

clover food lab



Kiernan here. I've got a love/hate thing going on with dried spices. On the one hand, they're convenient and shelf-stable, and they allow me to improvise fun flavor combinations in the kitchen even when there's not too many options in the fridge. (This week I tried roasting carrots with hot honey and...what did I have on-hand on the spice shelf?...fennel seed! It was good!!)

On the other hand, my spice cabinet is BURSTING with bottles, jars, canisters, and baggies, many purchased for a single recipe 2 years ago. I've tried organizing them in 12 different ways—size, alphabetical order, geographically, most-used to least-used, by expiration date—and none of it helps because, in the rush of cooking, it's a grab-and-go situation, organization be damned.

And by the time I'm cleaning up, the last thing I want to do is remember which organizational system I'm adhering to this month.

But the big problem I've got with dried spices is that they are MISUNDERSTOOD. Poor ground cumin! Poor coriander! Oh, my dear sweet paprika!



The first misunderstanding is that dried spices last and last and last. Not so. Those expiration dates are real, and, in many cases, a bit too generous. Spices oxidize and lose their pungency over time—ground spices especially.

Recommendations for how long to keep spices range hugely, but my rule of thumb is about a year. At the 12-month mark, spices will often have lost some of their kick, but you can increase the amount you use in a recipe and still get the notes you need. It helps to jot down on the lid when you bought the jar.

Another tip: when in doubt, smell the spice. If you're not picking up much scent, those babies have got to go.

The second misunderstanding is that all dried spices are created equal. No no no no. No. Buying smaller quantities of higher quality dried herbs is well worth the additional cost, if you're able. You want to buy from a proprietor who you can trust hasn't had the spices on the shelves for a long time, oxidizing away. You'll end up throwing less out, and the flavors will be much more robust.

The final misunderstanding is that dried spices are ready to go into recipes straight out of the bottle. While you can certainly do this, in order to get the MOST flavor out of your spices, you should BLOOM YOUR SPICES IN OIL. It takes just a minute or two and it changes everything.

So what do I mean bloom? In a small skillet, heat a couple of tablespoons of oil or ghee (clarified butter) over medium-low heat. When you suspect the oil or ghee is hot, put in a little spice and see if it sizzles. Once it does, put your spice directly into the oil, and turn off the heat.

(Depending on the spice and oil, you can keep the heat going for another minute or so, but it's probably not necessary.)

THAT. IS. IT.

So why are you doing this? A lot of the flavor of spices is locked up in fat-soluble compounds, which emerge with heat and fat (the oil or ghee.) By blooming the spice, you are infusing the oil or ghee with flavors which, when then added to a dish, more effectively coat your tongue than a ground spice or whole spice could. You then experience that as a stronger and longer-lasting flavor.

And not just a little bit stronger: [America's Test Kitchen](#) determined that blooming can produce 10x more flavor!

The blooming technique is a staple of a lot of South Asian cuisines, but you can try it in recipes across the board. One note: blooming does work better in oils with a higher smoke point, since you're essentially frying the spices. Canola, safflower, peanut oil, and ghee are all great choices, but feel free to experiment with different oil and spice combinations to see how the flavors slightly change.



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