

# Fragrant, Pungent Coriander

Could this be the world's  
most popular herb?

BY CAROLYN HAYNES



**I**t may sound funny, but to me, coriander is as essential to food as salt. Eaten raw, this flat, serrated leaf is fresh, pungent, and a little bit piny. Cooked, its flavor turns mellow and savory, and provides a warm background to other flavors. Fresh coriander is an indispensable part of daily cooking in most parts of the world, and it may well be the world's most popular herb. In North America, fresh coriander is finding its way into the

*Keep coriander's bright, bold flavor under wraps. To preserve the aroma, flavor, and texture of the fresh herb, stick the roots and stems in a jar of water, cover the leaves with a plastic bag, and refrigerate (see photo at left). The coriander should stay fresh for at least a week.*

*Assertive coriander turns subtle when cooked. You may not be able to tell that there's coriander in this dish of rice with pigeon peas (at right), but you'd miss it if it weren't there.*



everyday repertoire of many cooks who fell in love with it when eating Mexican, Chinese, or Indian food.

### **CILANTRO = FRESH CORIANDER**

Friends get impatient when I talk about “coriander leaves,” insisting that the correct name is cilantro. Cilantro is in fact the Spanish word for coriander leaves. I’ve also heard it called Chinese parsley, and in Indian markets it’s often called *hara dhanya*. Technically, “coriander” refers to the entire plant *Coriandrum sativum*. The leaves, roots, and seeds are all used in cooking, but they aren’t interchangeable. The roots have a stronger, more bitter flavor than the leaves. Thai and Cambodian cooks use coriander root to flavor stocks and curry pastes. The light brown spherical seeds have an altogether different taste. This spice is quite common in Indian curries, and it’s also used whole to flavor pickles. Before you begin cooking a recipe,

make sure you’re clear about what it’s calling for—fresh coriander or coriander seeds.

**You either love it or hate it.** As hard as it is for me to believe, not everyone loves fresh coriander. Though taste experts aren’t sure if it’s a matter of genes or familiarity, for some people the smell of fresh coriander is fetid and the taste soapy. While the chemical components in coriander leaves are the same ones found in less controversial foods such as limes, experts believe that it is the proportion of these coriander flavor components that may be sensed pleasantly by some and negatively by others. In other words, while most people love coriander, for some people, coriander just doesn’t taste good.

### **SMELL IT BEFORE YOU BUY IT**

Contrary to what many cookbooks say, there’s no adequate substitute for fresh green coriander leaves. Dried ones have already lost their flavor by

the time they're fully desiccated, and parsley shares nothing with coriander except a deep-green color (though flat-leaf parsley sometimes looks a bit like coriander).

Good coriander leaves are extremely fragrant, so you should be able to smell them from a distance. Look for coriander that's tender, aromatic, and very green. It will keep longer if it still has its roots attached. To be sure that it is coriander—not flat-leaf parsley—and that it's aromatic, lightly bruise a leaf to release the scent. Don't be taken in by beautiful looks: if it has no aroma, it will have no flavor. Avoid wilted bunches with yellowing leaves. While they may smell aromatic, they'll spoil quickly even when properly stored. They also won't be able to add that critical splash of green color that visually enlivens dishes.

**Keeping it fresh**—Once you have fresh coriander home, pick out any wilted leaves and put it in a jar like a bunch of flowers, with its roots or stem ends submerged in water. Don't wash the bunch before storing it—water on the leaves will hasten rot. Cover the leaves with a plastic bag and put the whole thing in the refrigerator. Change the water every two days or so, picking out any wilted leaves when you do, and the coriander will stay fresh for at least a week.

When I don't have the refrigerator shelf space to spare for a jar of coriander, I wrap the leaves very tightly in aluminum foil and toss this airless package anywhere in the refrigerator. Another method is to wrap the coriander in a moist—not wet—paper towel and refrigerate it in a resealable plastic bag or an airtight plastic container.

If you don't have easy access to fresh coriander, when you do get a bunch you can freeze the leaves instead of refrigerating them. Make a paste or a chutney in the blender with coriander, water, and, if you like, other flavorings (see recipe for Coriander Chutney, opposite). Pour this mixture into ice-cube trays, freeze them, and then transfer the cubes to a plastic bag. I have also had success stuffing coriander leaves into ice-cube trays, filling the trays with water, and freezing. The leaves darken slightly and get soft, but the flavor stays strong. I use these leaves only in cooked dishes.

**Wash it with a dunk and a swish.** If the coriander still has roots attached, twist them off (save them if you're planning to cook Thai or Cambodian food). Carefully pick through the rest of the plant, removing any blackened, yellowing, or brown-edged leaves. To wash the dirt and sand off the leaves, dunk the coriander in a bowl of water, swish it around, and then let it float for a few seconds. Take the leaves out of the water and repeat the process with fresh water until no grit is left on the bottom of the bowl.

Once the coriander is clean, gently pluck the leaves from the stems, being careful not to string along any tough fibers from the stem. There are those who recommend using only the leaves, but I am not a purist about this. Certainly don't use the stems if they're tough or woody. When using coriander as a garnish, I use only leaves, leaving them whole or chopping them coarse. When I'm mixing a large amount of fresh coriander into a salad, again I'd use only the leaves. But when cooking coriander in dishes like the potato kebabs, I say use leaves and stems as long as both are tender and fresh.

### **HOT AND BOLD FLAVORS COMBINE WELL WITH CORIANDER**

Once you have a sense of the aroma, appearance, and taste of coriander, start thinking of good combinations. Fresh coriander belongs with tomatoes, onions, and hot green chiles, ingredients commonly found in Mexican and Caribbean food (see the recipes for Guacamole with Coriander and Yellow Rice with Pigeon Peas on p. 70). Try coriander leaves in your favorite gazpacho or salsa recipe and you'll suddenly realize what's been missing.

*Let the dirt and sand fall away. To clean fresh coriander, pick out any wilted or yellow leaves, swish the leaves and stems around in a bowl of cool water, and then lift the herb out of the water, letting the grit sink to the bottom. Repeat until the water is free of grit.*



Photo: Sloan Howard

*Coconut and coriander are natural partners. Blended together with chiles and lime juice, the pair make a hot chutney that enlivens fish, fritters, rice, or whatever else you choose to spoon it over.*



It's impossible to think of coriander without thinking of ginger. A standard Indian green *masala* (or fresh spice mixture) consists of fresh coriander leaves, green chiles, onion, ginger, and cumin. Sauté the ingredients lightly in oil or butter, adding the coriander at the last minute, and then fold them into an omelet. Or let the same team of ingredients flavor a chicken, meat, or vegetable dish like the Pakistani potato kebabs (see recipe on p. 70).

Coconut and coriander also blend well together. The freshness of the coriander cuts through the creaminess of the coconut in preparations like Coriander Chutney. Toss coriander as a garnish on a Thai coconut soup where it collaborates with the flavors of the coconut, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and galangal.

Sprinkle chopped coriander over curries and vegetable dishes. Mix two or three tablespoons of chopped coriander into your favorite salad. Make a fresh green salsa by grinding large quantities of coriander leaves with lime, onion, green chiles, and garlic—or leave out the lime and stir raw rice into the paste and cook to make Mexican green rice.

The more I experiment with this herb, the more convinced I am that you can never have too much fresh green coriander.

### **CORIANDER CHUTNEY**

This thick paste is my friend Duchi's version of a traditional South Indian coriander-coconut chutney. If you have a mortar and pestle, try Duchi's method of crushing the coriander, coconut, and green chiles, and then adding the lime juice, salt, and sugar. For a quicker version, throw the ingredients in a blender or food processor.

*Yields about 1 cup.*

**1 cup coriander leaves and stems, tightly packed**  
**1 cup fresh or dried grated coconut**  
**1 to 2 hot green chiles, cored and seeded**  
**2 Tbs. lime juice**  
**½ tsp. salt**  
**1 tsp. sugar**  
**1-in. piece fresh ginger (optional)**  
**1 clove garlic (optional)**  
**Water**

Put all the ingredients except the water in a blender or food processor. Add ¼ cup of water and blend. Scrape down the sides and keep adding water and blending until the mixture is a thick paste. The goal is to use just enough water to rehydrate the coconut but not so much that the paste is watery.

## YELLOW RICE WITH PIGEON PEAS

(Arroz con Gandules)

This is a classic Puerto Rican dish. Look for annatto (*achiote*) seeds and pigeon peas (*gandules*) in Latin American markets. Serves two to four.

2 Tbs. oil  
1½ tsp. annatto (*achiote*) seeds  
⅓ cup chopped onion  
½ cup chopped green bell pepper  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
½ cup chopped tomatoes  
1 Tbs. capers  
½ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted and ground  
(or ½ tsp. ground cumin)  
1 tsp. salt  
½ tsp. oregano leaves  
1 cup cooked pigeon peas (*gandules*)  
⅓ cup fresh coriander leaves, tightly packed  
1 cup uncooked rice  
1½ cups water

In a small pan, heat the oil over medium heat. Put the *achiote* seeds in for a minute—long enough to release their yellow color and flavor but not long enough to turn too brown. The oil should be a bright yellow-orange. Strain the oil into a medium saucepan, and discard the *achiote* seeds.

Add the onion to the oil and sauté until translucent, about 5 min. Add the green pepper and garlic, stirring lightly. Add the tomatoes, capers, cumin, salt, oregano, pigeon peas, coriander, and rice. Stir thoroughly over medium heat for 2 min. and then add the water. Stir frequently until the water comes to a boil and reduces until it's level with the rice. Turn down the heat to low, cover, and cook for another 20 to 25 min., until all the water is absorbed.

## PAKISTANI POTATO KEBABS

(Alu Kebab)

I like to use unpeeled Red Bliss potatoes for a nice texture and color. Although these kebabs are delicious plain, I recommend serving them with a mint or coriander chutney. Yields about 20 kebabs.

1¼ lb. (4 medium) red potatoes  
½ tsp. salt  
¼ cup finely chopped onion  
4½ tsp. finely chopped fresh ginger  
1 green chile, cored, seeded, and chopped fine  
¾ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted  
⅓ cup chopped coriander leaves and stems, tightly packed  
6 Tbs. breadcrumbs  
2 Tbs. lime juice  
½ tsp. salt  
⅛ tsp. finely ground black pepper  
½ cup clarified butter, vegetable oil, or combination of both

Put the potatoes in a saucepan, cover with water, and add the salt. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and cook for another 15 min., or until the potatoes are thoroughly cooked and soft enough to mash. Drain and cool.

In a large mixing bowl, mash the potatoes with a potato masher or a large spoon, leaving them a little chunky. Add the onion, ginger, chile, cumin seeds, coriander, breadcrumbs, lime juice, salt, and pepper. Blend thoroughly, using your hands if necessary. Let this mixture stand for 15 min. and then shape into small patties, about 2 in. in diameter and ½ in. thick, taking care to smooth out the edges so that the patties don't come apart as they cook.

Heat the butter or oil in a heavy skillet. When it's sizzling hot, put as many patties in the pan as will fit without touching. Turn when they're crispy and golden brown,

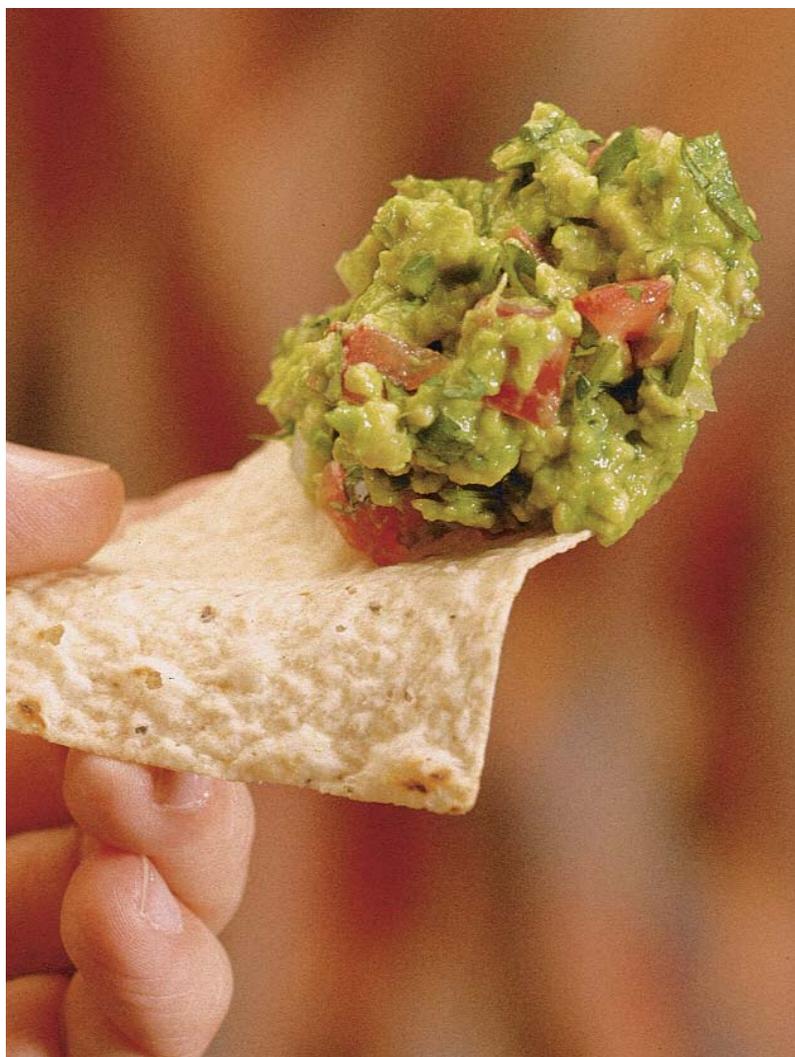


Photo: Eleanor Thompson

about 3 min. Cook the other side until crispy, and remove from the pan with a slotted spatula. Drain on a cooling rack covered with paper towels. Fry the remaining kebabs. They're best served right away, but you can put them in a low oven to keep them warm.

## GUACAMOLE WITH CORIANDER

If you've never put coriander in guacamole, try my version. This recipe is easily doubled. Yields almost 2 cups.

½ cup diced tomato  
2 Tbs. finely chopped onion  
1 green chile, cored, seeded, and chopped fine  
2 Tbs. lime juice  
1 ripe Haas avocado  
2 Tbs. plain yogurt (optional)  
½ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted and ground  
¼ cup chopped coriander leaves, tightly packed  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Marinate the tomato, onion, and chile in the lime juice while you prepare the avocado. Peel the avocado and mash it in a bowl with a fork until smooth. Stir in the yogurt, if using. Stir in the rest of the ingredients. Let sit for 15 min. for the flavors to blend before serving.

Carolyn Haynes became fanatic about fresh coriander as a child when her family lived in India. She works in a refugee assistance program in Philadelphia. ♦

**It ain't guacamole without coriander.** Fresh coriander, or cilantro as it's called in Spanish, adds its unmistakable flavor to many Mexican dishes.