

Mustard: A Condiment and a Medicine

by Sue Minter

“I desire your more acquaintance, good Master Mustardseed”

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Mustard has been used medicinally since the time of the Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460—375 BC). The Romans ate the whole seed as a spice during meals, but mustard was not milled for use at table until the eighteenth century. Today, mustard is number one in the world spice trade in terms of volume. That is perhaps a little-known fact, as most people think of spices in terms of nutmeg, mace, cinnamon, ginger and the other tropical spices and condiments.

Mustard is a temperate crop, in Britain sown in spring to produce its brilliant yellow flowers in early summer, then harvested in late summer and early autumn. It is mainly grown in East Anglia. Two different species are cultivated, *Brassica juncea* Brown Mustard and *Sinapsis alba* White Mustard. Each has a different quality to add to the blended mustard powder or creamed mustard, the brown giving pungency (and the rich yellow color) and the white adding fire. The blending of these two characteristics can lead to many permutations and different nations have definite preferences; for example, the French use mustards creamed with vinegar and incorporate whole or partly cracked seeds, while the Americans prefer sweetened creamed mustards with a less fiery aftertaste to them.

In France the center of the mustard trade is Dijon where a huge range is produced for blending with herb butters, and to use with poultry, egg and fish dishes, rather than the more traditional British mustard range used mainly with beef and ham.

The action of mustard as a condiment

to stimulate appetite and salivation and so hasten the first stage of digestion, its ability to break down indigestible fats and meat fibers, and its ability to stimulate digestive juices to complete the digestive process. Many people find the taste itself adds to their enjoyment, so aiding good digestion!

Medicinal mustard

Mustard contains an essential oil (allyl isothiocyanate) which, when applied to the outside of the body, increases the circulation and so helps the elimination of poisons. This makes it of great value in treating a number of complaints, from a simple chill to rheumatism. Externally, mustard is often applied as a poultice or pack (for example, to ease bronchitis, neuralgia or toothache) but it is also available as an ointment. Mustard ointment has long been marketed in Britain and is recommended to ease the pain of unbroken chilblains.* Two or three tablespoons of mustard powder can be used in the bath to ease chills, relax tired muscles and promote sleep. Aching feet can also benefit from a foot bath (one tablespoon) and I have found this very beneficial when I have been chilled.

Some hints for using mustard in cooking

If you are using dry mustard powder, always cream it in cold water and let it stand for ten minutes before use. Make fresh for each meal.

Use dry mustard to rub over frozen joints of meat as a tenderizer before cooking. Tenderize and flavor bacon by adding dry mustard to the frying pan before cooking.

A SEED MUSTARD SAUCE

For serving with rabbit or chicken.

1 shallot
1 teaspoon unsalted butter
4 tablespoons dry white wine
4 tablespoons chicken stock
1 tablespoon whipping cream
3/4 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1 sprig young French tarragon
1 level tablespoon seed mustard
20 g (3/4 oz) unsalted butter
A little lemon juice, salt and pepper

Lightly sauté the chopped, peeled shallot in the teaspoon of butter. Add the wine and allow briefly to boil. Add the chicken stock and simmer to reduce by half. Allow to cool slightly, stir in the cream, Dijon mustard, seed mustard, tarragon and the rest of the butter. Season with salt, pepper and lemon juice to your preferred taste.

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