

World Traveler

TO DINE FOR

▶ CHEFS' TIPS

▶ Top Secrets

Chefs and other food connoisseurs spill the beans about some of their kitchen tricks. By Tom Sietsema

Good cooks tend to be frugal cooks, which is why Mark Furstenberg grinds up old bread and stores it in a cup in his kitchen.

If one of his soups needs a bit of thickening, the esteemed Washington, D.C., baker stirs breadcrumbs into the broth instead of cornstarch. But Furstenberg doesn't stop there. Crumbs from one of his rustic loaves might also replace croutons in a salad, or even help layer a trifle of fruit, custard and whipped cream.

"It's fun to find really nice and versatile uses for something I care about," says

the man who has helped some of the most famous chefs in the country, including Thomas Keller of The French Laundry in Napa Valley and Per Se in New York, improve their bread programs.

Reach into almost any food lover's bag of culinary tricks and you can pull out some surprising ingredients—offbeat additions that make sense when they hit the tongue.

When Daniel Patterson of Coi restaurant in San Francisco wants to brighten a soup, he reaches for a bottle of rice wine vinegar. A splash or two gives the soup a

soft acidity and makes the bowl "come alive," says the chef.

That elusive anise-like accent on the whole wood-roasted snapper at Michael's Genuine Food & Drink in Miami? Chef Michael Schwartz says he dusts the fish with fennel pollen (along with a brush stroke of olive oil and a dash of fleur de sel). Like saffron, fennel pollen is expensive; Schwartz says he pays \$45 for eight ounces. But, as with saffron, "a little goes a long way."

At home, Rick Bayless, the chef of the Mexican-themed Frontera Grill and Topolobampo restaurants in Chicago, sneaks beet juice into cooked tomatoes that have turned orange-brown and even into strawberry ice cream, to give those foods a brilliant red hue. He uses so little beet juice, it doesn't affect the taste, he says, yet the coloring "tells the diner to get ready for intense flavor." Another "secret weapon" in his cooking arsenal: epazote. He uses the pungent herb to add "sweet earthiness" to black bean dishes, soups and sauces.

But secret ingredients don't need to be unusual. Basic pantry staples can play major roles in how food tastes. Salt, for instance, reduces bitterness and heightens sweetness, which explains the grapefruit eater who sprinkles the mouth-puckering citrus with a pinch of the seasoning before he digs in, and the pastry chef who adds a bit of salt to cookies or cakes. Sugar, on the other hand, can bring out flavor people would otherwise not detect.

Over the years, I've had the chance to test a few common kitchen tricks. I can vouch that lime helps cut the heaviness of dishes like black beans and sweet potatoes, and that nutmeg lends the suggestion of cheese to gratins and casseroles. I'll take the word of chefs who have shared their

Chef Michael Schwartz



trick for combating dull-colored cooked greens and bananas that have faded to black: vitamin C, which they use in powdered form.

The key to success is restraint. "Less is more," says Lynne Rossetto Kasper, radio host of "The Splendid Table" on American Public Media. Tomato paste and Asian fish sauce are among the secrets she employs in her Minnesota kitchen. A dab of the former lifts pan juices and enriches chickpea purees; a dash or two of the fish sauce (called *nuoc nam* in Vietnamese) gives resonance to vinaigrettes and even meat loaf. "You'd never know it's there," Kasper says. She advises starting with just a teaspoon or so of an enhancer and sampling it before adding more. "You have to taste your way," she says.

Some secret ingredients contain zero calories but loads of flavor. When I asked Dan Barber, the executive chef and co-owner of the soulful Blue Hill in and Blue Hill at Stone Barns in , N.Y., what he liked to tuck into his food, his answer took me by surprise. "Stories," he responded. Had I misheard him? I had caught up with the chef in late August while he was shopping at Union Square Greenmarket and munching on an elephant ear plum.

As it turns out, "stories" was exactly what he meant. Barber appreciated the work and time the plum grower from

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the Hudson Valley put into growing the fruit, which the chef called "the best I ever had." Unlike their mass-produced cousins, the elephant ear plums offered a "fullness of flavor" that neatly wove sweetness with acidity, a pleasant surprise for the farmer after several lackluster, challenging growing seasons. Barber planned to share the farmer's early woes,

▶ Dark Chile Shrimp Soup with Epazote

This recipe includes one of Rick Bayless' secret ingredients: epazote, which can be found at Mexican grocery stores. It makes enough for 10 servings.

INGREDIENTS:

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| 2 tablespoons olive oil | 4 medium (about 1 pound) boiling potatoes (like the red-skin ones), cut into 1/4-inch pieces |
| 4 large (about 1 1/2 ounces) dried pasilla negro chiles, stemmed, seeded and torn into large pieces | 4 large (about 1 pound) carrots, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch pieces |
| 6 large garlic cloves, peeled and halved | 2 large sprigs fresh epazote |
| 1/3 cup (a scant ounce) dried shrimp | 1 pound fresh medium-small shrimp (you'll have about 50 shrimp), peeled and deveined (if you wish) |
| 2 quarts chicken broth (divided use) | |
| Salt | |
| 2 limes, cut in wedges | |

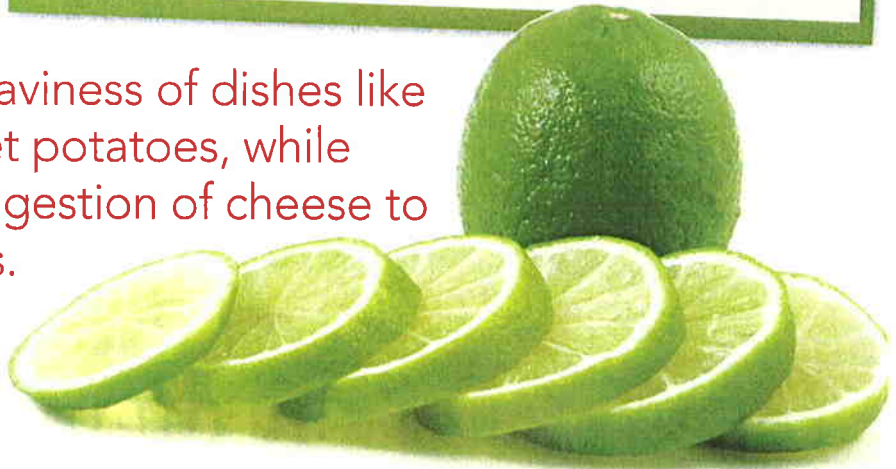
DIRECTIONS:

1. Make the base. In a very large (8-quart) saucepan or a soup pot, heat the oil over medium. When hot, add the chiles and garlic. Stir constantly until the chiles are blistered, have noticeably changed color and have filled the kitchen with a toasty chile-infused aroma. Add the dried shrimp and 4 cups of the broth. Cover, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer the mixture for 30 minutes.

Pour the mixture into a blender jar, set the lid loosely in place, cover with a kitchen towel and blend the mixture as smoothly as possible. Pour through a medium-mesh strainer back into the pot. (Straining will remove any bits of unblended chile skin.)

2. Finish the soup. Add the remaining 4 cups of the broth, along with the potatoes, carrots and epazote. Taste and season with salt, usually about 2 generous teaspoons depending on the saltiness of your broth. Cover and simmer over medium to medium-low heat until the potatoes and carrots are tender, about 30 minutes. Stir in the shrimp and turn off the heat, wait a minute, then serve bowls or cupfuls of the soup for all your guests to enjoy, offering the lime wedges for each guest to squeeze in.

Recipe from season six of Rick Bayless' TV show "Mexico—One Plate at a Time."



along with his superior fruit, with his customers back at the restaurants.

As the chef sees it, "stories make food taste better." ▼

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