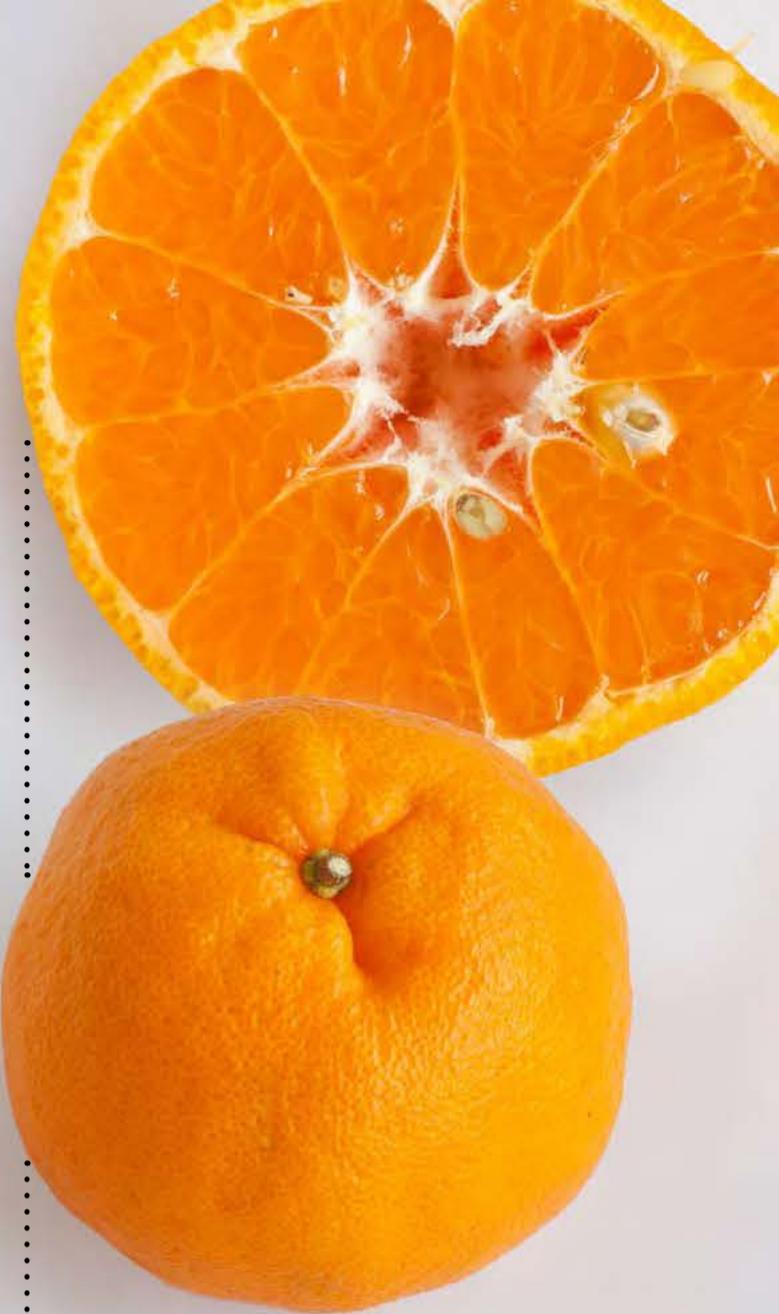
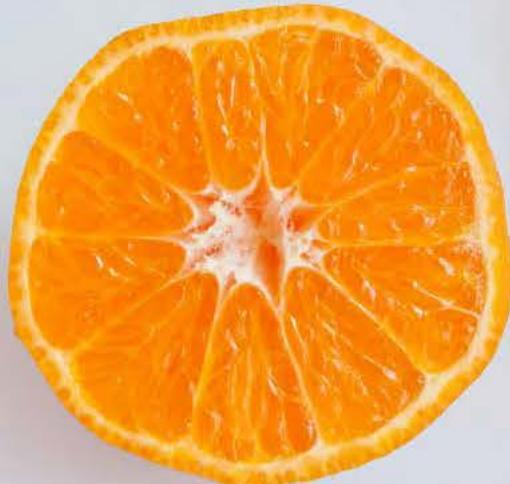
Go over all the fruit at least once a day to check for incipient soft, bruised or brown spots, which can deteriorate quickly, and remove any blemished ones. You can also store mandarins loosely packed in paper bags in the fridge vegetable drawer, but check their condition every couple of days.

Some of the ornamental potted plants sold at Chinese New Year bear fruit which resemble tangerines or clementines. Likely hybrids of calamansi, mandarin and other small citrus, the plants are often developed and grown for looks rather than taste, and may have been treated with pesticides. So never assume they are edible. Always check with the vendor if they can be eaten.

Here is a guide to the many different mandarin kinds sold at supermarkets and wet markets during Chinese New Year.

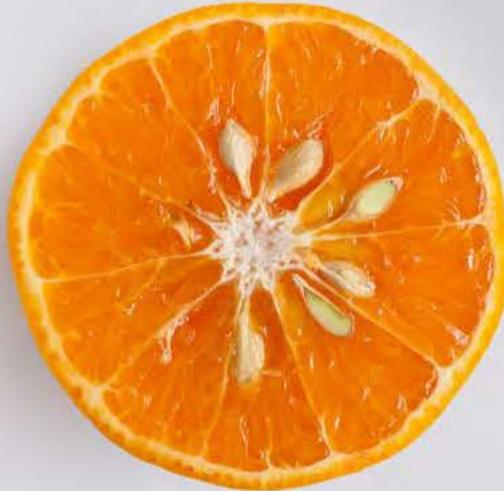
❖ Ponkan

These mandarins are 7 to 8cm across and plump. They are perhaps the most popular Chinese New Year mandarin orange as they combine a generous size with a succulent, juicy texture and a flavour that is sweet, vibrant and tangy. Yet, they are not so concentrated that you cannot eat a few at a time. The skin peels off easily.



❖ Clementine

Bred from mandarin varieties cultivated in the Mediterranean region, these look like large tangerines or small mikans. They are distinctly more tart than either of those, easy to peel, quite juicy and seedless. As they are often imported from Europe, they can be expensive.

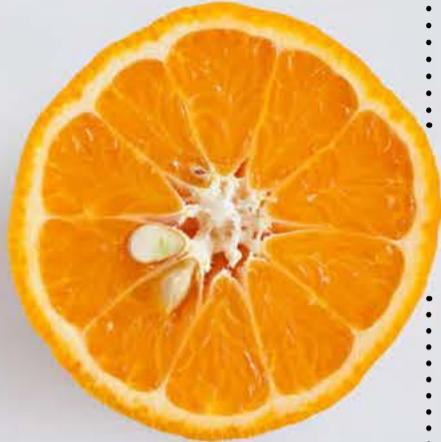


❖ Kinno

From Pakistan, these are also 7 to 8cm across, slightly squat in shape, with smooth, shiny and clingy skins and many seeds. When perfectly ripe, they are intensely sharp-sweet and full-flavoured. Eating more than one at a time may be overkill. Their ample juice and aromatic zest are good for making drinks and cocktails, and for cooking and baking.

❖ Lukan

They are similar in size to ponkans and have slightly rough, loose skin with a few wrinkles. They are also easy to peel. Good ones have a bright acidity and can be quite sweet, although overall, they have a milder flavour than ponkans. Like ponkans, their zest is fragrant but can be too soft and bitter to be useful in cooking.

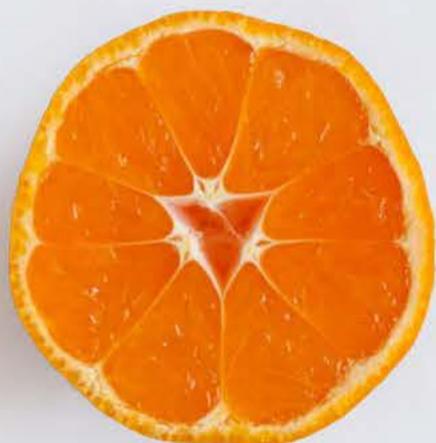
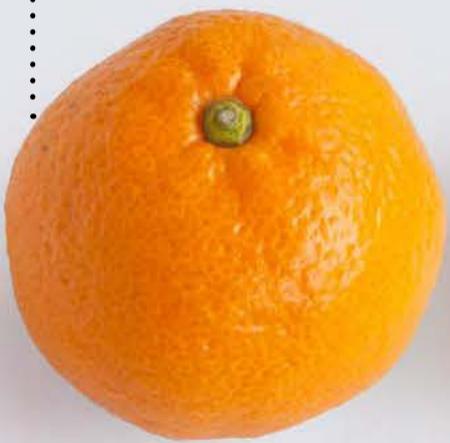


❖ **Swatow**

About the same size as lukans and ponkans, and also from southern China as their name suggests, these mandarins have rougher, thicker skin which is harder to peel, chewier internal membranes and a less sweet taste. What they lack in finesse, they make up for in durability. They have a longer shelf life than many other mandarins and can last two to three weeks.

❖ **Mikan**

These small mandarins are 5 to 7cm across and are very refreshing, with a light acidity and floral sweetness. A cinch to peel, they are also very juicy and seedless. In the United Kingdom, where they are mainly enjoyed at Christmas, they are called satsumas, after the name of a citrus-growing region in Kagoshima. Mikan mandarins are a speciality of some Japanese prefectures, such as Wakayama and Ehime, as well as of Korea's Jeju Island.



❖ **Mandelo**

This mandarin-tangerine-pomelo cross from the United States is the size of a grapefruit, with thin, clingy yellow-green skin and lots of seeds. Very sweet and abundantly juicy, it has a flavour halfway between pomelo and grapefruit, and a lingering but quite pleasant faint bitterness. These citrus fruit are called “cocktail grapefruit” by some producers. They are also good for making marmalade.





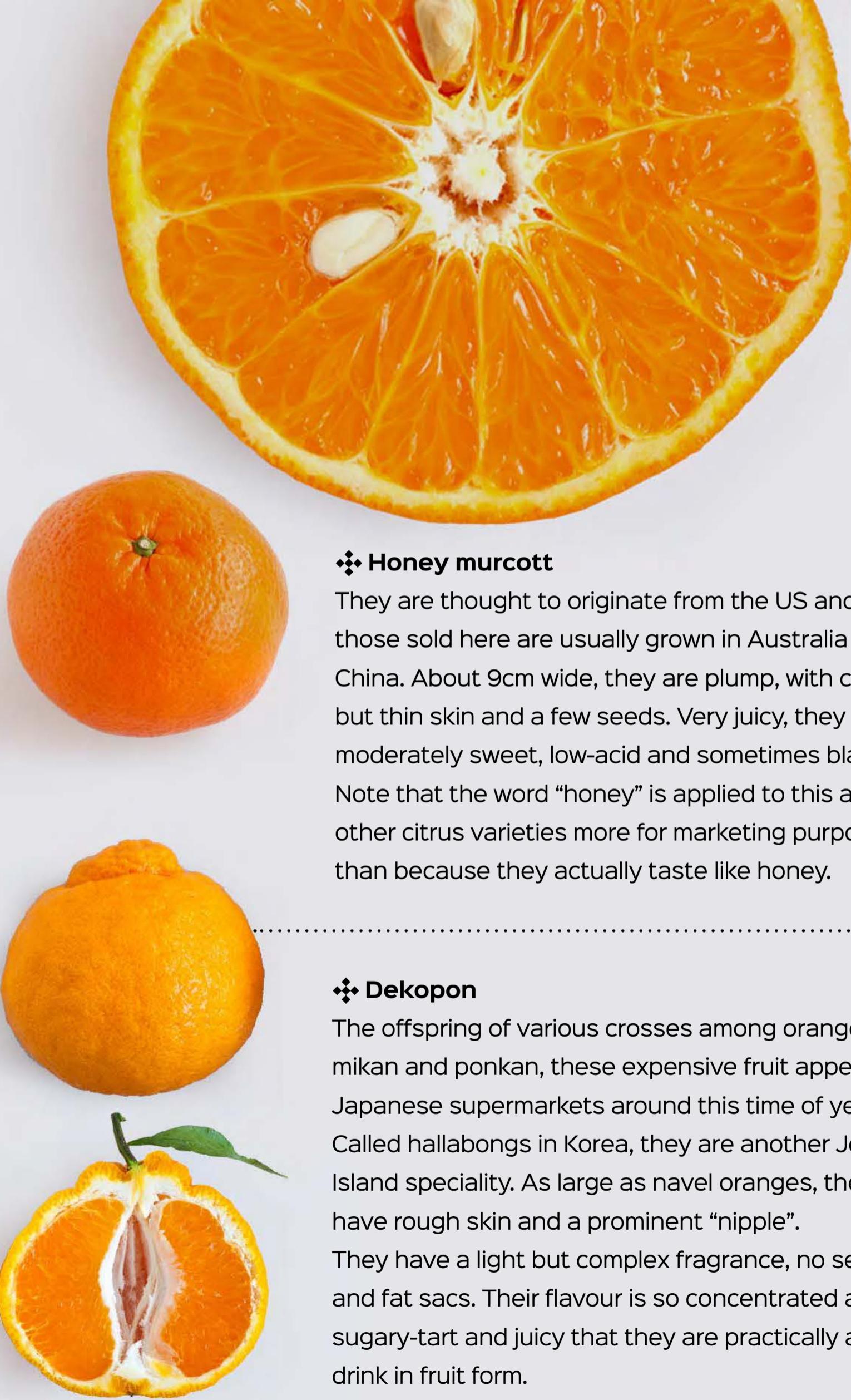
❖ Tangerine

The name “tangerine” originally referred to mandarins associated with Tangiers in North Africa, but its usage since has had more to do with public relations than botanical relations. The China tangerines sold here are sometimes confusingly labelled “baby oranges”, which they are not. They are 4 to 5cm wide, with glossy, rough skins. Tangerines are often packed along with some green leaves, which symbolise strong relationships between the giver and the recipient. Densely sweet, low-acid tangerines have a short aftertaste and few or no seeds.



❖ Sour orange

They are occasionally seen in gourmet supermarkets in December and January. In Japanese culture, they symbolise continuity and family inheritance in New Year celebrations. About 7cm, yellow to deep orange in hue, they are also known as Seville oranges in the West. This pomelo-mandarin cross has a very old pedigree and history of cultivation. Traditionally used for making marmalade, confections, liqueurs, extracts and perfumes, it is not typically eaten raw as it has extremely sour juice, many seeds and membranes, and a tough, bitter, deeply fragrant rind.



❖ Honey murcott

They are thought to originate from the US and those sold here are usually grown in Australia or China. About 9cm wide, they are plump, with clingy but thin skin and a few seeds. Very juicy, they are moderately sweet, low-acid and sometimes bland. Note that the word “honey” is applied to this and other citrus varieties more for marketing purposes than because they actually taste like honey.

❖ Dekopon

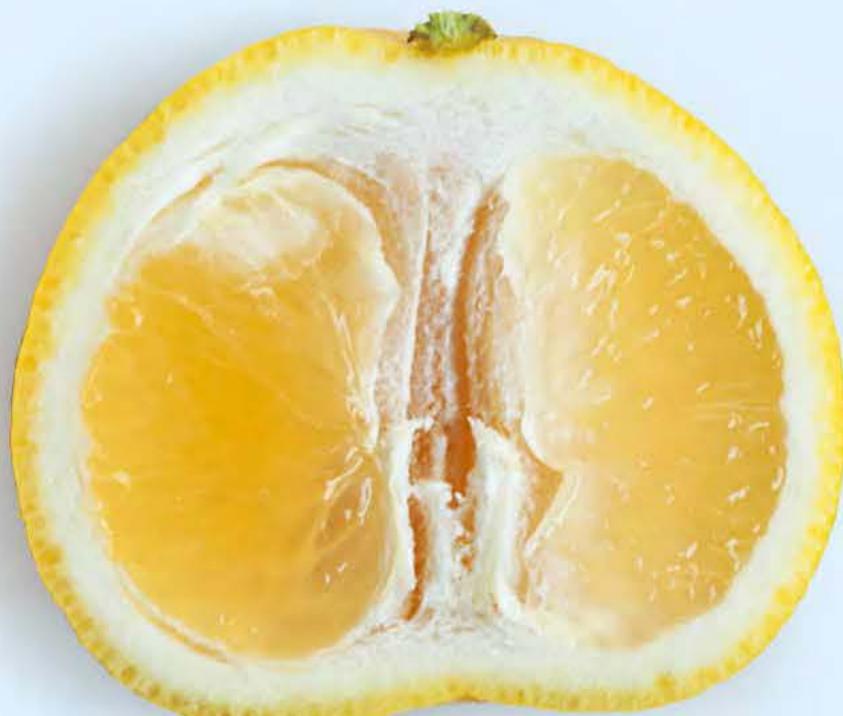
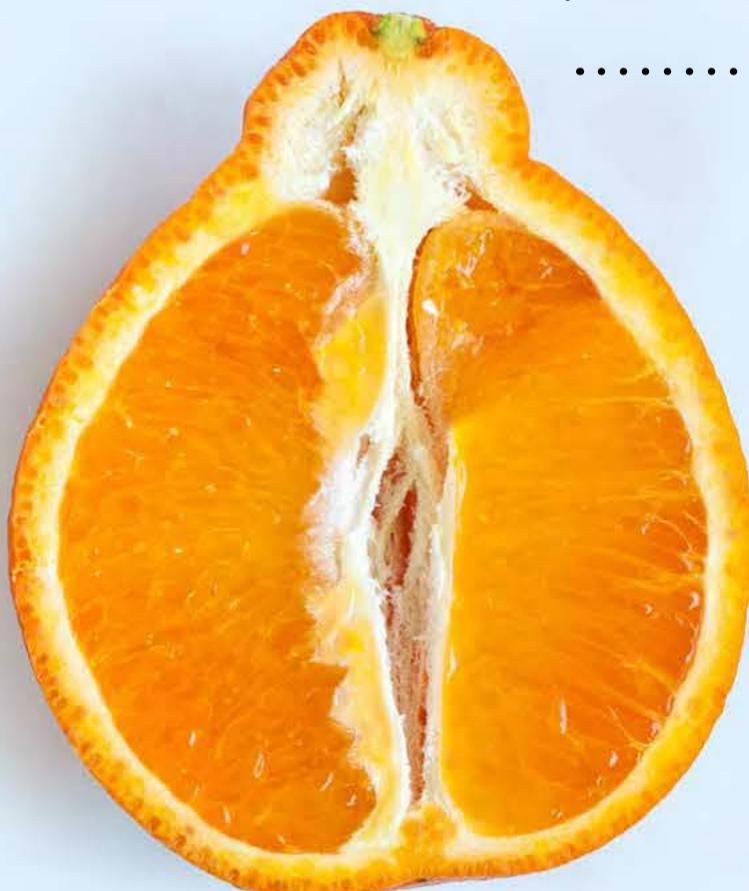
The offspring of various crosses among orange, mikan and ponkan, these expensive fruit appear in Japanese supermarkets around this time of year. Called hallabongs in Korea, they are another Jeju Island speciality. As large as navel oranges, they have rough skin and a prominent “nipple”. They have a light but complex fragrance, no seeds and fat sacs. Their flavour is so concentrated and sugary-tart and juicy that they are practically a soft drink in fruit form.



Citrus: *Unusual hybrids*

Supermarkets are stocking seasonal citrus fruit of unusual or hybrid identity. Look out for these when you are in the produce aisles.

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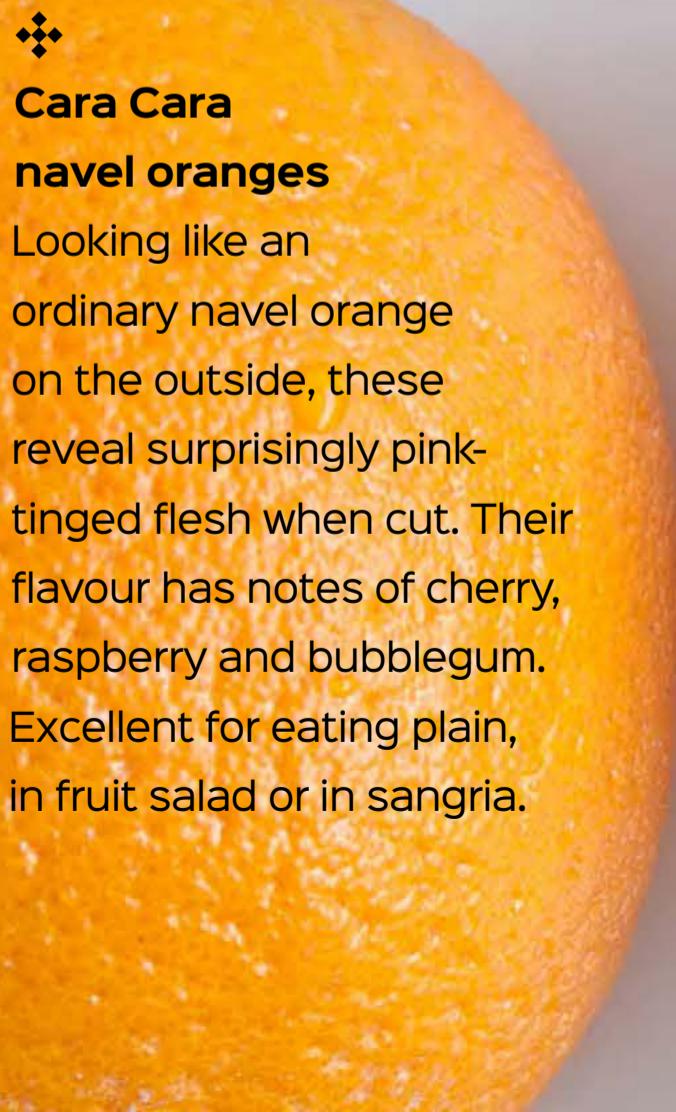




❖ Meyer lemon

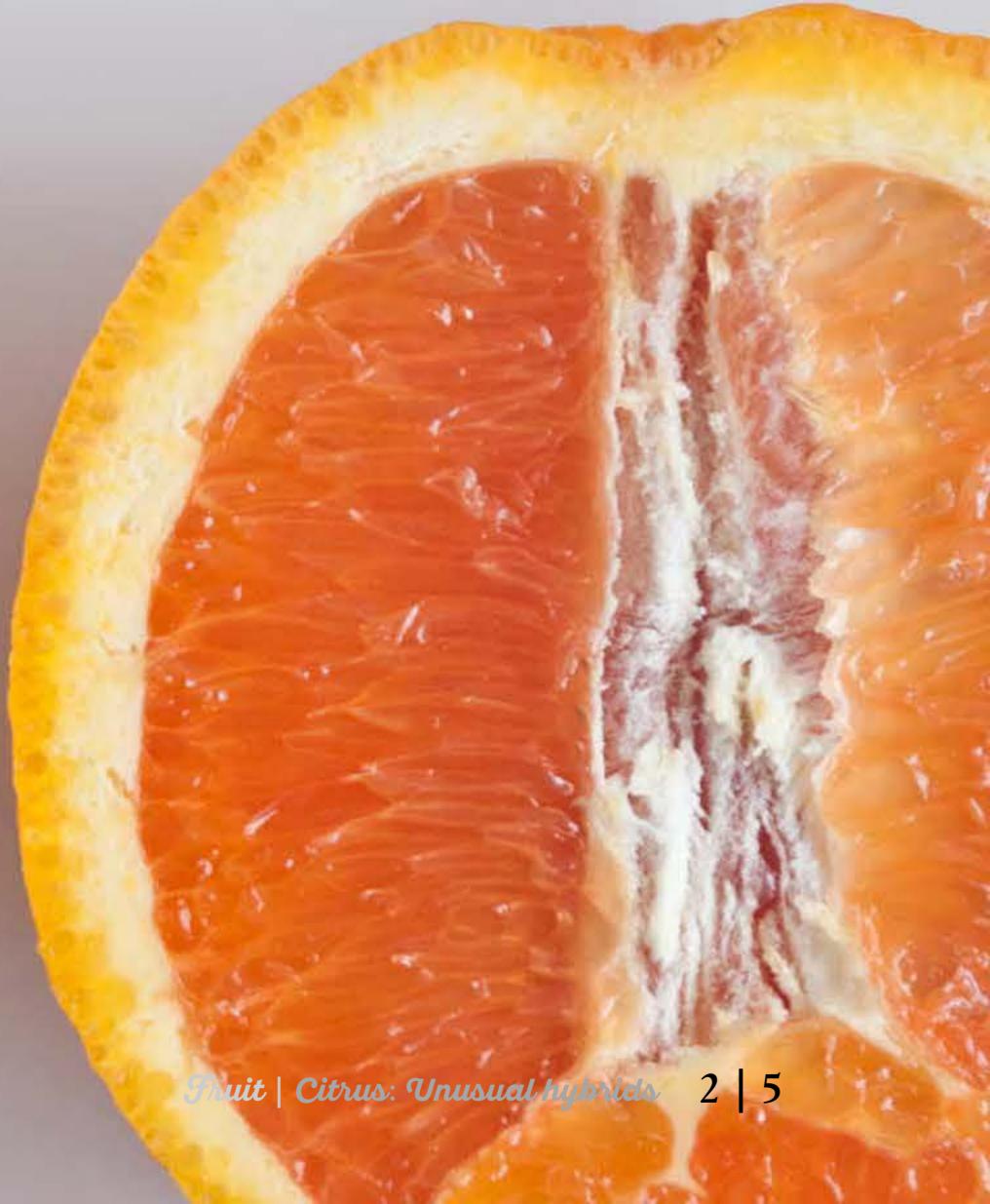
This Chinese fruit has age-shrouded origins, but experts judge it to be a mandarin-lemon hybrid. Looking like a rotund lemon, it has dark yellow skin and flesh when ripe. Tart but sweeter than a regular lemon, it has an orange-blossom note to its aroma.

Think of and use them as lemons with added complexity. Especially good in lemon curd, all kinds of salads and jellies.



❖ **Cara Cara navel oranges**

Looking like an ordinary navel orange on the outside, these reveal surprisingly pink-tinged flesh when cut. Their flavour has notes of cherry, raspberry and bubblegum. Excellent for eating plain, in fruit salad or in sangria.





❖ Blood oranges

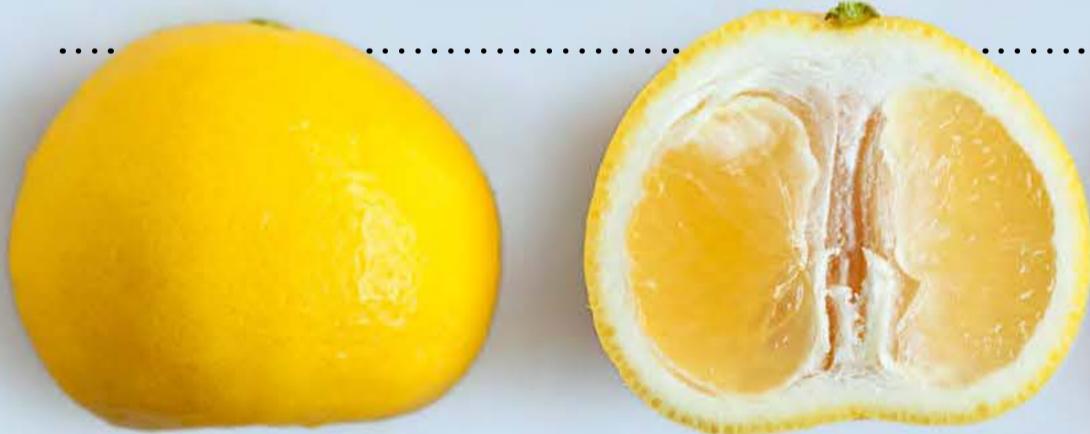
These have a faintly spicy, almost savoury edge that is subtly distinct from a normal orange. External colour is not a good predictor of internal colour. Very red-skinned fruit can have only slightly reddish flesh and vice versa. Moro oranges, the kind most often sold here in season, can have dark red, almost black flesh. Best eaten as is, or in fruit or vegetable salads. Blood orange juice can be used in cocktails, in syrups or glazes for desserts, or simple sauces for seafood.





❖ Dekopon

This Japanese fruit has mikan, ponkan and orange ancestors. It resembles a large, rough-skinned mandarin with a prominent bump at the stem end. Simultaneously intensely sweet and pointedly tart, its wonderfully vivacious flavour will remind you of orange soda in the same way that Kyoho grapes recall grape soda. Expensive, but a little goes a long way. Best enjoyed chilled, and slowly savoured.



❖ Hyuganatsu

These Japanese citrus look like small yellow mandarin oranges. Unusually, they are eaten with zest removed but pith still on: the soft, non-bitter pith is a good foil for the sweet flesh, whose taste conjoins mandarin, grapefruit and lemon. Their zest smells like a grapefruit-lime blend – great for candying or infusing desserts. Muddle slices of unpeeled hyuganatsu in iced tea or cocktails for a liltng fragrance.

❖ Ortanique

This fruit is from a family of hybrids called tangors, bred from tangerines and regular sweet oranges. Sweet and mildly acidic, the juice is not very distinctive in flavour. However the zest has a bright, zingy aroma like orange candy, good for use in cakes, desserts and marinades.





❖ Yuzu

This very popular Japanese fruit is a hybrid of mandarin and wild citrus species. Too seedy and fibrous to be eaten as is, it is valued for its beguiling and pervasive aroma. Both zest and juice have herbal, floral and citrus elements to their scent. Their sparklingly sour juice works well in both sweet and savoury dishes. Korean-grown yuzu, called yuja, are made into a conserve that is stirred with hot water to make a cough and cold remedy.

❖ Minneola

From the family of hybrids called tangelos, crosses of tangerin and pomelo varieties. Recognisable by its “nipple” and bright orange hue. Prime specimens are easy to peel and extremely juicy. Their zest has a uniquely floral, almost rose-like character, their juice a high-contrast balance of sharp and sweet. Best eaten neat, juiced, or made into jelly desserts.



Tomatoes

These fruit have become so ubiquitous and essential to cuisines around the globe that it is impossible to imagine a world without them.

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❖ Cherry tomatoes

Bred and marketed for their small size, punchy flavour and attractive colours, cherry tomatoes often have relatively thicker skins than larger tomatoes and hence keep well. Shown here are yellow toberries, a trademark Dutch cultivar with very juicy fruit the size of large blueberries.



❖ Black tomatoes

Varieties with dusky brown-grey skin and flesh, suffused with red, purple or green. Many originate from America and Eastern Europe. They can have very complex flavours, with umami (savoury) and mineral notes. Shown here is the Kumato, a commercial black tomato cultivar sold at local gourmet supermarkets when in season.



❖ Fruit tomatoes

All tomatoes are fruit, but these red or pink Japanese cultivars are named for their high sugar levels which approach those of melons and peaches. Look for them at Japanese supermarkets.

❖ Red tomatoes

Genetic research has shown that mass-farmed regular red tomatoes bred primarily for their bright colour may end up with the linked trait of lower sugar levels, hence their frequent lack of flavour. Thankfully, tastier red heirloom and commercial types are now more widely available.



❖ Green tomatoes

Unripe tomatoes are mostly green and sour, but some cultivars are green and flavourful when fully ripe, with a balanced tanginess and firm but juicy texture. Shown here is a Green Zebra cherry variety.



❖ Beef/beefsteak tomatoes

Catch-all terms for large tomato varieties that can be thickly cut into large slices. They often have defined lobes, an irregular shape and many internal seed compartments.



❖ Bi-coloured tomatoes

Many heirloom varieties are mottled or striped. Shown here is a Brown Tiger cherry tomato.



❖ Yellow tomatoes

These often, but not always, have a milder flavour and lower acidity than red tomatoes. A pear-shaped cherry variety is shown here.

❖ Plum tomatoes

These thick-fleshed, egg- or oval-shaped varieties are traditionally held to be best for cooking down into sauce or paste. Favoured by producers of canned tomato products. Shown here are Roma tomatoes on the vine.



❖ Vine/truss tomatoes

Sold still attached to their vine, these are hand-picked and handled extra carefully, thus commanding a premium price. Besides the vine's visual appeal, aroma and indication of freshness, its presence does not contribute much to flavour. The plant's genetics, growing conditions and ripeness when picked are still the most important factors.



Commercial vs heirloom tomatoes

All tomatoes originated from a small number of wild South American species. Commercially farmed varieties are usually modern hybrids selected not just for flavour but also traits such as uniformity, fast growth and ability to survive transportation. While there is no single definition of "heirloom", cultivars so labelled typically have long histories or pedigrees, are associated with particular geographical areas or growing traditions, and have a wider range of shapes, flavours and textural nuances.

Choosing and storing

Store tomatoes in a brown paper bag at a cool room temperature. Check frequently to assess ripeness and for signs of spoilage. Refrigerating tomatoes for more than a day or so makes them mealy and bland.

*Herbs &
Spices*

Basil

This uniquely aromatic herb is revered in cultures around the world. Here is a guide.

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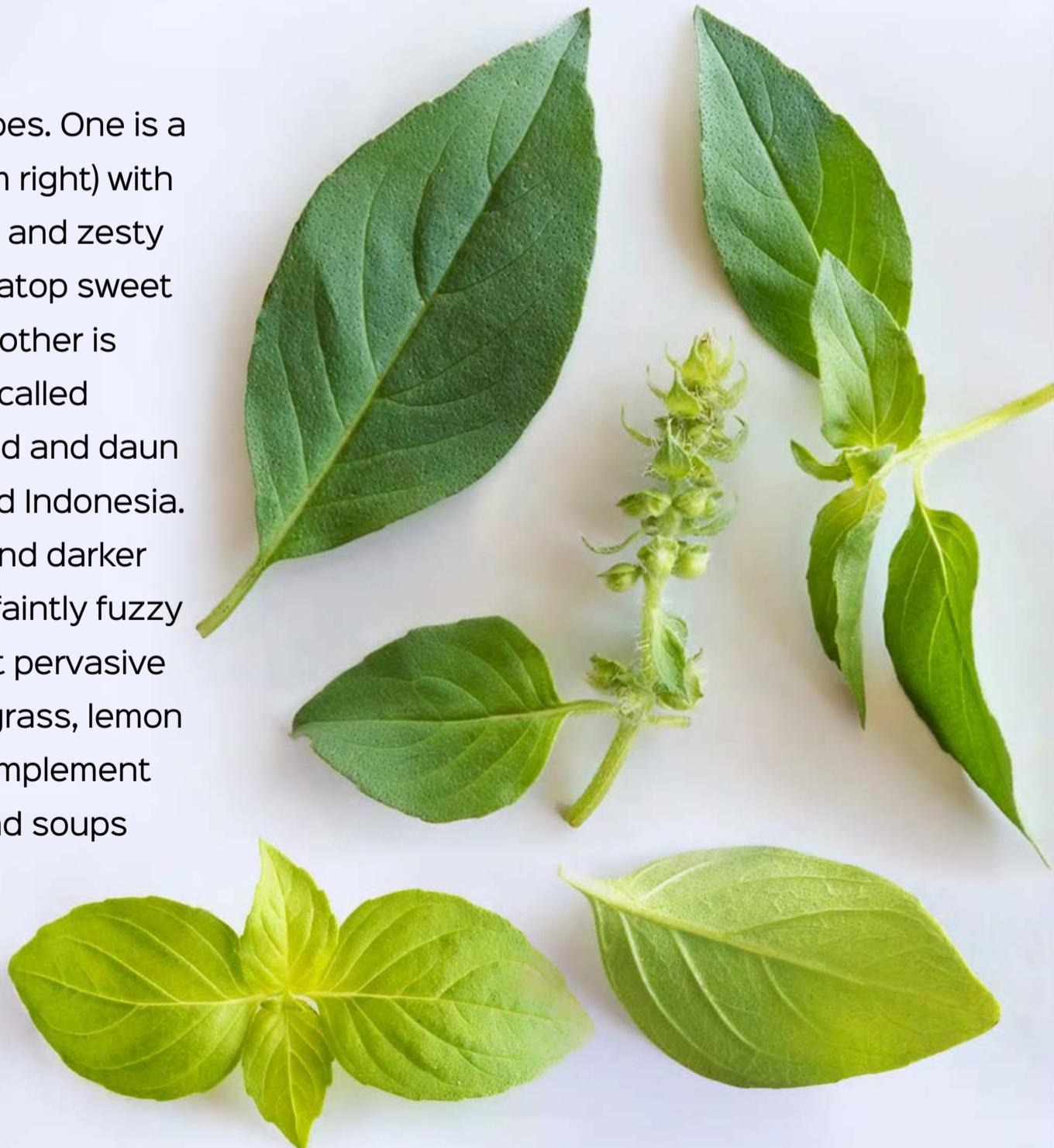


❖ Cinnamon basil

Bearing serrated-edged green leaves on reddish-purple-tinged stems, this plant has a heady cinnamon character besides a sweet basil aroma profile. Its unique fragrance makes it amenable to savoury dishes, such as stews, braises, soups and salads, as well as sweet dishes, such as fruit compotes and salads, ice cream and sauces. Try it in fruity beverages such as sangria or a Pimms Cup.

❖ Lemon basil

Shown here are two types. One is a Western variety (bottom right) with wide, pale green leaves and zesty lemon accents layered atop sweet basil's clove scent. The other is Thai lemon basil (right), called bai maenglak in Thailand and daun kemangi in Malaysia and Indonesia. It has slightly slimmer and darker green leaves, soft and faintly fuzzy stems, and a gentle but pervasive scent hinting at lemongrass, lemon and lime. Both kinds complement seafood, mild curries and soups very well and should be very lightly cooked, if at all.



❖ Holy basil

Called bai krapao in Thai, this is sharp and peppery – hot to the taste when very fresh.

Its piercing aroma, which intensifies when the herb is heated or very lightly cooked, has subtle camphor and allspice notes.

Thai groceries may sell two types. The purple type (right) has dark purple stems and purple-flushed green leaves and is a bit stronger in character. It is a good partner for meats and chilli-hot dishes. The “white” type (bottom right) has green leaves on pale green and pale purple stems, and its slightly milder nature suits white meats and seafood. Called tulsi in Hindi, holy basil has few if any culinary applications in India, but is used for devotional purposes and in traditional Ayurvedic medicine.



❖ Western sweet basil

Also dubbed Mediterranean basil for its popularity across that region. It is most famously used in Italian pesto and as a frequent sidekick for tomatoes and olive oil in various dishes. Many cultivars with different leaf sizes and shapes exist. Shown here is the type most commonly sold here, with fleshy stems and soft, slightly cup-shaped green leaves that can reach 10 to 12cm in length. It has a sweet, almost floral aroma with distinct clove notes. Its aroma changes and is attenuated in the dried herb, becoming more hay-like and less sweet. Fresh sweet basil can be blended into a paste with some oil and frozen in an airtight container for storage.



❖ Purple basil

Several cultivars exist around the world, differing in leaf shapes and shades. Shown here is one with serrated-edged, teardrop-shaped leaves with a purple-green top and grape-purple underside. Purple basil has an assertive sweet basil aroma. Infuse it in white vinegar to obtain a fragrant, purple-tinted condiment.

❖ Thai sweet basil

Called bai horapa in Thai, this has purple stems, green leaves and dark purple flower spikes. It has strong anise and liquorice notes and, when cooked, is more spicy and forward than Western sweet basil. Add to stir-fries, curries, soups and stews right at the end of cooking. It releases its fragrance as it wilts in the heat. In Thailand, it is also eaten raw as part of a vegetable platter served with nam prik relishes. In Taiwan and China, a basil cultivar with a similar aroma profile is used in recipes such as san bei ji (three cup chicken) and also in Hakka dishes such as lei cha, pestle-pounded mixed herb tea.



Storing the herb

Lemon basil and holy basil are fragile and wilt soon after picking, especially in warm conditions, so use them as soon as possible. Swaddle the other types in paper towels, place in plastic bags, gently press out all the air, seal and store in the fridge vegetable drawer for a couple of days. Supermarket potted basil will last for several days if kept well watered, but re-pot it with more compost to keep it going for longer.



Commonly confused herbs & spices

Some spices are often confused with one another because of similar looks or misnamings.
Here is some clarity.

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❖ Cassia and cinnamon

The *Cinnamomum* genus contains closely related tree species with fragrant bark, several of which historically have been labelled “cinnamon” at one time or another.

Ceylon cinnamon is considered the true article. Its soft, tan bark is very thin and rolled up in tight scrolls, and has a sweet, lilting, almost lemony scent. What is very often sold as cinnamon, whole or ground, is really cassia, which is thick, hard, reddish brown, and rolled more loosely. It has a stronger, more forceful aroma, which survives cooking better.

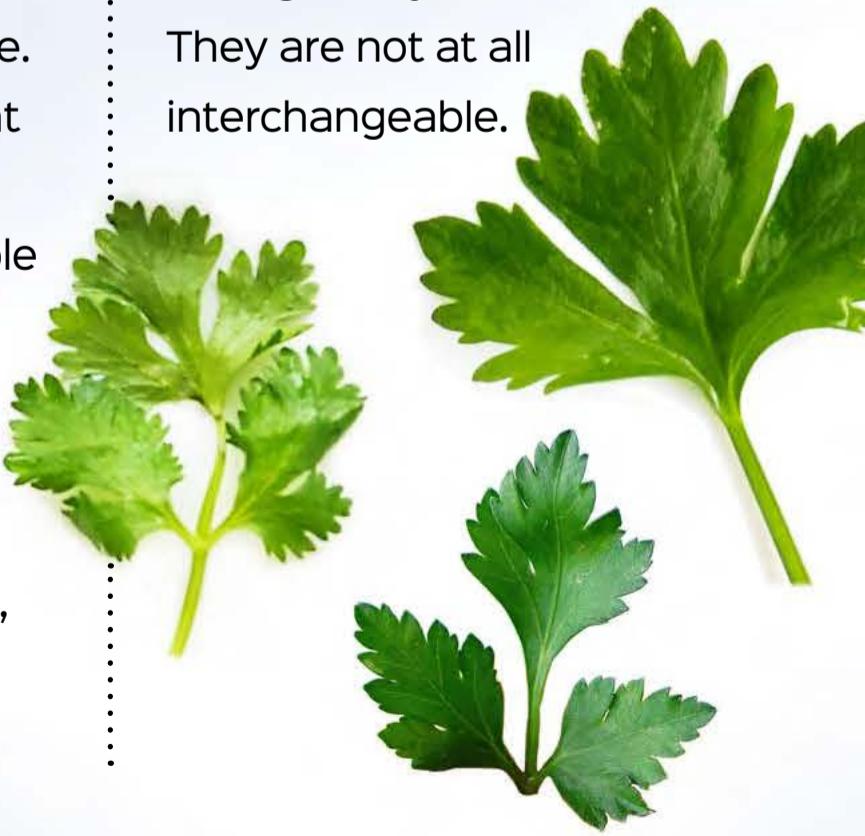
Shown here with top and cross-section views, left to right, are: cassia pieces with bark intact, cassia sticks and true cinnamon.

❖ Coriander, flat-leaf parsley and Chinese celery

These all have similar leaf shapes, and further confusion stems from an old Western name for coriander leaves, Chinese parsley. Coriander (bottom left) has fragile yellow-green leaves and a fresh, sweet and what some have called “soapy” aroma. Flat-leaf parsley (centre) is more blue-green and has a grassy, herbaceous snap.

Chinese celery has large, sturdy leaves on long stems and a strong celery note.

They are not at all interchangeable.





❖ Fennel and aniseed

Some Asian cultures do not distinguish between these spices, notably India, which uses both. In Hindi, they are often lumped together under the name saunf, sometimes with modifiers. Fennel may be called badi saunf (big fennel) or moti saunf (fat fennel), and aniseed called vilayati saunf (foreign fennel), choti saunf (small fennel), or patli saunf (slim fennel).

Fennel (left) is larger and has nutty and hay-like nuances, whereas aniseed (right) is smaller, thinner and has a sweeter aroma clearly similar to star anise. They are interchangeable in small quantities, but not when either is a key flavour. Fennel is more compatible with savoury dishes, aniseed with sweet ones.



❖ Krachai and kencur

Both are called “lesser galangal” by many sources but, in fact, are completely different spices and also distinct from regular galangal (lengkuas or blue ginger).



Krachai (left), also called fingerroot for its unique shape, has a hot, sharp bite, loved by Thais for fierce curries.

Kencur (top right), also called cekur, sand ginger or sha jiang, has a heady aroma combining notes of cinnamon, ginger and white pepper, and is used extensively in Indonesia and south China.

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❖ Cumin, caraway and black cumin

Cumin is usually correctly labelled, but similar-looking black cumin and caraway are often confused for each other in India. Caraway is far more commonly used in Europe than Asia. Cumin seeds (left) are small, spindle-shaped with many fine grooves, and pungent-smelling. Caraway seeds (centre) are long, with fewer but deeper grooves, and a minty note to their fragrance. Black cumin seeds (right) also have deep grooves but are the slimmest of the three, and smell like a sweeter version of cumin. They are not interchangeable.



❖ Saffron and safflower

Both are sources of yellow-orange natural food colours with long histories, but saffron is the world's most expensive spice, whereas safflower is considerably cheaper. Unscrupulous spice merchants still try to pass off whole or powdered safflower as saffron to tourists, who should be alerted by suspiciously low prices.

Saffron consists of the dried stigmas of the saffron crocus flower; safflower, of dried petals from the safflower plant. Seen and sniffed side by side, the differences are obvious.

Saffron (top left) is deep red-maroon, sleek and smells warm, metallic, slightly medicinal. Safflower (bottom left) is orange, untidy-looking, and smells mildly of raisins and tobacco.



Chilli: Powders

Don't sweat the hot stuff: learn about chilli powder varieties in this chapter.
All powders pictured were bought at local supermarkets and stores.

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❖ Red chilli powder

The most common kind sold in local stores and supermarkets is medium to very hot, sharp and biting rather than sweet. Indian shops additionally often carry the deep brick-red, mildly hot Kashmiri chilli powder shown here. The name nowadays refers more to its flavour style than its origin.



❖ Yellow chilli powder

Made from yellow-skinned chillies, these tend to be less ferocious than red or green chilli powders, though still hot. Shown here are pili mirch from India, which has a sweet, toasty aroma and is used in chaats (snacks); and Peruvian aji amarillo, which has a raisin-like bouquet.



❖ Green chilli powder

A modern product, made possible by technology that can dehydrate green chillies without warping their herbal, vegetal flavour. Sharp and very hot, a little goes a long way. Handle with care. Great for making seasoned salt to dust on deep-fried snacks.

❖ Paprika

This can vary from mild to quite hot, but is distinguished by a distinctly sweet, mellow undertone and slow burn. Hungary and Spain (where paprika is called pimenton) are major producers, each country having its own styles and grades.

❖ American chili powder

The spelling difference and a made-in-the-USA indication tell you that this is not pure dried chilli, but a blend of chilli and other spices such as cumin, oregano and such. It is meant for seasoning chili, the Tex-Mex stewed meat dish.

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❖ South American chilli powders

You would expect chilli's home continent to overflow with different kinds of ground dried chillies (spelt "chiles" there), and so it does. Types include ancho (sweet, fruity, woody), guajillo (hints of green tea and fruit), arbol (very hot, sharp) and habanero (extremely hot, tropical fruit nuances). Look for them at speciality shops.

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❖ Cayenne pepper

A pungent, snappy, very hot powder. It is made from one of the first chilli cultivars to reach Europe and other countries after seafarers discovered the New World. Often cited in old British and American cookbooks.



❖ Smoked chilli powders

Ground from chillies dried over wood fires. Popular kinds include Spanish smoked pimenton (right) and Mexican chipotle (smoked jalapeno) powder.



❖ Korean chilli powder (gochugaru)

Sold in large chilled bags at Korean supermarkets, this is chiefly used in kimchi but works well as an all-purpose mild chilli powder. Its bright heat builds quickly but does not linger.

❖ Turkish chilli flakes

These come in many heat levels and subtly varying flavours. Look for them in Middle Eastern speciality shops. They may have a slightly tacky feel from added oil. The best grades are stone-ground and additive-free, and have complex aromas hinting at fruit, tobacco and herbs. Shown here is aci pul biber, coarse-ground and medium-hot with a hint of bitterness; an excellent all-purpose chilli powder.



Storing

Keep chilli powder in an airtight container in a dry, cool place, ideally the fridge or freezer. If it smells musty or sour, throw it out.

Adulterants

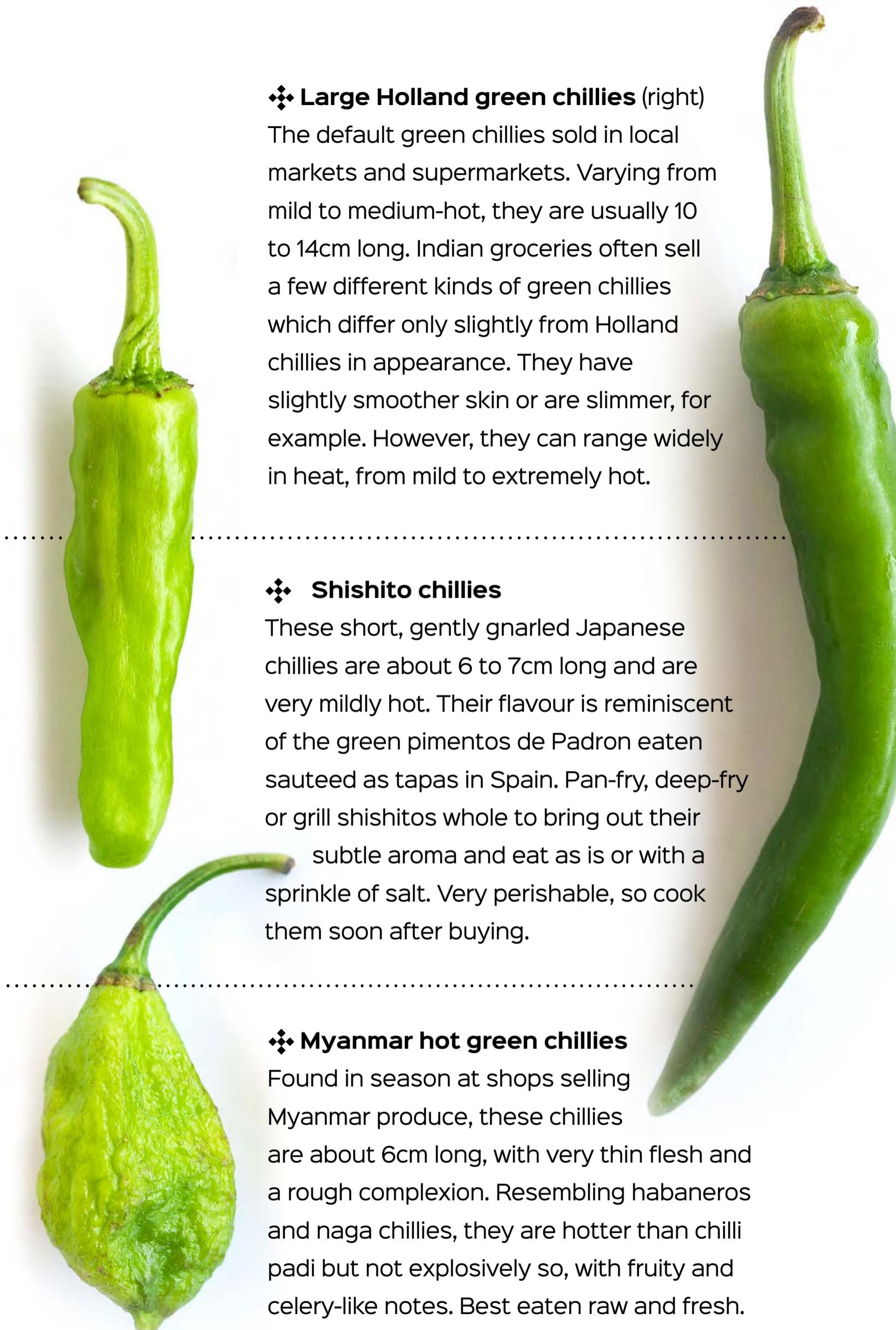
To test chilli powder for adulterants, fill a clear transparent glass with water. When its surface is still, sprinkle a tiny bit of the suspect powder on top of it. Chilli fragments will slowly descend through the water: artificial colouring will leave streaks as it sinks; bulking agents will float or turn the water cloudy.



Chilli: Green

There is more than one shade of green and one level of heat when it comes to these capsicums. Here is a guide to those sold here.

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❖ Large Holland green chillies (right)

The default green chillies sold in local markets and supermarkets. Varying from mild to medium-hot, they are usually 10 to 14cm long. Indian groceries often sell a few different kinds of green chillies which differ only slightly from Holland chillies in appearance. They have slightly smoother skin or are slimmer, for example. However, they can range widely in heat, from mild to extremely hot.

❖ Shishito chillies

These short, gently gnarled Japanese chillies are about 6 to 7cm long and are very mildly hot. Their flavour is reminiscent of the green pimentos de Padron eaten sauteed as tapas in Spain. Pan-fry, deep-fry or grill shishitos whole to bring out their subtle aroma and eat as is or with a sprinkle of salt. Very perishable, so cook them soon after buying.

❖ Myanmar hot green chillies

Found in season at shops selling Myanmar produce, these chillies are about 6cm long, with very thin flesh and a rough complexion. Resembling habaneros and naga chillies, they are hotter than chilli padi but not explosively so, with fruity and celery-like notes. Best eaten raw and fresh.



❖ Jalapenos

With a noticeable sweetness and a sustained heat that ranges from mild to medium, these Latin American chillies are very versatile, if expensive. They have glossy dark green skin and crisp flesh and are best showcased when raw or lightly pickled.



❖ Indian green chilli padi

These slender Kermit-green chillies vary from mild to nearly as hot as Thai chilli padi. They are 7 to 9cm long and are good pickled whole. Look for them at Mustafa Centre and Indian groceries.



❖ Mini green chilli padi

These chillies are short and stubby at 2cm or shorter in length, with blunt tails. They are used in some Myanmar, Laotian and Thai dishes and have a strong, pervasive heat that is more sweet than sharp. Good for condiments and garnishes or nibbling neat along with grilled meats and salads. Look for them in Thai and Myanmar grocery shops.

❖ **Bajji chillies**

These pastel green, only mildly hot Indian chillies are nicknamed after the fritters or bajji that they are popularly made into. Similar cultivars are often called “banana chillies” elsewhere around the world. Fleshy and succulent, they are well suited to being slit and stuffed with fish, meat or masala mixtures and then deep-fried, grilled or poached in curries or soups. They are around 12 to 15cm long and 3 to 4cm wide. Smaller ones can also be pickled in vinegar.





❖ **Piman peppers**

Around 8 to 9cm long and 5cm wide, these Japanese capsicums have thin flesh and skin and a compact core with many seeds. Though they have zero heat, their green-pepper fragrance has an intensity similar to that of a hot green chilli. Best eaten raw, stir-fried or grilled until very lightly cooked.



Choosing and storing green chillies

Select chillies without blemishes or soft

***spots. Their stems should be fresh-
looking, not shrivelled or blackened.***

***Wipe dry, remove stems, place chillies
in a brown paper bag and seal loosely,
then keep in the vegetable drawer of
your fridge***



❖ **Thai green chilli padi**

These are 6 to 7cm long and have a fresh, coolly herbal aroma and a blazing, mouth-filling heat. They are used raw or cooked in dishes wherever intense vegetal heat is required and are essential to green curry paste.

Chilli: Red

Singaporeans love chillies in all their diversity. Here is a guide to locally sold varieties.

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❖ Holland chillies

The large red chillies commonly sold at every wet market and supermarket, named for the country which brought them back from Indonesia for systematic cultivation. Fleshy, 8 to 12cm long, with a mild sweetness and mild-to-medium heat. An all-purpose chilli for cooking, spice pastes and sauces.



❖ Sichuan chillies

Favoured in Sichuan for their steady medium-to-strong heat and complex fragrance, where they are called 'facing heaven chillies', as they grow pointing upwards. Stubby and conical, they are 4 to 5cm long. Only sold dried here, at Chinatown grocery shops. Good quality ones should radiate a sweet, warm aroma as soon as you open the packet. Avoid those which are very dark, limp or dusty.

❖ Gundu chillies

Also called cherry chillies for their small round shape. Only sold dried locally, at Indian stores. Medium to high heat, popularly used in South Indian cuisines.





❖ Chilli padi

Fiery hot, with thin flesh and chewy seeds. Called prik kee noo or “mouse dung chillies” in Thailand, owing to their small size. Shown here (left) are the 3cm-long kind widely sold locally. Smaller types exist. Also shown here are a tiny kind, barely 1cm long, used in northern Thailand and Myanmar, which can be hotter than their larger siblings.





❖ Habaneros and Scotch bonnets

Two different cultivars of the same chilli species. Like all chillies, habaneros originate from South America. They eventually travelled to the Caribbean where growers developed them into Scotch bonnets. Today, habaneros are most identified with Mexico and are usually shaped like rumpled, inverted teardrops, as shown here. Scotch bonnets are squatter, with deeper ridges, resembling their namesake hat. Both chillies are extremely hot, but also have a rounded, pleasant fruitiness to their flavours.



❖ Sweet capsicums

Familiar large red capsicums, also known as bell peppers, have been joined on store shelves by other sizes and shapes of non-hot pods. Shown here is a Dutch red “tinkerbell” pepper, around 5cm from top to bottom, with a firm, crisp texture and juicy sweetness. Also shown here is a long sweet capsicum, shaped much like a Holland chilli, but 20cm long. Chillies of this kind are sometimes called “frying peppers” in the United States, as their smooth, tasty flesh is well suited to sauteeing.





❖ Naga jolokia

From East India, a previous record holder for the world's hottest chilli variety. They are much hotter than habaneros or chilli padi. One single 3cm pod is sufficient to make a large pot of spicy curry serving several people. Traditionally smoke-dried or pickled in India, it is now farmed around the world and is sometimes sold fresh by gourmet supermarkets here. Treat with care.

❖ Piquillo peppers

A chubby conical capsicum with no heat and thick, very flavourful flesh, these are from Spain. They are usually roasted and then marinated or pickled. Look for piquillos at tapas bars, or in cans or jars at gourmet supermarkets. Shown here is a canned piquillo stuffed with seafood mousse.

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❖ Byadgi chillies

A common dried red chilli sold at Indian stores, finger-sized, with medium heat and good colour. Often unnamed, and sometimes mislabelled as “Kashmiri chillies”, which are not easy to find outside India. True Kashmiri dried chillies are broader and less wrinkled, only mildly hot, and look reddish-brown but release a deep red hue when soaked and ground.



Storing

Stems deteriorate and rot very quickly once they get damp, so remove stems from fresh chillies, and keep them loosely bundled in a paper bag in the fridge vegetable compartment. Store dried chillies in airtight containers in a cool, dark cupboard.

Garlic

Indispensable
in the Asian
kitchen, garlic
comes in many
forms and strengths.

Here is a guide to
the most commonly
available types.

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❖ White-skinned garlic

The regular cured garlic sold everywhere for everyday use has white skin and pale ivory flesh with medium pungency. Choose firm heads with unblemished skin and avoid shrunken, soft or brown-spotted ones. Store in an open container in a well-ventilated place at cool room temperature.

❖ Old garlic

Sold locally for use in bak kut teh, this has been grown, cured and matured to yield fat, starchy and particularly pungent cloves. They attain a creamy texture and strong flavour when slow-cooked in their skins.

❖ Pink garlic

Many European garlic types have vivid purple- or pink-tinted skins. Some varieties, typically from France or Spain, are sold at local supermarkets, sometimes labelled as “gourmet garlic” or “rose garlic”. Usually quite strong but also sweet-natured, they are amenable to raw or cooked preparations.





❖ Thai garlic

These cloves are tiny, each one from 5mm to 10mm long, with very thin skins. Very aromatic, they are usually left unpeeled and are lightly crushed or bruised before being added to the wok in Thai stir-fries and other dishes.

❖ Fried garlic

When deep-fried slowly in oil until golden brown, garlic becomes mild and nutty tasting. Ready-made fried garlic is packed dry or immersed in the frying oil, which absorbs enough aroma to become a condiment itself. Shown here is crispy fried Thai garlic, sold in Thai grocery stores. It has a light, almost feathery texture, thanks to the small cloves and their included skins.



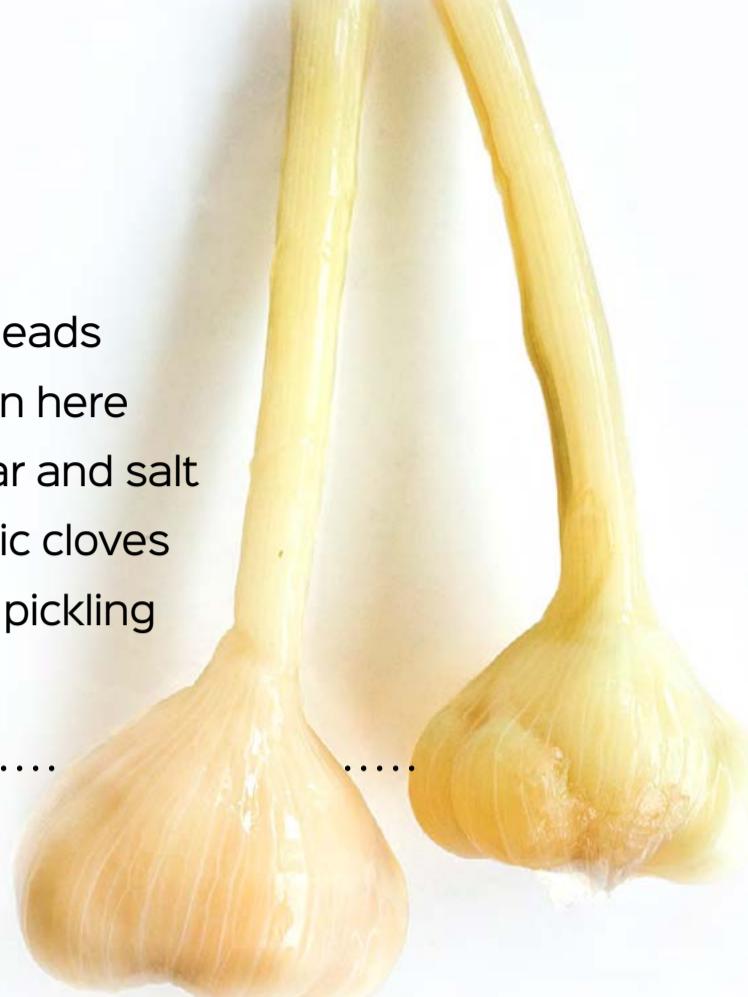


❖ Black fermented garlic

In Korea and Japan, whole heads of garlic are kept in warm and humid conditions for several weeks until their sugars caramelise, turning their flesh black, soft and sticky. Often promoted as a health product, it is a useful culinary ingredient in its own right, with mild pungency, intense and sweet dried-fruit notes as well as a subtle bitterness.

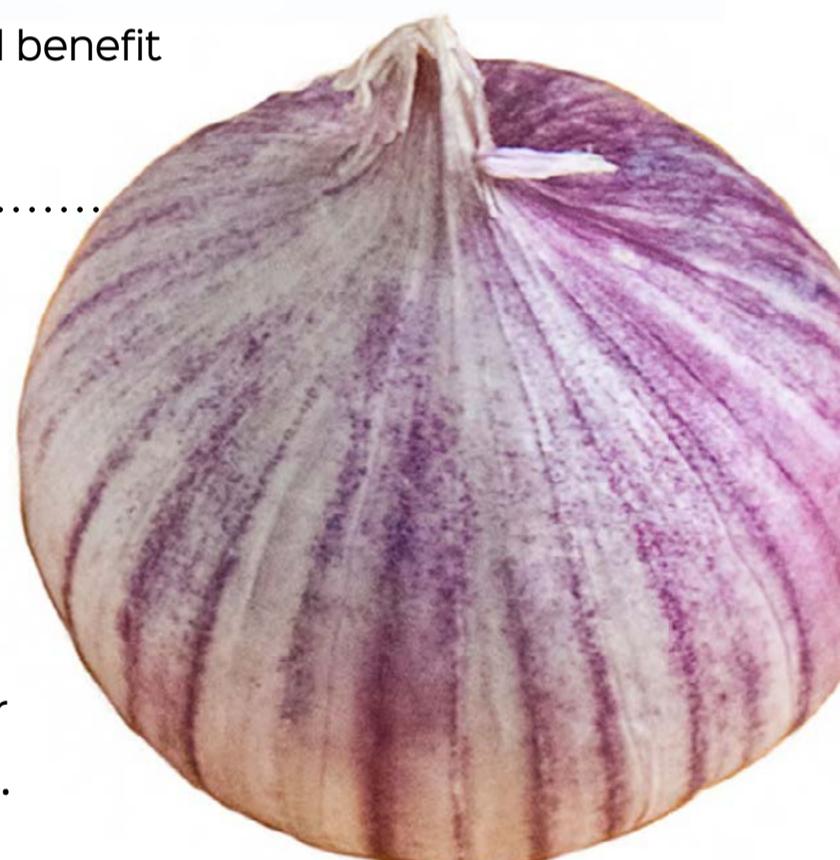
❖ Pickled garlic

Garlic can be pickled in many ways. Whole heads can be preserved with salt or vinegar. Shown here (right) are Thai garlic heads pickled in a sugar and salt brine. Japanese cooks preserve peeled garlic cloves by immersing them in soya sauce, honey or pickling pastes based on miso or rice bran.



❖ Smoked garlic

Occasionally found at wet markets and supermarkets, smoked garlic heads have mottled brown skin and flesh and an earthy fragrance. They are suitable for use in any dish which would benefit from a hint of smoke along with a garlicky aroma.



❖ Fragrant garlic

This stripey-skinned Chinese garlic is grown in warm conditions which prevent the heads from developing into separate cloves – each head is a single, large globe-shaped clove. More headily scented than regular garlic but not as sharp and biting as old garlic, it can be substituted for either of those in any recipe. Look for it in supermarkets.



Curing garlic

To concentrate their flavour and render them stable for long storage, newly harvested garlic heads (left) are usually cured by being air-dried slowly for two weeks or so until their soft skins become papery. The stalks are either trimmed off before packing or woven together to produce a hanging braid of garlic heads.

Ginger

Used and loved by cooks around the world for millennia, ginger has many faces.

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Young ginger

Immature ginger has tender ivory flesh and very thin skin that may be banded with pink. It is faintly hot and gentle, not sharp. Most suited to eating raw or pickling, which turns it a natural pale beige-pink.



Old ginger

As ginger matures, its skin thickens and its flesh becomes more fibrous and more concentrated in the compounds that carry its heat, acidity and bite. Cultivars and subspecies from different countries and climates can have markedly different aroma profiles – India alone has a few hundred types.

Below are some kinds available locally:

❖ Australian ginger

The organic Australian ginger shown here is very firm and dense, with satiny skin and a complex fragrance boasting fresh, powerful notes of lemon and white pepper. Queensland is especially known for its ginger, most of which is crystallised or made into products such as jams and sauces.



❖ Thai ginger

This has a cheerful, rounded, fruity scent with notes of lemon and orange. Use as for Indonesian ginger.



❖ Torch ginger bud

(bunga kantan) (below)

The unopened bud of a ginger species. The spicy-herbal, camphor-like aroma of its pink petals is valued in Peranakan, Malay and Indonesian cuisine. Two kinds are commonly seen in wet markets, one slim and the other more bulbous; their scent is the same. Avoid any with bright red petals and reddish stems – these are not true torch ginger and are much less fragrant.



❖ Indonesian ginger

This has a grey-brown skin slightly darker than regular ginger, and smaller, more rounded lobes. Its sweet, warm aroma, with lemony, fruity citric notes, makes it great for baking, candying, drink syrups and braising with pig trotters and vinegar.

❖ Bentong ginger

Originally cultivated in Bentong in Pahang, this Malaysian ginger is highly prized for its extra pungency and is correspondingly more expensive. It has dusky skin like Indonesian ginger, but otherwise looks like regular ginger. Sporadically available in wet markets here.



❖ Dried ginger

Highly pungent and hot. Frequently used in Indian home kitchen remedies, such as infusions for indigestion or coughs. Very tough and fibrous, and typically pulverised before use.

❖ Mango ginger

This Indian ginger has slim, thin-skinned fingers and a refreshing, pine-tinged aroma uncannily like green mango, hence its name.

Commonly used raw in pickles and relishes. Available in season at Mustafa Centre and Little India.

❖ Myoga ginger bud

Small, sleek buds of a Japanese ginger species, usually eaten raw. They have a delicate crispness and a muted, almost celery-like ginger flavour hiding a back-of-the-throat spiciness. A good garnish for sushi and rich meats.





❖ **China ginger** (left)

The thick, oval lobes of Chinese ginger have mild heat and pungency, with a note of pine. They are often somewhat less mature than other old ginger, with thinner skin and juicier flesh.

❖ **Bentong ginger**

Originally cultivated in Bentong in Pahang, this Malaysian ginger is highly prized for its extra pungency and is correspondingly more expensive. It has dusky skin like Indonesian ginger, but otherwise looks like regular ginger. Sporadically available in wet markets here.



Storing ginger

Buy in small amounts and use up promptly. Store in a well-ventilated place such as a rattan or plastic basket at cool room temperature, away from direct sunlight and heat. For longer storage, keep it in the vegetable drawer of the fridge, in a loosely crumpled brown paper bag or wrapped in paper towels in a resealable bag.

Prepping ginger

The more finely ginger is cut, the more pungency it releases. Grate it finely, a prickle-surfaced ceramic ginger grater works by far the best, for the most punch and for pulp you can squeeze for juice.

Bruised chunks or thick slices go into stocks and stews; thin slices into stir-fries and soups; juliennes into salads, pickles or on steamed dishes; finely minced for adding to minced meat mixtures or infusing syrups and alcohols.

Mustard

Yellow but seldom mellow.
Here is a guide to the different
faces of mustard.

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❖ Ground mustard seed

Two kinds are commonly sold locally, both shown here. The first is coarsely ground, with visible flecks of husk, available in Indian groceries and used in masala mixtures. The second is super-fine English mustard powder, used in table condiments and as a seasoning.



❖ Mustard oil (left)

Cold-pressed from the seeds, this gold-amber oil is rich in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids, including some omega-3 and omega-6. Its strong aroma is reduced when heated, but so is its nutritional value. Traditionally used in cooking and pickling in many Indian regional cuisines, especially Bengali, it also has a long history of use in Russia, for frying and general cooking. However, it is not considered fit for consumption in the US and other Western countries, as the erucic acid it contains has produced negative results in animal testing.

❖ White mustard seeds

These are similarly round and small, but off-white to pale buff-yellow in hue, and less pungent. Sometimes labelled “yellow mustard seeds” but they are seldom found here.

❖ Black and brown mustard seeds

The tiny spherical seeds are either a velvety black or a rich dark brown. Black mustard is slightly more pungent but the two are otherwise very similar. However, practically speaking, almost all of what is sold labelled as “black mustard seed” is really brown mustard, as the latter crop is much easier to harvest and is far more widely grown.



❖ French mustards

The three oldest types are: sharp and pungent Dijon, made originally with vinegar or verjuice but nowadays often with white wine; Bordeaux, slightly sweet and often containing grape must (wine grape juice); and Meaux, a mild mustard nubbly with whole seeds. Regional and modern variations may be flavoured with everything from shallot to blackcurrant.

❖ Scandinavian mustards

Typically sweet and mild to medium in heat, often flavoured with honey and herbs.



Prepared mustard and pungency

Prepared mustard is made by mixing the cracked, crushed or ground seeds with water and seasonings. The seeds contain sulphur compounds and an enzyme called myrosinase. When liberated in the presence of moisture, the latter acts on the former, turning them into isothiocyanates, which give mustard its bite and flavour. Myrosinase is deactivated by heat or by the addition of vinegar, which is how the strength of prepared mustard is controlled.



❖ German and Bavarian mustard

German mustard ranges from medium to quite hot, with a balanced, rounded flavour that makes it a versatile ingredient. Bavarian-style mustard (above) from the south of the country tends to be sweeter and milder.

❖ American mustard

(right)

This quintessential hot dog and burger condiment is usually mild, and characteristically tinted bright yellow with turmeric.



❖ Alcoholic mustards

Some European mustards are flavoured with beer, wine or liquors such as whisky, for added complexity.

❖ English mustard

Hot and aggressive, classically made up from powdered mustard and water only, with no acidity to tame it. Modern English condiment companies now make a wide range of flavoured and spiced mustards.

❖ Japanese mustard

Called karashi in Japanese, this fierce mustard is sold in squeeze tubes and traditionally accompanies shumai, tonkatsu and oden (yong tau foo's Japanese cousin). Some varieties are spiked with horseradish or other seasonings.



Tamarind

A sour cornerstone of Asian cuisines, tamarind is used in many forms.

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❖ Dried sweet tamarind

This Thai cultivar has been bred for more sweetness and less intense sourness. Sun-dried until its pods become brittle and its pulp slightly dry for easy shelling and less messy eating, it is usually sold whole in bags and is eaten au naturel as a snack.



❖ Tamarind pulp

The sticky brown pulp found inside ripe tamarind pods is rich in sugars, pectin and organic acids, chiefly tartaric acid, which together give it its characteristic rounded and fruitily sour character. Shown here is the regular wet tamarind pulp commonly sold in packets locally and a drier type from Mysore, India, which includes the pods' inner seed husks.

These are typically kneaded or blended with water to produce tamarind liquid that is then strained before use. Check the label to see if salt has been added. Once a packet has been opened, only touch it with clean hands or utensils and store in a resealable bag in the fridge, where it will keep indefinitely.



❖ Candied tamarind

Whole shelled pods can be cooked in sugar syrup until they become succulent and translucent. Ripe tamarind pulp can also be mashed and/or cooked down with sugar, salt and sometimes chilli, and formed into chewy tidbits. This type of candy is enjoyed in Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.



❖ Tamarind sauces

Perhaps the most famous tamarind-spiked condiment is Anglo-Indian Worcestershire sauce. Indian and Filipino grocery stores frequently stock different ready-made tamarind sauces, which may be runny, ketchup-thick or chutney-like. Shown here is a thin Indian tamarind sauce used for chaats and snacks, usefully packed in a squeezable pouch.



❖ Tamarind powder

Pulverised dried tamarind pulp. This is useful for marinades, sauces, rubs and seasoning mixes where a hit of sourness is wanted without added moisture. Store in a cool, dark place, but not in the fridge.



❖ Tamarind leaves

These are used in both traditional cuisines and medicine systems around the world. Tender young leaves, which are only slightly sour, can be eaten in salads, lightly cooked as a vegetable or pickled. In East India, they are often cooked with dhal and sometimes with mutton. Elsewhere in Asia, they are used as a foil for seafood in soups and other dishes.

❖ Tamarind beverages

Virtually all tamarind-using cultures make refreshing beverages out of it, from the Middle East to Latin America and Asia. These can be as simple as strained and sweetened tamarind liquid served over ice or processed, carbonated and canned like other soft drinks. Bars and mixologists are also seizing upon tamarind as a promising cocktail and artisanal drink ingredient.

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❖ Green tamarind

Fresh immature pods, whose pulp is pale green and very tart, are used as a souring agent in some Asian cuisines, for example in Filipino sinigang soup. The pods are boiled until they have softened, then mashed into the cooking liquid before it is strained, yielding a base sour broth. South Indian cooks make chutneys from green tamarind pulp.

❖ Tamarind concentrates

Cleaned pulp processed with water to various degrees of concentration, depending on the brand. They may be very thick and spoonable, or more liquid. Again, they may contain added salt, so read labels carefully.

Shown here is a Thai concentrate of pourable consistency, very useful for salad dressings or sauces. Keep refrigerated once opened.





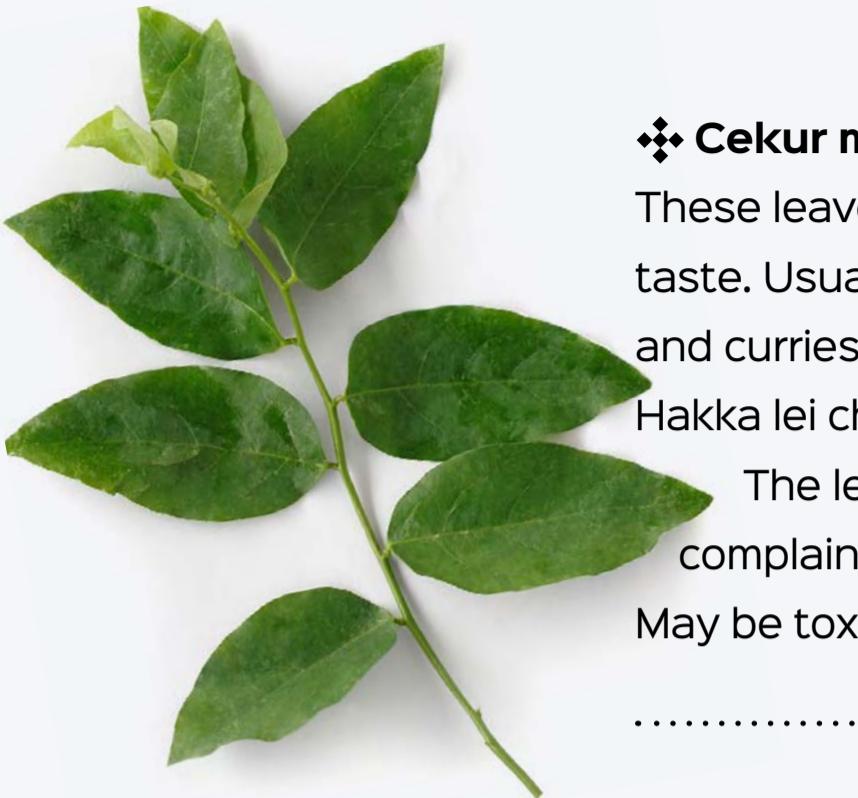
Ulam

These are used in both traditional cuisines and medicine systems around the world.

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Elsewhere in Asia, they are used as a foil for seafood in soups and other dishes.

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❖ Cekur manis

These leaves have a faintly sweet, almost pea-like taste. Usually eaten blanched or cooked in soups and curries. They are also used in some versions of Hakka lei cha fan (green tea and mixed herb rice).

The leaves and roots are used to treat several complaints, from fever to low lactation. May be toxic if eaten in excess.

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❖ Sand ginger leaves/daun cekur

Used in nasi ulam, kerabu and seafood dishes, these fleshy leaves are scented with pepper, cinnamon and citrus nuances. Cekur leaves and rhizomes are used in jamu medicine to treat aches, pains and inflammations of many kinds.

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❖ Wild pepper leaves/daun kaduk

Shiny and heart-shaped, they are sometimes wrongly identified as betel leaves. Cooking brings out their pungent, slightly cheese-like aroma. Considered good for treating coughs, fevers, flu, rheumatic ailments and aches.





❖ **Asian pennywort/daun pegaga**

Two subspecies commonly sold as pegaga are shown here: one has kidney-shaped, scallop-edged leaves, while the other has parasol-like round leaves. Both taste grassy and slightly bitter and have similar properties. A cooling, antioxidant-rich herb, pegaga is used across Asia to treat many complaints, especially skin-related problems. Usually eaten raw.

❖ **Laksa leaves/daun kesum (right)**

The flavour of these slim leaves blends coriander and lemongrass with a spicy kick. Widely used not just in laksa but also in many South-east Asian cuisines, they help to balance rich and fatty ingredients. Good for indigestion and rich in antioxidants. Use promptly as they dry out and wilt quickly.



❖ **Cosmos leaves/ulam raja**

Slightly chewy leaves which partner very well with sambal and other herbs, their snappy, refreshing taste hints at green mango and green apple.

Thought to cleanse the blood, they are also rich in antioxidants.



❖ Noni/daun mengkudu (right)

Young noni leaves are glossy, chewy and bitter. Both the leaves and strong-smelling noni fruit are used in folk remedies for menstrual problems, diabetes, gastric and bowel issues and many other complaints. Noni is high in potassium and may interact with hypertension medication. It may also affect liver function if eaten in excess.

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❖ Mint/daun pudina

Used in nasi ulam and kerabu and to garnish or accent many other dishes. The leaves' shape, colour, texture and aroma strength can vary quite a bit across different mint varieties. The kind most commonly sold locally has soft, rather fragile leaves and a clean minty scent.

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❖ Turmeric leaves/daun kunyit

Soft but fibrous, these have a cool, citrusy aroma and can grow up to 50cm long. Used in nasi ulam, kerabu, otah-otah, curries and steamed dishes, they compliment coconut and seafood flavours.

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❖ Sweet Asian basil/daun selasih

Added to nasi ulam, kerabu and curries for its sweet, calming clove-like scent. Thought to be good for indigestion, respiratory ailments, fevers and menstrual problems, it has antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.

To find out more: The National Parks Board (www.nparks.gov.sg) and the Malay Heritage Centre (www.malayheritage.org.sg) occasionally conduct talks and demonstrations on ulam vegetables and herbs. Consult their websites for details.

fish

A close-up photograph of a cylindrical tin can filled with anchovies in oil. The lid is removed, revealing the dark, silvery-brown anchovies submerged in a golden-yellow oil. The tin has a dark, reflective lid and a light-colored body.

Anchovies

Here is a guide to
small fish with a large
significance in cuisines
worldwide.



❖ Fresh anchovies

Highly perishable, which is why processed anchovy products are much more commonly sold than the raw fish. Their oily flesh is far milder in flavour than the cured or dried incarnations. Shown here are fresh Black Sea anchovies, prized in Turkey for their rich meatiness.

❖ Anchovy condiments

Many condiments are based on fermented or cured anchovies, such as South-east Asian fish sauces, Worcestershire sauce, Malaysian budu and other similar Asian fermented fish pastes.

❖ Anchovy pate

A savoury spread made from fresh or cured fish, often extended with another ingredient such as potato or cream cheese, or another fish such as tuna.



❖ Niboshi

Japanese dried anchovies, sold in Japanese supermarkets, which may also be labelled "iriko" or "sardines". They are often sweeter and less salty than ikan bilis, albeit more expensive. Mainly used in stocks like ikan bilis, their heads and guts must be removed first. They are then typically soaked in water for several minutes, then simmered briefly in their soaking water to make a light stock.

❖ Salt-packed anchovies

Whole fish cured in salt and packed in their salt coating. These are hard to find outside Europe. You may find them in gourmet stores or online. Before use, they should be rinsed and then briefly soaked in water or milk to reduce their saltiness.



❖ Anchovy paste

Pureed salted anchovies, often with added oil, frequently sold in a squeezable tube as a convenient alternative to canned anchovies. Some anchovy pastes, such as Gentleman's Relish from the United Kingdom, are additionally seasoned to be used as a spread on toast and in sandwiches.

❖ Oil-packed anchovies

The most common supermarket format of Western preserved anchovies, these salt-cured fish have had excess salt removed before being canned or jarred in oil. Usually available whole or filleted. Very soft, they readily dissolve when sauteed or simmered with other ingredients.



❖ Ikan bilis

Small dried anchovies widely available locally, usually graded by size and quality, and sold whole, as shown here, or gutted and filleted. They vary widely in flavour quality and saltiness, and are thus best bought from dry goods specialists, whose staff can advise you on the specific kitchen uses of different grades and sizes.

❖ Cooked anchovy products

Besides their use in stocks and soups, dried anchovies are also commonly fried or sauteed for use in side dishes, sambals and snacks across Asia. Shown here is a crispy Thai anchovy snack with lime leaf, chilli, sesame and fried peas.



❖ Vinegar-cured anchovies

Raw anchovy fillets marinated in vinegar and seasonings until “cooked” and firmed by the acid. Often sold at gourmet shops, drained and packed with olive oil, as shown here. Known as boquerones in Spain, where they are a popular tapas item.

❖ Anchovy stock products

Ikan bilis stock cubes and granules are familiar local pantry staples, and Japanese and Korean supermarkets have their own versions. Shown on



the left is powdered Korean anchovy stock.



The anchovy family

A large and global one, though only a handful of species are commercially fished. Anchovies are distinctly separate from the sardine and herring family, though species are often confused on food labels.



Fish & seafood roe

Seafood roe is a delicacy and festive treat in many culinary cultures. Here is a guide to the most common kinds seen here.

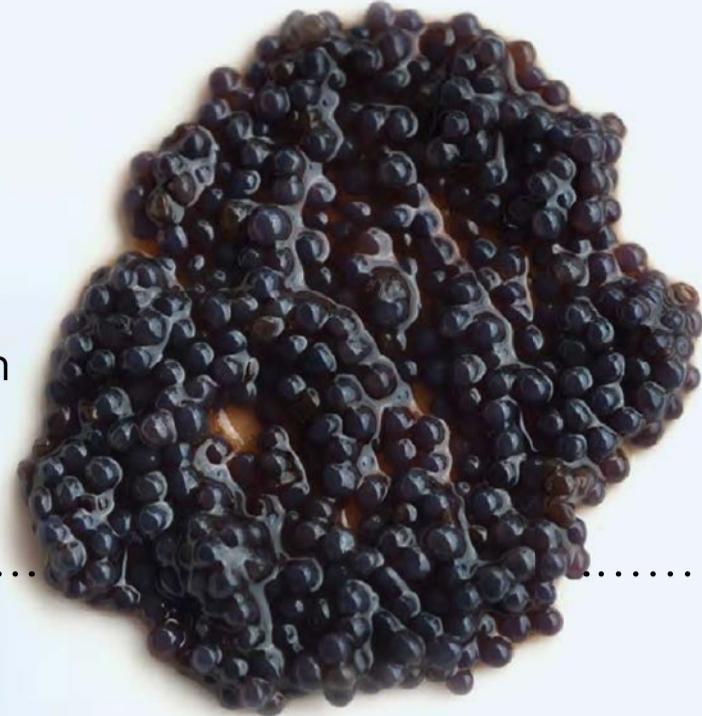
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❖ **Salmon and trout roe**

Similarly rich and oily in flavour, but different in size, salmon roe (left) and trout roe (right) pop in the mouth. They are briefly cured with salt and used in both Asian and Western cuisines to add colour, texture and richness to dishes. Japanese salmon roe is sometimes marinated with soy sauce.

❖ Capelin roe

This tastes similar to tobiko, but has a finer, softer mouthfeel as the eggs are extremely small. It is sold in jars and sometimes dyed in various colours. Black is shown here.



❖ Cured mullet roe

This dried, pressed roe of the mullet species has many names around the world – bottarga (Italy), karasumi (Japan), wuyuzi (Taiwan), tarama (Turkey) and avgotaraho (Greece). Salty and strong-flavoured, it is usually eaten thinly sliced, shaved or crumbled. Shown here is sliced Turkish tarama. The yellow rim is beeswax, in which the whole roe is coated for protection during storage.



❖ Mentaiko and tarako

Cured pollock roe or tarako is typically seasoned only with salt, while mentaiko is also flavoured with chilli. Edible as is or lightly cooked, both taste intensely savoury and partner well with carbohydrates such as pasta, potatoes and rice.



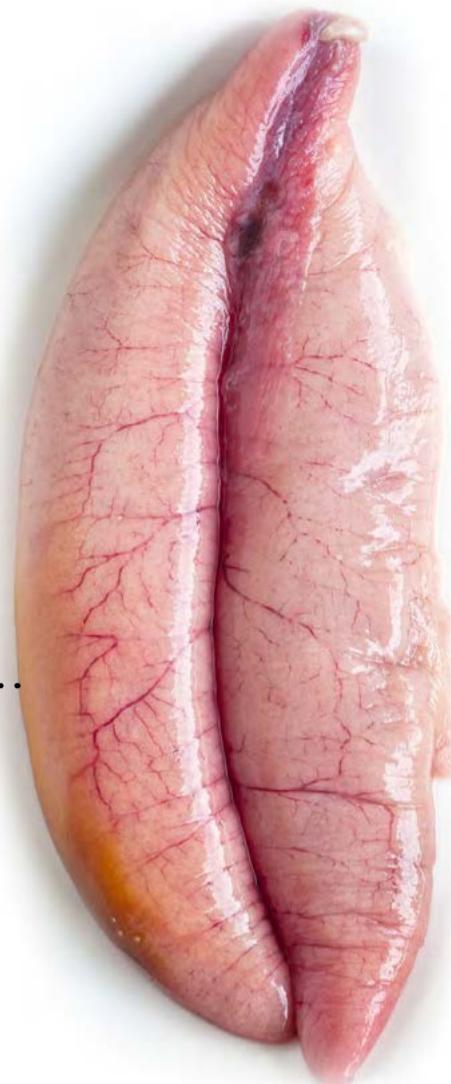
❖ Herring roe (kazunoko)

This pale yellow roe is an essential part of jubako or Japanese New Year tidbit assortments. It symbolises the blessing of many children. It is sold plain or seasoned, and is sometimes used in salads.

When eaten in strips or small pieces, it is flexible and springy, with a resilient, grainy mouthfeel.

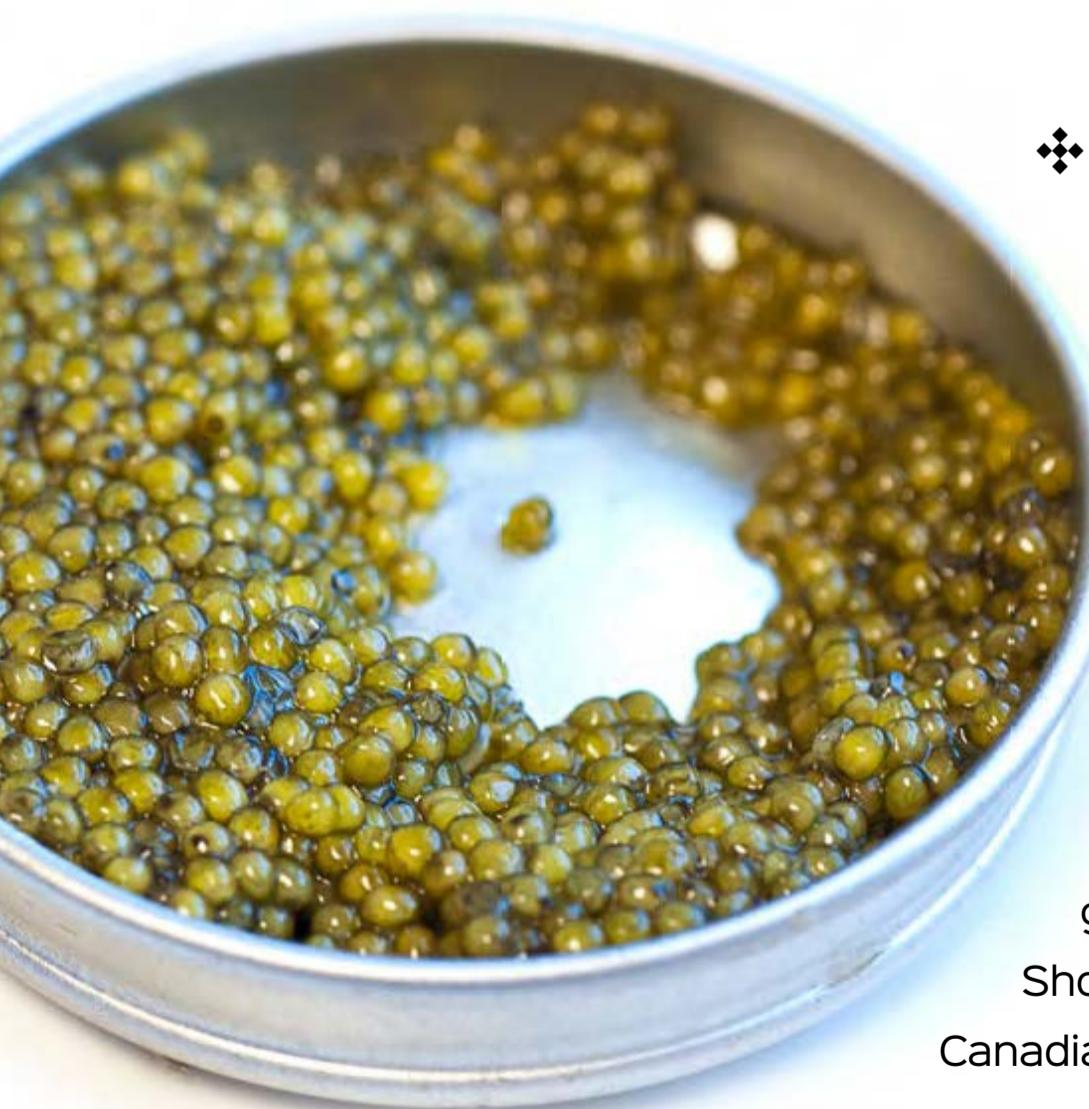
❖ Fresh roe (right)

Found in whole fish, and occasionally packed and sold separately by fishmongers and larger supermarkets, fresh roe is soft and fragile. It can be pan-fried (prick it first to prevent bursting), poached or cooked in curry gravy. Whole squids occasionally contain white roe sacs, which can be cooked similarly.



❖ Flying fish roe (tobiko)

A fine, firm-textured roe often seen in supermarket sushi selections. Naturally golden-orange, it is sometimes tinted green and flavoured with wasabi or dyed other colours for garnishing purposes.



❖ Sturgeon caviar

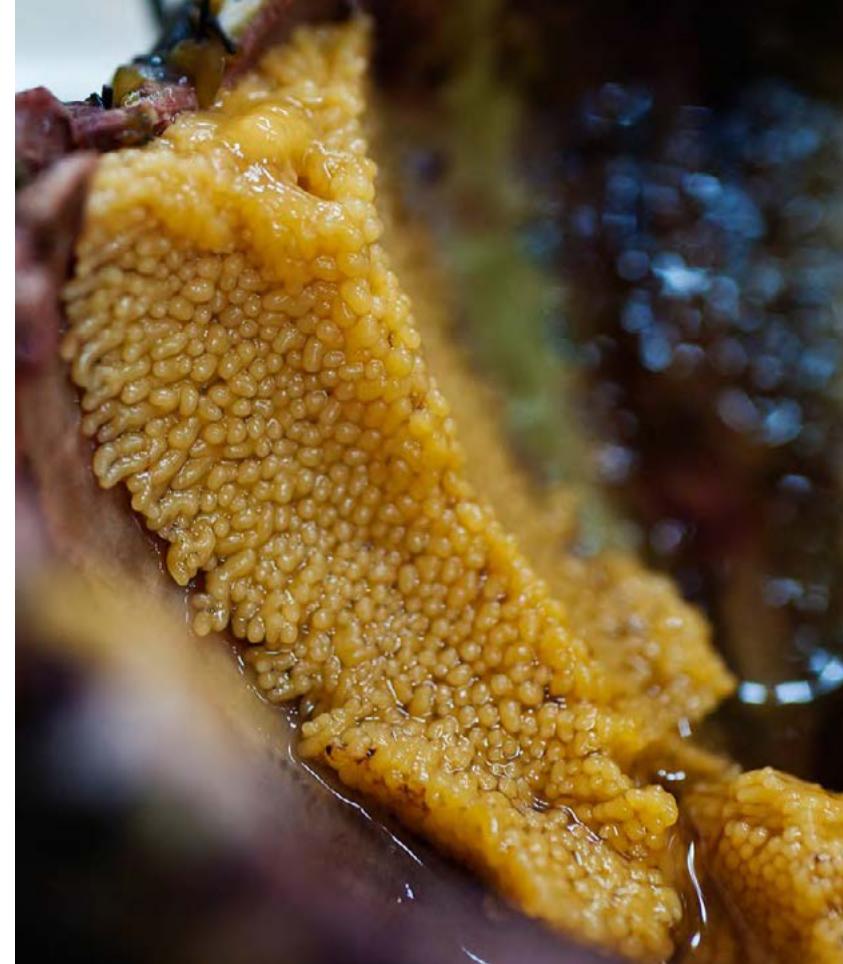
The most pricey of roe, from various species in the sturgeon family. Beluga, ossetra, sevruga and sterlet caviar are the most prized kinds. Caviar is traditionally eaten with mother-of-pearl spoons because metal ones are said to spoil the buttery, nutty flavour nuances of the soft eggs. They can be silvery-grey, golden-green or black in hue.

Shown here is golden caviar from the Canadian sturgeon.

❖ Sea urchin roe (uni)

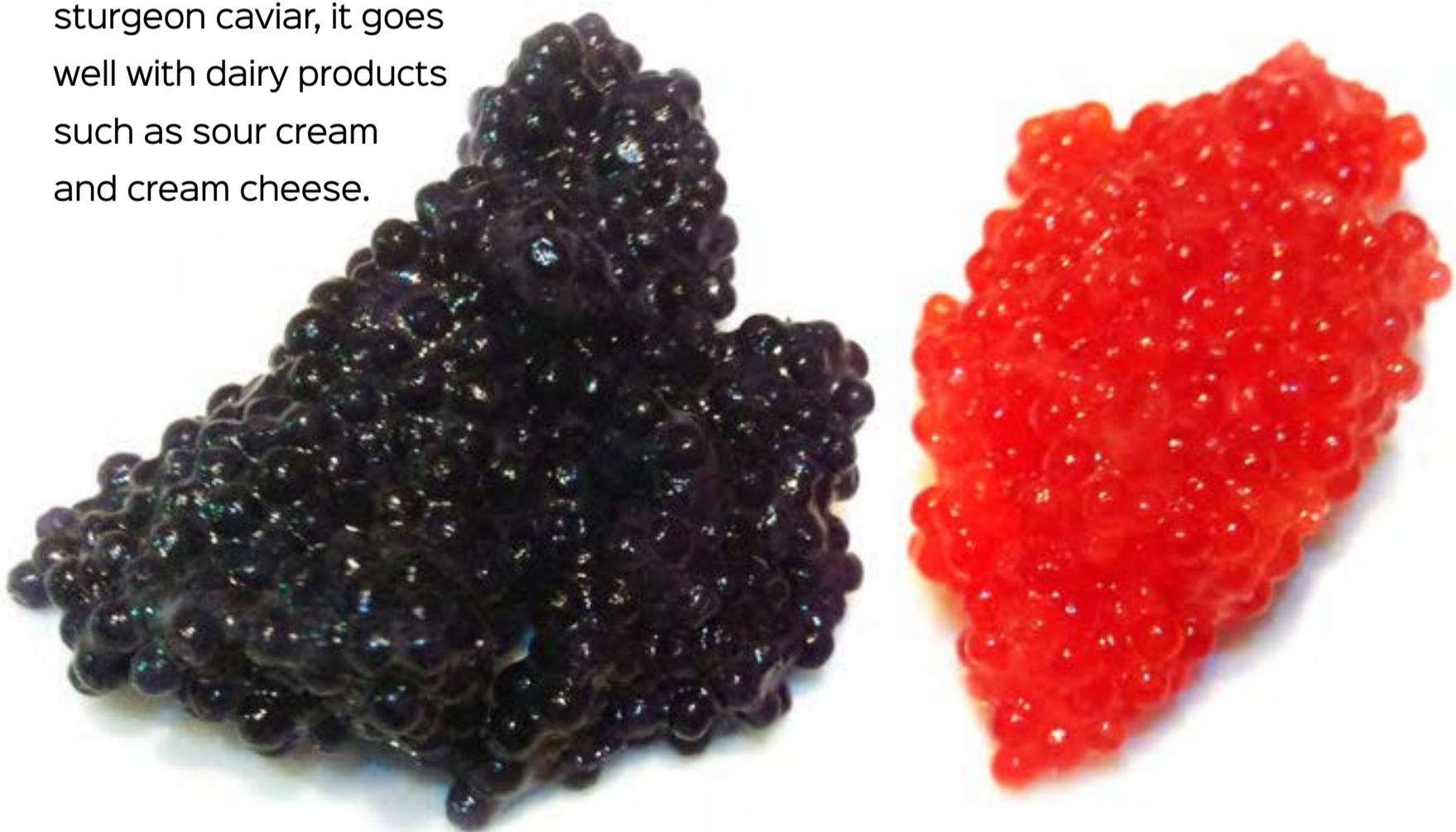
These ochre-coloured roe are actually the sea urchin's gonads, arrayed in five strips on the inside of its shell. Shown here is one in situ. The roe is enjoyed in many coastal cuisines around the world. It is creamy, soft, highly perishable and best eaten straight from the source.

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❖ Lumpfish roe

These are eggs from a fish family found in northern ocean waters. Popular in Scandinavian cuisine, the roe is often dyed red or black, and it has a mildly salty, somewhat generic fish taste. Like sturgeon caviar, it goes well with dairy products such as sour cream and cream cheese.





Salmon

This most popular fish has a few different faces. Here is a guide to locally available salmon types.

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❖ Atlantic salmon

Famously starring in nature documentaries as it leaps upstream along rivers, its Latin name is *salmo salar*, or “jumping salmon”. Good for almost all culinary uses from sashimi to smoking. Shown here are two different samples of Norwegian-branded farmed Atlantic salmon to illustrate how much it can vary. The paler piece (below) has much less visible fat but a deeper, more buttery flavour and is more suited for poaching, steaming or baking. The brighter-coloured piece with thick, fat bands (right) – a typical supermarket sample – is more bland and releases a lot of oily juice during cooking. This would be better for pan-frying, roasting or grilling, which melts off more of its slightly fishy-tasting fat.





❖ King salmon

Also called chinook salmon. This has a tender but meaty texture and very clean flavour, tasting of the sea without being “fishy” and rich without being cloying.

Excellent for all cooking methods, it deserves its name. It is native to the Pacific, but is now farmed elsewhere. The sample shown is from New Zealand.



❖ Salmon trout

Also known as rainbow trout or steelhead, this fish species is salmon’s close cousin. Its flesh looks very similar to salmon but is slightly finer and smoother in texture, and lighter-tasting. Well-suited for pan-frying, grilling and roasting, which concentrate its flavour.



❖ Sockeye salmon

A Pacific species with fine, dense flesh that has an eye-catching vermillion hue. It is also called red salmon. It has a slightly stronger taste than other varieties. If it has little visible fat, such as the wild sample shown here, poach it gently in butter or rich stock, or steam it to ensure it does not dry out.

❖ Salmon roe

Salmon roe packed in jars has usually been cured with a little salt. The Japanese distinguish between sujiko, roe sold still in its encasing sac; and ikura, naked salted roe. The former is typically cheaper as the burden of washing and preparing it falls to the cook. Egg size and flavour varies

slightly between species. The roe shown here, from a sustainably-fished wild Alaskan source, has very large eggs and an assertive taste.



❖ Sashimi salmon

As the freshwater stage of its life cycle can expose salmon to parasites, it never used to be a traditional fish for sushi and sashimi. Modern handling, processing and inspecting techniques can now select prime specimens safe for raw consumption, which are hence also more expensive.

❖ Pink salmon

A small salmon species with mild-flavoured and lean flesh, most often encountered here in cans and sometimes as smoked salmon. Use in croquettes and potato salads.



Wild vs farmed salmon

Many wild salmon populations are in decline. All salmon sold here is farmed unless explicitly labelled "wild". Farmed salmon get their fat stripes from rich formulated feed. Wild salmon are leaner from a more active lifestyle. Both fish get their colour from the same pigment compounds, albeit via different sources – a diet of naturally reddish crustaceans for wild salmon, and manufactured pigment added to the feed for farmed salmon. Farmed salmon has gotten a bad reputation because of environmental concerns (go to [www.wwf.sg/take_action/sustainable_seafood](http://www.wwf.sg/take-action/sustainable_seafood) or www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr) but its ubiquity is driven by consumers' desire for tasty but inexpensive fish.



Sardines

These little fish, rich in vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids, are more than just a convenience food. Here is a guide to the types you can find here.

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❖ Fresh sardines

Some fresh fish types sold here are colloquially and functionally considered sardines, such as tamban fish. Shown here is a Japanese sardine or iwashi, found in Japanese supermarkets. Raw sardines are highly perishable and should be gutted, cleaned, cooked and eaten as fresh as possible.



❖ Spicy sardines

A significant category of sardine products as their robust nature stands up well to chillies and spices. Shown here are sardines canned with pickled green jalapeno chillies, and also a spicy Thai sardine paste (found at Golden Mile Complex), similar to a nam prik and suited to be eaten with rice, congee, bread and salads.

❖ Water-packed sardines

These have the mildest, most neutral flavour, usually seasoned only with salt. They are the lowest-fat option and are best for use in dishes with other strong seasonings. Save the water to boost the flavour of broths, congee and seasoned rice.



❖ Oil-packed sardines

Oily to begin with, sardines retain more of their character and firm-but-supple texture when oil-packed. Lighter-tasting oils such as sunflower give the sardines' own flavour more prominence. Some types use infused oils, for example, olive oil with lemon or oil-based vinaigrette sauces. The oil can be saved for use in salad dressings, pastas, sauces and stir-fries.

❖ Salt-packed sardines

Canned in moist salt, these have a strong taste and anchovy-like texture. They must be rinsed and are often soaked before use. Seldom seen here.

❖ Sardines and soya

Like many small fish, sardines have great flavour synergy with other sources of umami (savouriness), and hence are often canned with fermented soya products. Shown here are sardines in Japanese miso sauce and sardines with salted fermented black soya beans: cooked firmer and drier than regular sardines, the latter is suited to be eaten with congee. Filipino stores sometimes stock sardines in vinegar-soya adobo sauce, and Japanese supermarkets sardines in teriyaki sauce.



❖ Smoked sardines

Some canned sardines are lightly smoked as part of their processing; others receive a longer smoking as their primary cure and are usually packed in oil, as shown here. They go particularly well with mustard or vinegar sauces. The smoky oil is good for dressing salads, noodles and potato dishes and seasoning marinades, sauces and stews.



❖ Tomato sauce sardines

By far the most common kind of canned sardines, perhaps because the sweet and acidic notes of the tomatoes are a good foil for the rich fish. Often made with larger, meatier fish than other canned varieties.



❖ Aged sardines

Premium fresh sardines processed and oil-packed with extra care, specifically destined for ageing before or after point of sale, rather like wine or vinegar. Connoisseurs hold that ageing refines and mellows the flavour and texture of sardines. Usually from Europe and expensive. Look for these at gourmet stores or online.

Species

"Sardine" is a catch-all term applied to several similar species within the herring family, along with synonyms "pilchard" and "sprat". These names are not used consistently across countries, though they all denote small, oily fish. Shown here are European brisling sardines, also called skippers. They are smaller and more silvery-hued than larger sardines usually canned in tomato sauce.



Beverages

Coffee

Perplexed by the wave of
new cafes, brewing
apparatus and drinks?
Here is a potted guide.

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❖ Espresso

Water at 90 to 96 deg C, sent through 7 to 9g of coffee grounds over 25 to 30 seconds, yielding a shot of about 30ml.



❖ Ristretto

A shot of “restricted” volume of about 22ml. Ideally, brewed exactly as for espresso but with finer-ground beans and sometimes done by abbreviating or accelerating the brew period, or tamping the grounds tighter.



❖ Cappuccino

Equal parts espresso, steamed milk, and thick milk foam.



❖ Macchiato

An espresso shot plus a dab of foamed milk.



❖ Latte

One espresso shot, 180 to 210ml milk – a piccolo (small) latte halves that milk ratio – and a little foam.

❖ Magic

Double ristretto with around four times its volume in milk and a little foam.

❖ Gibraltar

Double espresso plus just over the same volume of milk in a Libbey glass tumbler called the Gibraltar

❖ Cortado

One espresso shot, 30 to 60 ml milk, and a little foam.



Third wave coffee

A movement towards appreciating coffee as a specialty, artisanal, hand-crafted product, not a caffeinated commodity. “It’s about increasing knowledge all round – from farmer to supplier, roaster, distributor, barista, consumer – so coffee quality also increases as everyone aims for excellence,” says Pamela Chng of Bettr Barista Coffee Academy, a local social enterprise scheme that offers internationally certified barista training.



Extraction

The drawing out of coffee and its flavours from roasted beans with heated water, using different brewing methods.



Profiling machines

High-end espresso machines permitting manual variation of temperature and pressure. “Changing the pressure during different phases of the brew process lets me precisely extract different flavour dimensions from the beans,” says Michael Ryan of his hand-built Slayer profiling machine at Jimmy Monkey cafe in One-North Gateway.

Pourover

Water manually poured over coffee grounds in a filter, flowing through to yield coffees “very clear and bright tasting, almost like teas”, describes Chng.

Crema

The mottled, red-brown “head” on an espresso, a foam of carbon dioxide in emulsified coffee oils and compounds.



V60 (left)

A Japanese pourover filter cast in glass, ceramic or plastic by Hario glassware.

Single estate

The grail of third wave coffee –

beans from a single farm, roasted, ground

and brewed to showcase individuality and terroir (taste of place). “Coffee should be regarded like fine wine,” says Ryan.

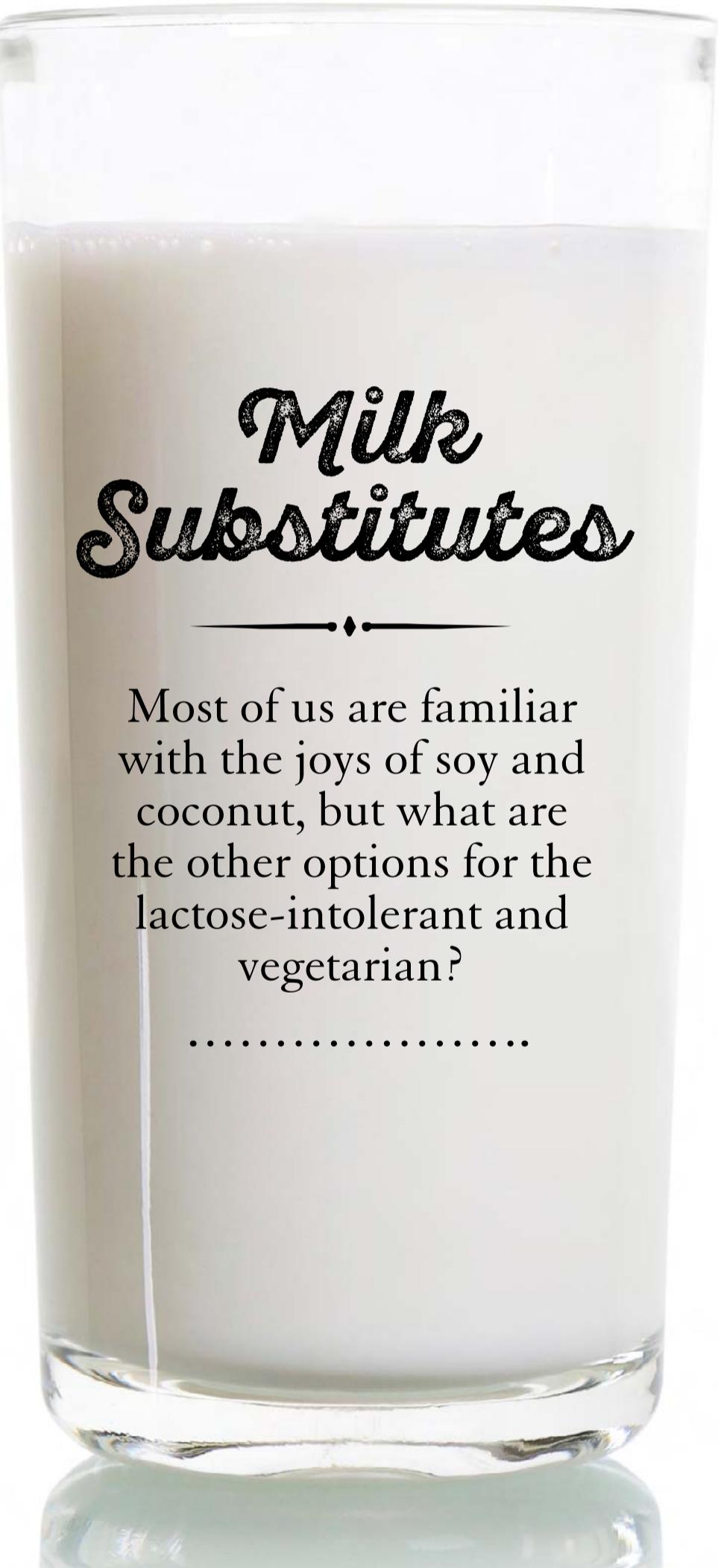
Sustainability

Environmentally friendly agricultural practices, fair trade, direct trade (beans bought straight from farmers) and related issues are core to third wave coffee.

Chemex

A glass vessel and paper filter pourover set, designed by a German inventor in 1941 and now made in Massachusetts.





Milk Substitutes

Most of us are familiar with the joys of soy and coconut, but what are the other options for the lactose-intolerant and vegetarian?

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❖ Almond milk has been a Middle Eastern staple since at least the 4th or 5th century, and later spread to mediaeval Europe. Modern versions vary in richness; they are good in coffee, curries, puddings, custards and ice creams.



❖ Rice milk, (below, left) usually made with brown rice, tends to be a bit thin and austere. Barley (below, right) and oat milks (below, centre) have a tad more oomph.



Vegan or vegetarian milks

Nuts, grains and legumes are blended with water to make vegan and vegetarian milks. Commercial versions are often fortified with vegetable oils, vitamins and minerals to improve their nutritional profile.

They often also contain vegetable gums or other thickeners, which produce a mouthfeel more like dairy milk. Flavouring may be added to mask strong vegetal tastes.

❖ Horchata is a family of Spanish and Latin American milk-like drinks made from various ingredients, including tiger nuts (actually a tuber), rice, almonds and sesame seeds.



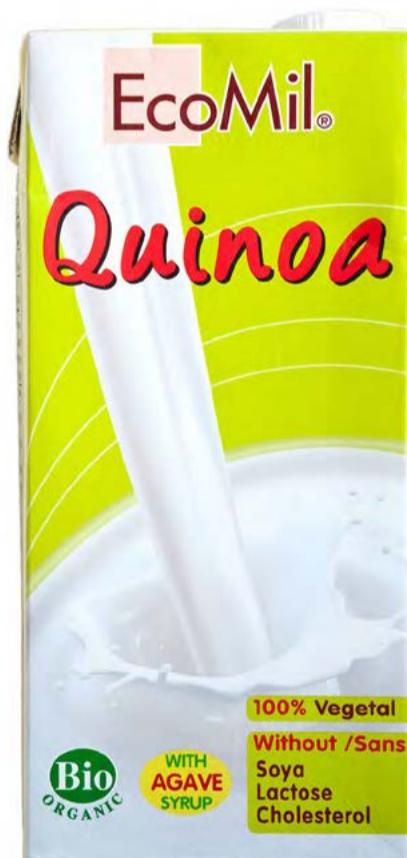
❖ Some shops stock nut- or soy-based cream substitutes (left), thicker versions of the milks. You can sometimes find pressurised canisters of squirtable “whipped” nut or soy cream, but be aware that these are addictive-laden.



❖ Lactose-free cow's milk has had all of its pesky lactose enzymatically broken down into the simpler sugars glucose and galactose, which most people can digest.



❖ Millet milk tastes a bit like soy milk, overlaid with the grain's slightly waxy cereal flavour.



❖ Quinoa milk, made from the Andean grain, tastes like bland soymilk and contains more protein than nut and rice milks.



How to make nut milks

Many nut milks taste best made fresh at home, as long as the expiry dates are far off.

Start by soaking nuts in water, in the fridge: eight to 10 hours for hard nuts (almonds, hazelnuts, brazil nuts), four to six hours for softer ones (cashews, macadamias, walnuts). Then rinse, drain and blend the nuts with two to three times their weight of cooled boiled water or filtered water, until smooth. Strain through fine cloth, wringing to extract as much liquid as possible.

The leftover nut solids can be used to make vegetarian pates, burgers, otak-otak, croquettes and such, or oven-dried to make a nut 'flour' for baking.

Though soft, walnuts do need soaking and draining to remove some of their bitter skin tannins. Alternatively, oven-toast them lightly, then rub off the skins.

Walnut milk is mellow and rich, with a mouthfeel surprisingly close to dairy milk. Made with toasted walnuts, sweetened and thickened with a little starch, it becomes Chinese walnut cream.

Cashew and macadamia nut milks are heavy in body and flavour, good for milkshakes and smoothies, and especially Asian curries and puddings.

Pine nuts need no soaking and yield a rich-tasting milk. Korean cooks simmer a thick milk of rice, pine nuts and water to make jat juk, a savoury porridge.

Sake

A beginner's guide to Japanese
sake appreciation.

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Rice milling (*seimai-buai*)

Rice varieties used for sake are most starchy at the cores of their kernels. Milling away the exterior layers of the grains removes protein and fat molecules that can negatively skew sake flavour, leaving the desirable starches behind. Milling percentages, always stated on sake labels, reflect the amount of rice left: for example, “65 per cent” means that 35 per cent of the grain has been removed. The lower the stated percentage, the more refined, delicate and subtle the sake.

The brewing process

Rice is milled, washed, soaked and steamed. Some of it is mixed with koji, a mould which breaks down starch into sugars. The ripened koji mixture is blended with more cooked rice, water and yeast in successive stages to build up a moromi, or mash. This is fermented for a few weeks. When deemed ready, the moromi is pressed to separate sake from lees. The sake is filtered, pasteurised and bottled, and typically left to settle for a few months before being shipped to stores.

❖ Junmai shu

A sake made from rice milled to at least 70 per cent or less, with no added alcohol. Shu means sake.

❖ Honjozo shu

Sake made from rice milled to at least 70 per cent or less, to which a little distilled alcohol is added before pressing, often lighter and less acidic than junmai sakes. Shown here is a honjozo from Niigata, honjozo characters magnified.

❖ Ginjo shu and daiginjo shu

Ginjo sakes are made with rice milled to at least 60 per cent or less: daiginjo, to at least 50 per cent or less. Either kind may be of junmai (no alcohol added) or honjozo families. Shown here is a junmai daiginjo from Aichi, junmai daiginjo characters magnified.

Sake flavour

Sakes span sweet versus dry, acidic, and umami (savoury and full) dimensions. They can have floral, fruity, cereal-like, nutty, grassy, herbal, earthy or toasted notes. They can feel heavy, light, textured or smooth in the mouth. Alcohol content varies from 15 to 18 per cent. Taste sake at room temperature to experience its full breadth, then decide if you prefer it well chilled, lightly chilled or warmed, advises Mr Naoki Satoh, business development manager at Orihara Shoten sake bar in Robertson Walk.





❖ Sparkling sake

Made by pressing and bottling sake early on during fermentation when it contains up to 10 per cent alcohol and ample residual sugars. Secondary fermentation in the bottle adds carbonation and a bit of sediment. Shown on the right is a sparkling junmai daiginjo nigorizake.



❖ Namazake

Unpasteurised sake which still contains active yeast and thus has a more vibrant aroma and flavour. Shown on the left is a junmai ginjo namazake, namazake characters magnified.

❖ Jizake

A catchall term for sakes made by small independent Japanese breweries, which represent regionality, terroir and idiosyncrasy.

❖ Futsu shu

Ordinary non-premium sake which does not qualify for any of the above designations: the cheapest kind.



❖ Nigorizake

Unfiltered or minimally filtered sake which contains some lees and is hence cloudy. Two brands are shown here: a typical nigorizake with a centimetre of settled lees (left) and an unusual premium kind (right) with substantial lees and a custard-creamy texture.



❖ Yamahai

Sakes brewed with a yeast starter nurtured in a traditional, hand-made way, which consequently have stronger, more complex flavours. Shown here is a yamahai junmai ginjo, yamahai characters magnified.



Sake prices

For standard 720ml bottles, expect good entry-level sakes to cost roughly \$35 to \$45; mid-range sakes, \$45 to \$60; and premium sakes, \$65 and up. Bars and restaurants may mark up these take-home prices by another 60 per cent or so for dine-in.

Matching sake with food

"There are no real rules," says Mr Satoh. Sake's amino acids and sugars give it a balanced flavour profile complete within itself. This allows it to partner virtually anything.

Storing

Keep sake in the coldest zone of the fridge. Once opened, drink as soon as possible, especially highly perishable namazake and nigorizake.

Sake cups

Masu, square cedarwood cups, have historical significance, but impart their own aroma to sake. Artisan-made porcelain and glass cups, like those shown here, are functional and beautiful.

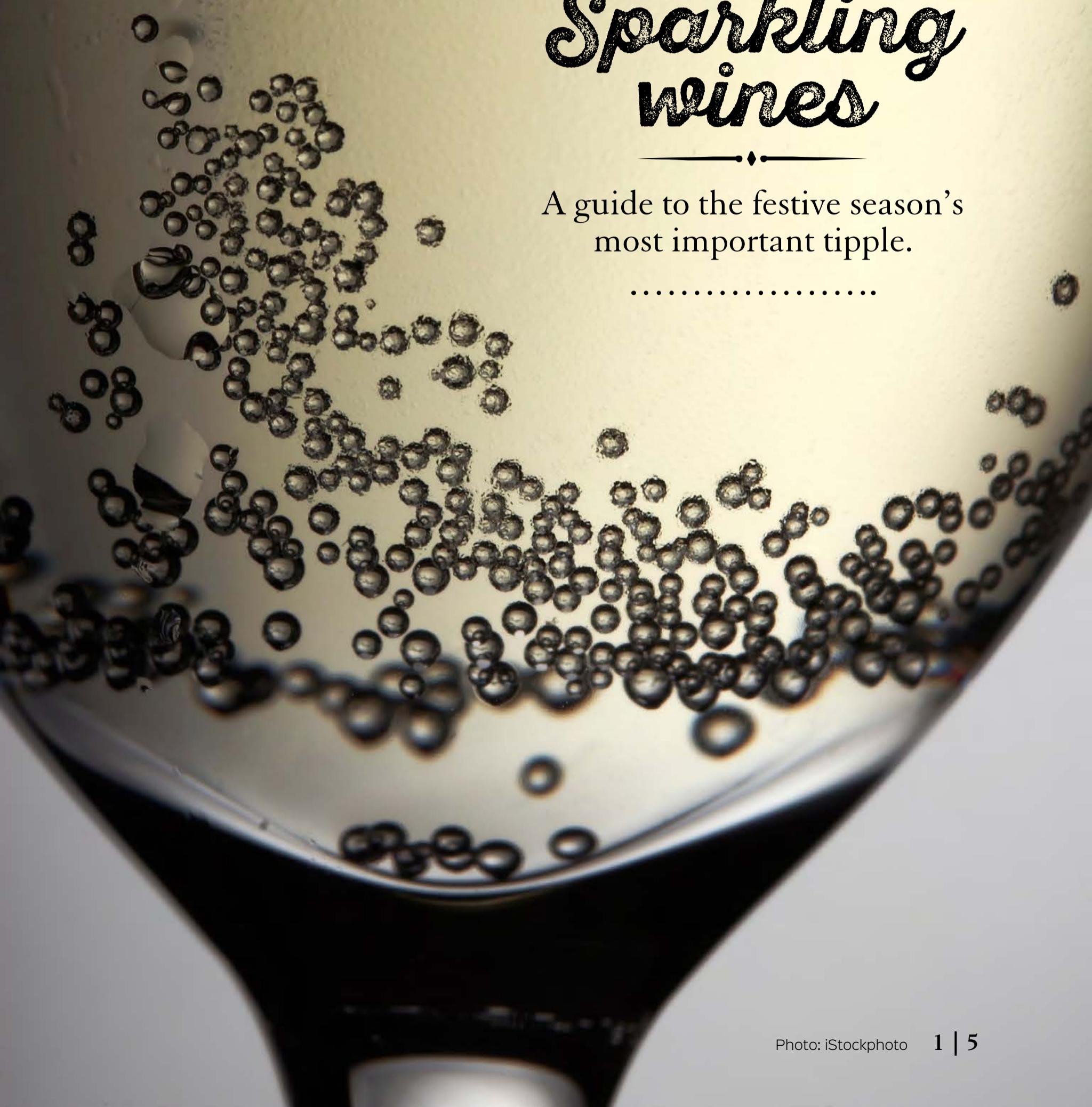
All sakes and cups from and photographed at Orihara Shoten Japanese liquor shop and bar.



Sparkling wines

A guide to the festive season's
most important tipple.

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❖ Champagne

Considered the queen of all sparkling grape wines. Only those from France's Champagne region, made with the traditional method and other specific production criteria, can legally be labelled champagne. Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Meunier are the classic champagne grape varietals. Vintage champagnes are from a single year, non-vintage ones are blended. Prestige cuvees are the highest-quality and most expensive champagnes.



❖ Italian sparkling wines

There are many regional variants, some spumante (fully sparkling) and some frizzante (semi-sparkling, with less pressure). The most well-known and popular are franciacorta (made by the traditional method), prosecco (right), asti and moscato d'asti. Many, especially of the latter three types, tend to the sweet rather than the dry.



❖ Sekt

The overall term for German and Austrian sparkling wines, which come in many styles and varieties – the frizzante (left) shown here is actually from Austria.



❖ Cava (left)

The Spanish equivalent of champagne, made by the traditional method from local grapes such as Macabeo, Parellada and Xarel-lo. Like champagne, cava varies from sweet to dry.



❖ Sparkling red wines

The most well-known old-world fizzy red is Italy's lambrusco, refreshing and easy to pair with food. The most famous new-world version is perhaps sparkling Shiraz from Australia, full-bodied and energetic.



❖ Sparkling rose wines (left)

Sparkling roses are made in a wide gamut of traditional styles across Europe and over the past few decades, also in the US and Australia. Many are good paired with Asian food.



❖ Sparkling Japanese sake

(right)

Usually sweeter and lower-alcohol than its grape cousins. Made by halting sake's first fermentation a little early, so it contains some residual sugar, and then fermenting it a second time in bottles. Some cheaper types are made by flavouring and directly carbonating sake, almost like a soft drink.



Traditional method

The oldest and most revered way to make a sparkling wine. First, a base wine or cuvée is made from a single grape or a blend. This is mixed with yeast and sugar, transferred to a robust glass bottle, sealed and left to ferment on its side at a cool temperature for a few years, during which it acquires complex, yeasty flavours. Next, the bottles are slowly moved and rotated to a 45-degree slanting position so that the yeast sediment settles in their necks. Next, the necks are frozen, then swiftly uncapped so that the carbonation pressure disgorges the frozen nugget of yeast sediment. The bottle is then topped up with a “dosage” of sugar and other proprietary ingredients, such as more cuvée, and resealed with a cork and its wire cage.

Charmat method

Largely the same as the traditional method, except that the second fermentation happens in a tank, not individual bottles. The wine is subsequently filtered, spiked with the dosage, then bottled under pressure. This shorter, less expensive method emphasises the grapes’ fruity, aromatic character rather than yeasty nuances.

Storing sparkling wines

Best stored horizontally in a wine fridge or fridge – they spoil quickly at local room temperature.

Opening sparkling wines

“Never shake or agitate the bottle before opening unless you’re an F1 driver. Loosen or remove the wire cork cage. Hold the cork firmly and slowly twist the bottle until the cork pops out.

Champagne and moscato provided by Singapore Straits Wine Company; cava, sparkling rose and prosecco provided by Monopole.



Credits

Text and photos

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A blurred background image showing a person's hands holding a smartphone. The screen of the phone displays a news application with various news items and images. To the right of the phone, there is a white cup of coffee on a saucer. The overall scene suggests a person is reading news on their mobile device while having a coffee break.

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