

# Tiny Capers Give Exuberant Flavor

Add zing to all kinds of dishes, from hot-and-sour chickpea soup to tomato-rich braised chicken

BY ROBERT WEMISCHNER

**M**y fridge and cabinets are filled with all sorts of condiments, but when I want to give a dish a bright burst of tartness, I reach for capers. They're a staple of the Mediterranean pantry, and a staple of my pantry, too. Capers may look nondescript in their shiny glass jars, but they're my secret weapon. Those green buds from a prickly, sun-baked shrub can really make a dish sing.

Capers provide a flavor kick far out of proportion to their small size, adding a zestiness that's as warm as their native Mediterranean. They add tang to northern cooking, too. You can use capers to brighten all sorts of dishes—soups, salads, stews, pastas, grilled fish, chicken, chops, and more.

## CHOOSE SALT-PACKED CAPERS FOR PURER FLAVOR

Capers come pickled in vinegar-based brine or preserved in coarse sea salt. Though the brined ones are easiest to come by and taste just fine, I prefer salt-packed capers. They lose none of their taste to the vinegar brine, and they retain a chewier texture.

**The smallest capers are called nonpareilles** (pronounced non-puh-REHL), and they're about the size of peppercorns. They're what you'll find in the supermarket in slender bottles. Capers are classed by size, and though it's only sometimes that you see them labeled as such, I think the names are kind of neat. In ascending order of size, they're called *surfines* (7 to 8mm), *capucines* (8 to 9mm), *capotes* (9 to 11mm), *fines* (11 to 13mm), and *gruesas* (13mm and up).

Different-sized capers don't vary in taste, but a bigger caper naturally delivers more flavor per bite. It's a question of preference and aesthetics as to

which size capers you like in a particular dish. Some people prefer smaller buds because they scatter more evenly through a dish, lending flavor to every mouthful.

Whatever size capers you choose, they should be uniform in size; this means consistent quality throughout the batch. If you're buying capers packed in salt, be sure that the salt is white or pale yellow. Darker salt means the capers are rancid.

**Stores specializing in Mediterranean ingredients offer the widest selection**, best prices, and freshest supplies of capers. Major caper-producing countries include Turkey, Morocco, Italy (especially good capers come from the Sicilian island of Pantelleria), France, Greece, and Spain.

## ALL CAPERS NEED RINSING

Both brined and salt-packed capers need to be soaked before they're added to the other ingredients; the buds' flavor and texture shine through more clearly that way. Certain recipes, however, like the Spanish-style chicken on p. 52, take well to the extra caper flavor you'll get by draining, but not washing, brined capers.

**Soak brine-packed capers in a few changes of cold water** and gently rinse them in a sieve (save the brine to cover any remaining capers, which you should refrigerate after the bottle is opened). Soak salt-packed capers in cold water, and then drain and rinse them (I like to give about four rinsings, which



*All capers need rinsing. The flavor and texture of both brined and salt-packed capers comes through more clearly that way.*



*Capers come packed  
in brine or in salt.  
Salt-packed capers  
maintain their flavor  
and texture better  
than those packed  
in brine.*



takes about half an hour). Even after soaking, capers are still salty, so you'll likely need little or no additional salt for the dish you're preparing.

An opened jar of brined capers will stay fresh for about three months in the refrigerator, and an opened bag of salt-packed capers will keep refrigerated for up to two months. If you have leftover soaked and rinsed salt-packed capers, just cover them with mild vinegar in a glass jar, refrigerate them, and try to use them within a few days.

### JUST A SMATTERING ADDS BIG FLAVOR

I think capers are great if you don't have time for making involved sauces—they add big flavor, fast. Use capers sparingly and toss them in near the end of the cooking time; long cooking tends to mute their lively taste and crunchy texture. Capers are especially good combined with other tart, salty, or pickled ingredients, such as lemons, anchovies, olives, tomatoes, garlic, and vinegar.

Capers are from the Mediterranean, but they're used in northern cooking, too. You'll find them in Danish steak tartare, Scandinavian smorgasbords, and German pork dumplings.

**Capers punch up other flavors in a recipe,** which makes it fun to experiment. Remember that they're an assertive presence, even in small amounts. To be sure you don't overdo it, taste as you go.

### Pollo Alcaparrado (Spanish-Style Braised Chicken)

Crusty peasant bread and dry white wine from Spain, Italy, or Greece are excellent companions for this dish. Serves four to six.

- 3 lb. chicken pieces
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Flour for dredging
- 3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, approximately
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed or minced
- 1 cup coarsely chopped onion
- 2 lb. fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded, excess juice removed, and chopped, or two 28-oz. cans of peeled plum tomatoes, well drained, seeded, and chopped (3 cups)
- ½ cup drained large capers
- ⅓ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

Lightly sprinkle the chicken with salt and pepper. Dredge it in the flour, shaking off any excess. Pour a scant ⅛ inch olive oil into a large, heavy skillet and heat the oil until it's almost smoking. Brown as many chicken pieces as you can fit in one uncrowded layer. Cook the chicken until it's well browned, about 5 min., and then turn to brown the other side. Transfer to a platter.

Pour off excess fat from the pan, add the wine, and deglaze over high heat, using a wooden spoon to dislodge any browned bits clinging to the pan. Simmer 1 min. Add the garlic and onion and cook over moderate heat until tender, stirring occasionally, 5 to 7 min.

Stir in the tomatoes and return the chicken and any juices to the pan (the liquid should barely cover the



*Capers punch up other flavors in a recipe and help them work in tantalizing concert, as in this Spanish-Style Braised Chicken with tomatoes, garlic, and onion.*

Photos except as noted: Brian Hagiwara  
Photo above: Alan Richardson



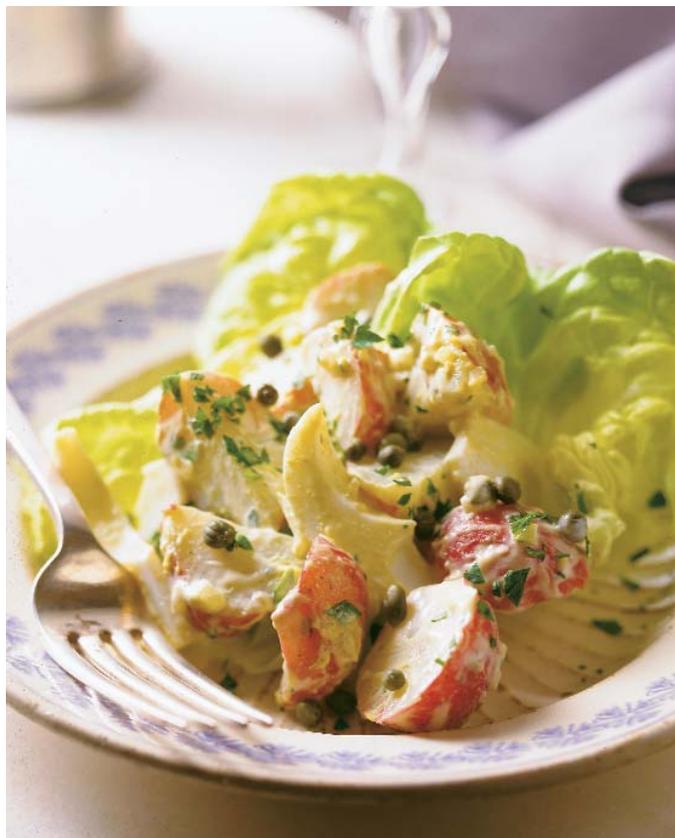
chicken). Cook, covered, over medium-low heat, until the chicken is tender when pierced with a knife, about 40 min. Transfer the chicken to a warm serving platter. Boil the sauce over high heat until slightly reduced. Stir in the capers, taste, and adjust seasonings, keeping in mind that capers add salt. Pour the sauce over the chicken, garnish with the parsley, and serve immediately.

### Tunisian-Style Chickpea Soup

*Harissa* is a hot pepper paste you'll find in most Middle Eastern markets. One dollop turns up the heat in this make-ahead soup. Cooking the chickpeas in the oven keeps the stovetop free for other cooking. *Serves four.*

*1½ cups dried chickpeas, washed and picked over*  
*2 bay leaves*  
*1 Tbs. cumin seeds*  
*2 Tbs. olive oil (the fruitier the better)*  
*1 cup coarsely chopped onion*  
*4 cloves garlic, crushed or minced*  
*1 Tbs. harissa or hot sauce; more or less to taste*  
*1 Tbs. salt*  
*1½ to 3 Tbs. lemon juice or white-wine vinegar*  
*4 medium stale pita or other flatbread, torn or cut into rough pieces (3 to 4 cups)*  
*¼ cup large capers, soaked, rinsed, and drained*  
*2 Tbs. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley*  
*Extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling*  
*8 lemon wedges (optional)*

Soak the chickpeas overnight in about 6 cups water. Drain and transfer them to an ovenproof casserole, along with the bay leaves and enough water to cover



*Capers are from the Mediterranean, but northern cuisines benefit from their sassy kick, too, as in this Scandinavian-Style Potato Salad.*

## A scrubby bush yields tasty capers



I was surprised when I first learned that those tiny, elegant capers in the tall, slim jar are actually the preserved buds of the scrubby, prickly Mediterranean caper bush.

**Just before the buds burst into bloom**, they're harvested and soaked in open-air barrels of salt and water. The resulting lactic fermentation draws out acidity and bitterness. Though some claim that the buds produced by wild plants are better, you can find excellent cultivated capers, too.

**Caper buds are aged for a month or two** before they're repeatedly washed, re-brined, and fermented. Finally, they're cleaned, sorted, and packaged.

**Besides caper buds, caper bushes yield berries when buds are left to flower.** After the white and purple blossom fades, the pistil develops into large, fleshy, olive-shaped fruits, which you'll find preserved in brine with their stems attached. Caper berries taste like buds, with a pleasant soft-crunchy texture. They add pep to salads, and make a great martini garnish.

the chickpeas by 1½ inches. Bake uncovered at 325°F until you can pierce the chickpeas easily with a knife, about 2 hours; most should stay intact. (During baking, add more water if needed.) Set aside.

While the chickpeas are cooking, toast the cumin seeds in a heavy skillet over medium heat until fragrant but not brown, about 5 min. Grind them to a fine powder with an electric spice grinder or a mortar and pestle. Set aside.

In a large, heavy saucepan over medium heat, warm the oil until fragrant. Cook the onion, stirring, until

Go easy on the salt when you cook with capers—these briny buds give a zingy kick far out of proportion to their small size.

tender but not browned, 5 to 7 min. Stir in the garlic and cook for 1 min. Add the *harissa* and ground cumin; cook briefly, just until fragrant. Add the cooked chickpeas, their liquid, and the salt; simmer until the onions have disintegrated, about 1 hour. Remove the pan from the heat; season with the lemon juice or vinegar to taste. Remove and discard the bay leaves, taste, and adjust the seasonings.

Divide the pita among four heated soup bowls. Spoon the chickpeas over the bread with equal portions of the liquid. Sprinkle with the capers and parsley, and add more *harissa* to taste. Just before serving, drizzle a bit of olive oil over each bowl. Serve lemon wedges on the side if you like extra tartness.

### Scandinavian-Style Potato Salad

If you don't have a fine sieve to drain the yogurt, line a regular sieve with a coffee filter. *Serves four.*

#### FOR THE SALAD:

2 lb. small red potatoes  
4 hard-cooked eggs, peeled and quartered  
¼ cup finely chopped onion  
4 Tbs. capers, rinsed a few times in cold water  
2 Tbs. finely snipped fresh chives  
Butter or red-leaf lettuce leaves

#### FOR THE DRESSING:

1 Tbs. Dijon mustard  
1 Tbs. mayonnaise  
1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil  
2 to 3 Tbs. lemon juice  
½ cup nonfat yogurt, drained in a fine sieve in the refrigerator for 4 hours  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Boil the potatoes in lightly salted water until tender, 15 to 20 min. Drain the potatoes, refresh them in cold water, and press them dry with a kitchen towel. Cut them in half, or in quarters if they're large. Set aside to cool.



*Mediterranean comfort food.* Capers season this satisfying Tunisian-Style Chickpea Soup with a warm burst of flavor.



*Caper butter is a versatile, handy flavoring. At the last minute, drop a slice on fish, chicken, chops, vegetables, potatoes, or pasta. The compound butter keeps for weeks in the freezer.*

**Make the dressing**—In a small bowl, whisk together the mustard, mayonnaise, olive oil, and lemon juice until the mixture is smooth. Whisk in the yogurt. Add pepper to taste.

Put the potatoes and three of the eggs in a bowl. Sprinkle in the onion, capers, and chives. Gently toss in the dressing, taking care to keep the potatoes intact. Garnish the salad with the reserved egg quarters and the lettuce.

### Caper Butter

This compound butter is as good on grilled vegetables as it is on chicken, fish, steak, rice, potatoes, or pasta. Wrapped tightly, caper butter keeps well in the fridge for about five days and in the freezer for a month. *Yields one 6x1-inch log.*

*4 oz. unsalted butter, softened  
1 Tbs. capers, drained, washed, patted dry, and finely chopped  
1 tsp. finely minced Kalamata or other good-quality black olives  
1 tsp. grated lemon zest  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste*

Cream the butter. Add the capers, olives, and lemon zest. Add pepper to taste. Shape the butter into a log about 1 inch in diameter by 6 inches long. Wrap tightly and refrigerate until serving time, or freeze it if you're making it in advance. Before serving, let the butter soften enough so that you can easily slice it into medallions.

#### CAPERS BY MAIL

**Adriana's Caravan**, 409 Vanderbilt St., Brooklyn, NY 11218; 800/316-0820; brined and salt-packed capers.

**Dean & DeLuca**, 560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 212/226-6800, ext. 268; brined and salt-packed capers.

**The Pasta Shop**, 5655 College Ave., Oakland, CA 94618; 510/547-4005; brined and salt-packed capers.

**Zingerman's Deli**, 422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104; 313/769-1625; salt-packed capers.

*Robert Wemischner wrote The Vivid Flavors Cookbook (Lowell House, 1994) and is co-author, with Karen Karp, of Gourmet to Go: A Guide to Opening & Operating a Specialty Foods Store, to be published this spring by John Wiley & Sons. ♦*