



Using Fresh Herbs

In September of this year Ginsberg Foods became the single major distributor of Rock Hedge Herbs. This is high quality, organic greenhouse operation distributing fresh herbs all year round, all processed and packaged in Millbrook, NY, Dutchess County. We are already sourcing all of our mushrooms from Bulich Farms in Catskill, NY, Greene County. As such, Ginsbergs becomes the prime source of local produce year round. The herbs are picked daily, and carefully packaged in breathable plastic, and shipped in small cardboard containers. This is a little primer on the types of herbs that are available from Rock Hedge Herbs, and some uses for them.

Fresh Edible Orchids – Our new source of fresh Orchids is unique to our area. These orchids are truly edible, with no artificial fertilizer, or harmful pesticides as other products. They are a very beautiful addition to any plate. Orchids may be used as a whole flower on a butlered platter, or a single slice of petal can be used as a garnish with beautiful results, and costs pennies.



Basil – This is an annual herb grown all over the world. It is used dried and fresh for Italian and Mediterranean dishes, especially with tomatoes. Use as whole leaves, chopped, or “chiffonade” (long cut strands). It is very useful as a single leaf garnish. Fresh basil is tasty as a whole leaf addition to pizza or lasagna. Basil is the prime ingredient in Pesto sauce. The strong flavor will stand up to garlic.



Chives – Perennial member of the onion family. Once planted and established, chives will come back each year much stronger than the last. Very popular fresh, dried, or frozen. Especially good with potato and egg recipes. It may be used as a very upscale garnish as a whole stem, rising from the entrée to create height for the dish.



Dill - This is an annual herb grown all over the world, especially known for pickle flavoring. Used in some cultures as a flavoring for soups and chicken dishes. I can't stand Dill and will never use it. Dill is very useful as a garnish for potato dishes, egg dishes, and some seafood, such as salmon. A few sprigs laid out over fresh salmon will be enough to flavor the dish while it is baking.



Mint - A perennial herb grown mainly in temperate or northern climates. Once planted in your garden it will never ever go away. Digging it out, tilling it under, or chopping it up with a shovel will just annoy it and cause the mint to grow more profusely. This is a very popular herb for desserts, and beverages, such as Mojitos and Mint Juleps. Mint goes very well with strawberries and other fruit, and as a garnish for fruit salad.



Oregano – A southern perennial that can be grown in New York State. There are innumerable types of Oregano, which have greatly varied tastes. It is closely related to Marjoram, and some oregano plants will have a cloyingly sweet smell that is not attractive. Greek and Italian Oregano has the flavor that we associate with this herb. Oregano is well known for use dried or fresh in pizzas, and tomato sauces. It is used in Greek seafood dishes, and pairs well with lemon and wine. If overused, it will dominate the flavors of most dishes. A little goes a long way.



Rosemary- A Mediterranean perennial herb that can stand a light winter, down to about 20 degrees. It is a wild plant all throughout Spain, Italy, Morocco and Greece, and has long been valued for its flavor and healthy properties. This is one herb that is very different when used fresh as opposed to dry. Roasted Red Potatoes with fresh rosemary is a classic dish. Its flavor is hardy, and will stand up to high heat, such as a quick sauté in olive oil, or Roast Leg of Lamb.



Sage – A hearty perennial that winters very well in New York. This is a very strong flavored herb that should be used sparingly. Best known for use in Thanksgiving Stuffing, it is equally at home in egg dishes, potato salads, and meat and poultry dishes. The leaves make a very pleasing garnish for salad or entrée plates.



Tarragon – A tender perennial that grows in temperate climates, generally south of New York. The mild anise or licorice flavor is difficult to work with unless you are following a distinct recipe. It is a prime flavoring in Sauce Béarnaise, and in Fines Herbes, both classic French ingredients. Chopped fresh tarragon tastes great just as is in scrambled eggs, or over a grilled steak. A reduction of white wine and fresh tarragon will make a nice flavor for roast chicken.



Thyme – a low growing perennial herb from the Mediterranean region. This highly flavored herb should be used with caution, as it will dominate any dish. If used correctly, however, it can be the most beautiful flavor in the book. The leaves are on stiff twigs, which make it useful for tall garnishes on any plate. It is a primary ingredient in fines Herbes, along with parsley and tarragon, and can be used in all sorts of recipes, from seafood, to eggs, to meat or vegetable dishes.



WHAT TO DO WITH TOO MANY HERBS

Whether you are growing them, or buying them, it is a shame to waste fresh herbs. Keeping them in the cooler for two weeks just results in old green stuff that tastes as good as Iceberg Lettuce. You can dry the herbs if you have a great amount, but unless you have perfect conditions, the end result will not be perfect.

Better to freeze your overabundance. Most herbs, such as chives, thyme, and rosemary, will simply be frozen with little or no effect on the color or flavor. Some flat leaf herbs, such as basil, and sage, will turn dark brown when frozen, but will keep their beautiful fresh flavor. If these are to be used in a stuffing, or tomato sauce, they can be used just as if they were fresh, with no difference in taste.

WHEN SUBSTITUTING FRESH HERBS FOR DRIED HERBS

A general guideline when using fresh herbs in a recipe is to use 3 times as much as you would use of a dried herb. When substituting, you'll often be more successful substituting fresh herbs for dried herbs, rather than the other way around. For example, think potato salad with fresh vs. dried parsley!

HERB/FOOD COMBINATIONS

Here are some ideas to help you start combining fresh herbs with your foods.

BASIL - a natural snipped in with tomatoes; terrific in fresh pesto; other possibilities include pasta sauce, peas, zucchini

CHIVES - dips, potatoes, tomatoes

CILANTRO - Mexican, Asian and Caribbean cooking; salsas, tomatoes

DILL - carrots, cottage cheese, fish, green beans, potatoes, tomatoes

MINT - carrots, fruit salads, parsley, peas, tabouli, tea

OREGANO - peppers, tomatoes

PARSLEY - The curly leaf is the most common, but the flat-leaf or Italian parsley is more strongly flavored and often preferred for cooking. Natural for parsley include potato salad, tabouli

ROSEMARY - chicken, fish, lamb, pork, roasted potatoes, soups, stews, tomatoes

SAGE - poultry seasoning, stuffings

TARRAGON - chicken, eggs, fish

THYME - eggs, lima beans, potatoes, poultry, summer squash, tomatoes

COMPOUND BUTTER

(beurre aux fines herbes)

For 8 guests

4 Tbsp Extra Virgin Olive Oil
2 Tbsp fresh Chives, chopped fine
1 Tbsp fresh Thyme, leaves only, chopped fine
1 Tbsp fresh Tarragon, leaves only, chopped fine
1 Tbsp fresh Parsley, chopped fine
1 Tsp Rosemary, leaves only, chopped fine
1 pound butter
A pinch of salt and pepper, if you want

In a small mixer, or food processor, place the Olive Oil, and all of the fresh herbs. Mix until the herbs are distributed, but not mashed. This can also be done in a large mixing bowl with a heavy plastic scraper.

Add the butter, at room temperature, but not melted. Mix well with whatever method works for you until the herbs are well distributed, and the butter is soft and fluffy.

Lay out a piece of baker's parchment paper, or heavy wax paper. Scrape the softened herb butter onto the paper, and form into a long log, about 1" in diameter. Roll the paper around the log, keeping it as tight as possible. Put into the cooler for one hour. At this time, cut the butter, with the paper still around it, into pieces a few inches long. Wrap well in plastic film, put a date on the plastic, and put in the freezer.

To use the butter, simply take a stick out of the freezer, and cut a chunk off with a sharp serrated knife. Use this to top a grilled steak

FRESH BASIL PESTO

2 cups Fresh Basil Leaves, packed down
1/3 cup Pine Nuts (or walnuts)
3 each Garlic Cloves
1/2 cup Extra Virgin Olive Oil
1/2 cup Fresh Grated Parmesan or Romano Cheese
Salt and pepper to taste

Place the basil, and the pine nuts in a blender or food processor. Add the garlic, and run a little so that it forms a rough paste. Slowly add the olive oil in a constant stream while the machine is running. This may also be done with a mortar and pestle. Stop the machine a few times to scrape down the sides, to make the pesto nice and smooth. Add the grated cheese, and blend lightly.

Use this Pesto to flavor pasta, on fresh toasted bread slices, or for vegetables. It freezes very well for a long time. It is best to store in small containers, as much as you'd use in a day or two.