

SUPER SPICE

**Turmeric has long been touted for its health benefits.
Local chefs share recipes and why they love cooking with it.**

By Lisa Waterman Gray — **Chow Town/Kansas City Star** — June 28, 2017

After reading about turmeric's anti-inflammatory properties, I wondered if it might help my longtime digestive issues. Confident I wouldn't take time to create turmeric-infused dishes daily, I added the spice to my morning coffee, plus cayenne and cinnamon.

Within weeks, my typically sluggish digestive system had transformed.

Turmeric has recently caught renewed attention in the culinary world. It appeared in the February issue of Bon Appetit magazine as an ingredient for Turmeric-Ginger Chicken Soup, and several months later as Turmeric-Ginger Tonic With Chia Seeds.

It's also a key element in wildly popular "golden milk." Touted as a health-promoting beverage, it features coconut milk (or regular milk) simmered with juiced, shredded or powdered turmeric and coconut oil. Fans of golden milk may enhance the flavor with sugar, cinnamon, honey, ginger, peppercorns or other ingredients.

FoodRepublic.com has made the case for How to Eat Turmeric (And Why You Should), and FoodMatters.com has described How to Make an Anti-Inflammatory Turmeric Paste You'll Want to Add to Everything. WebMD.com offers an exhaustive description of turmeric's uses and health benefits and you can also buy turmeric supplements.

"It's definitely becoming more and more popular as more of the health benefits have been researched and talked about," says local nutritionist Lisa Markley. "It's pretty simple to incorporate turmeric into familiar dishes. You can put it in scrambled eggs or egg salad for color or use it in more exotic dishes like curries. I sometimes grate fresh turmeric, or sprinkle powdered turmeric, into a smoothie."

COOKING WITH TURMERIC

A South Asian rhizome and herbaceous perennial plant, turmeric has long been used in traditional healing practices — especially Indian traditional and Siddha medicine — and cuisine. The small, firm, even-toned root is best used in the kitchen when it has no blemishes or dark spots.

Beneath turmeric's thin, fibrous skin, its flesh can range from the color of sweet potato to shirt-staining saffron yellow. Turmeric "stains" everything dramatically, contributing an extra-deep hue to many mustards and mustard powder. Dried, powdered turmeric root contributes potent flavor to curry dishes and is a significant ingredient in most commercial curry powders.

Turmeric may accentuate savory Persian and Moroccan dishes, while some Iranian khoresh dishes feature onions caramelized in oil and turmeric. The pretty spice colors

and flavors many Nepalese vegetable and meat dishes, and Vietnamese dishes such as mi quang.

Ameet Malhotra, owner of Kansas City's Elephant Wings, a weekend personal chef experience for dinner parties of 6-12 guests, prefers to use turmeric powder because of its convenience. He combines it with a variety of spices, including cumin, cinnamon, fenugreek, cilantro and panch puran spice.

Originally from Mumbai, India, and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and a graphic designer with Hallmark, Malhotra moved to the United States in 1998.

After Malhotra's family immigrated, too, his father began cooking as his own father had cooked, sparking Malhotra's interest. His grandma taught him many vegetable dishes, and he began to experiment with Indian spices and garnishes. Today, Malhotra also shares his culinary passion with his young son, Aadi.

Physician Jyoti Mukharji, who teaches Indian cooking classes in her home, favors powdered turmeric too. She has had 2,800 students since starting the classes in February 2010.

"Fresh turmeric doesn't blend as well when added to curries, and it's not a pleasant taste on your tongue," she says.

Nutritionist Markley says she also prefers to use turmeric powder.

"It's easier to keep on hand and use on a more consistent basis. But any time you use the dried spice, make sure it hasn't been in your cupboard for a year or two.

"If you only want a little you might look into bulk spice options. You can start small — maybe a quarter of a teaspoon — and incrementally add a little more. The fact that it pairs with coconut helps to improve the bioavailability of (turmeric). Fresh turmeric has a brighter, cleaner flavor and is a little less pungent, so it's a little harder to overdo it."

James Beard award-winning executive chef Michael Smith, who owns Extra Virgin and Michael Smith restaurants, uses both powdered and fresh turmeric in his Mediterranean dishes.

He appreciates the quality of turmeric powder available at Al Habashi Mart, 888 International Market and Hun Vuong Market.

"I like to use turmeric when I see it at the stores, almost always in savory dishes," Smith says. "(We use) turmeric powder, if we're making a ragout or some kind of sauce, but I love to use fresh turmeric for ceviche.

"Turmeric goes with acids, basil and mints. It's better in small doses. We peel it and then slice it very thin, on a mandolin. If you're making a vinaigrette, put it in a blender."

In India, fresh turmeric is primarily eaten for medicinal reason, Mukharji says. "Peel fresh turmeric, take a piece that is about an inch long and eat it with a crude piece of sugar."

She often uses the seasoning with lentil dishes, especially yellow lentils, and in meat

dishes such as kormas — a basic meat curry cooked in most Indian homes. Some of these meat dishes may also include onion, ginger, garlic, tomatoes or plain yogurt.

“When I make a dish, I use turmeric for coloring and flavoring,” Mukharji says. “Add it in the beginning so the turmeric gets cooked and the flavor marries with the dish. I personally don’t like the aroma of it; it must be cooked to overcome the taste and the smell.”

Curry powder combines turmeric with up to 14 additional ingredients, Mukharji says. “It’s primarily marketed for the Western world, as a very exotic ingredient, but people wouldn’t know what you’re asking for in India.”

Markley uses the warming spice in golden milk or in smoothies with orange and banana.

“At a coffee shop I go to you can get turmeric in tea bags and have it with steamed milk,” she says, adding that she has also made a turmeric spritzer with lime juice.

Smith pairs turmeric with many fruits, including pineapple, citrus and apples, as well as garlic and multiple chili varieties. Turmeric-infused sauce may top grilled fish or any kind of shellfish, such as scallop ceviche, or grilled lamb racks with date molasses and vinegar sauce, served with spicy fresh ginger drizzle sauce and jicama/cilantro/turmeric/onion/parsley/apple slaw.

Malhotra uses turmeric in every dish he makes. Mukharji appreciates its medicinal properties.

“Turmeric is such a terrific antiseptic. In Indian farm communities, 15 miles in a cart can take a day or a day-and-a-half to the hospital, (so they put) clarified butter with turmeric powder on wounds.”

TURMERIC’S HEALTH BENEFITS

The primary compound responsible for turmeric’s anti-inflammatory properties is curcumin.

Traditionally consumed in stews, stir-fry dishes and teas, turmeric typically co-stars with other “warming” spices.

The most effective way to ingest turmeric is by combining it with black peppercorns. They contain piperine, which drastically increases the body’s ability to absorb turmeric into the bloodstream which it slowly metabolizes in the liver. Adding coconut oil or other fats also facilitate the metabolic process.

Turmeric has been used as treatment for everything from flu symptoms to the effects of Alzheimer’s disease. In addition, preliminary research has suggested curcumin may slow the spread of — and possibly prevent — some forms of cancer, and liver or heart disease.

Want to ease stress or boost brain health? Add turmeric to your diet. You may simultaneously stabilize your blood sugar, lower your cholesterol and reduce symptoms associated with heartburn or irritable bowel syndrome. Studies have indicated that

turmeric may also reduce bladder inflammation as well as gallbladder disorders and kidney problems.

This long-revered pain killer has been employed to alleviate menstrual, arthritis or fibromyalgia symptoms, while promoting recovery from bronchitis and lung infections. Its antimicrobial properties may relieve inflammatory skin conditions and gum disease or infected wounds, too.

Recipes available on request.