

Recently we looked at some popular herb seasoning blends. No doubt Herbes de Provence is a great dried blend that is very useful, especially for grilled foods.

This time let's look at the much larger category of spice blends. These are so numerous that we will look only at the best-known examples.

There is probably no more widely used spice blend in our area than chili powder – the one used in seasoning chili con carne– not the one used in Indian cuisine. This blend is usually primarily cumin, paprika, oregano, Cayenne and garlic powder. Its distinct flavor comes from the cumin. The paprika provides the color.

Some versions of the New Orleans classic barbecue shrimp have as their main seasoning this type of chili powder.

Other chili powders are made mainly from chilies – mostly red peppers. Varieties like Ancho, Cayenne, Jalapeno and Pasilla all qualify. Classic Indian cuisine utilizes one made from Cayenne peppers.

Many real Mexican recipes use all sorts of seasonings made from dried chilies ground to a powder. These contain great subtle flavors that are not based on heat. I think those qualify as chili powders, too.

Next let's talk about curry powder. This blend usually contains spices like coriander, turmeric and cumin. Another interesting spice – fenugreek – is in many versions. The hot most often comes from chilies like cayenne.

Other spices that appear in curry blends include cardamom, fennel, ginger, garlic, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, mustard seed and other peppers.

Curry powder is really an English "invention." The English made this all-purpose blend of spices to season their Indian-style food. The local population always made seasonings specific to a dish and prepared them to order.

The yellow in curry powder is from turmeric. The other basic ingredients are coriander, cumin and fenugreek. Usually some type of

hot spice from chilies is added. The spice I like to add toward the end of cooking is cardamom. It adds a wonderful aroma to a dish – particularly seafood.

Curries go down lots of roads such as green, yellow and red. These are made from pastes and will be the subject of another article.

Go beyond curry and you come to garam masala. This blend is similar to a curry but usually does not contain cumin. What is usually added is ginger, garlic and anise or fennel. This blend is often made hotter with even more chilies.

The French have a spice blend known as four spices. It consists of white pepper, ginger, nutmeg and cloves – all in ground form. This blend adds a rich earthiness to a dish. We used it this week in the potato and mushroom soup at Jimmy's.

Now the Chinese have a blend called five-spice powder. Traditionally the ones used are Szechuan peppercorns, star anise, cloves, cinnamon and fennel seeds. Actually it's not cinnamon but a close bark-like relative.

This is a very useful blend that imparts unique aroma to a dish. We use it at Jimmy's in our shrimp toast. If you add salt to five-spice powder, you have a very nice seasoned salt.

Other popular seasoned salts you can purchase are garlic and onion salt. I prefer to stick with the granulated version of these and control the salt myself.

Two well-known seasoning blends from Louisiana are from Zatarain's and Tony Chachere's (cash-uh-rees). These are seasoned salts with an extra kick from garlic and Cayenne. They are quite useful if you are careful about the salt.

Tony Chachere was about the first Louisiana chef to start selling something. He began around 1972 in Opelousas after he retired from cheffing. I am happy to have a copy of his book, "Cajun Country Cookbook," he published that year.

Chef Paul Prudhomme sells his blackening seasoning blend everywhere. He has lots of other versions, too. Most have the word "magic" in their name.

There are a number of packaged seasonings that are useful. Examples like taco seasoning, Italian seasoning and jerk seasoning are good ones.

Traditional lemon pepper is a great one to have around. It can add zip and flavor to meats and veggies alike – especially taken from the grill.

Another popular line of seasoning blends is from Mrs. Dash. There are a number of these that give you lots of different options. Many of them are low salt or salt free.

There are also baking blends like pumpkin and apple pie spice. The pumpkin version uses cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and ginger. Add some allspice and you have the apple pie kind.

My advice is to stay away from Accent and any other seasoning blends containing MSG – monosodium glutamate. This naturally occurring ingredient – a salt actually – is basically flavorless. However it acts as a flavor enhancer by getting our taste buds excited.

Many people have allergic reactions to MSG. Some are severe and others are never noticed as reactions. Fatigue is a common one that people never realize. It also causes the body to produce insulin with no sugar present.

MSG used to be common in Asian restaurants. It is used much less now. It is often present in food additives. So be careful and read the label.

It's OK to make your own versions of these or other spice blends. Those made fresh are most always better. Use whole spices and grind them just before using. Heating them before grinding brings out even more flavor.

The best thing to use is a spice grinder or a mortar and pestle. I've used the same one of those for over 30 years. It works just fine. You can also use a coffee grinder dedicated to spices.

The small jar attachment on a blender will work. Do not use your food processor however. You will stick spices to the blade and jam the machine. What you are able to grind will turn to a paste and not be good.

Be adventurous and try a few spice blends. They are easy to use and will add a variety to your dishes that your family will appreciate.