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Nutrition for Health and Fitness: Alternative Seasonings[1]

B. Ellen Templeton, Linda E. Moody and Linda B. Bobroff[2]

Flavor is an important component to the enjoyment of any food. A famous gourmet once said, "Flavor is the soul of food; and herbs, seasonings and spices are the soul of flavor."

Spices were highly treasured by our ancestors. For centuries, men risked their lives on long caravan trips across the Middle East, fought wars and discovered new worlds in order to possess a few pounds of spices. Pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg were considered necessary for survival. Spices added zest and pungency to our ancestor's food and wine.

The popularity and use of seasonings in cooking runs in cycles. Some cookbooks of the early 1900s showed the use of seasonings in about half of the recipes. By the 1930s the amount had dwindled dramatically. Today, the use of seasonings in food is gaining in popularity once again.

There is a certain freedom found when cooking with herbs, spices, and other seasonings. Their use in cooking is an art, not a science. Some basic guidance in the selection and use of seasonings may be needed, but the most important factors for success are the interest, imagination, and experimentation of the cook.

Innovative cooks of today recognize the ability of seasonings to transfer a simple dish into a delicacy. Those with simple tastes appreciate the use of seasonings to enhance the natural flavor of foods, recognizing that each food has a flavor all its own and should be savored for its uniqueness. Those with more sophisticated tastes enjoy the use of seasonings as an imaginative accent or an unexpected flair to favorite foods. Still others use seasonings to distract their tastebuds from salt and to allow other flavors to tease and tantalize their palates. Health-conscious cooks, and especially those with high blood pressure, appreciate seasonings other than salt. They not only add zest and contrast to the flavor and texture of food, but assist in lowering overall sodium intake.

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2. B. Ellen Templeton, former assistant professor and Extension Foods and Nutrition Specialist; Linda E. Moody, former associate professor and Extension Health Education Specialist; and Linda B. Bobroff, associate professor, Foods and Nutrition, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611. EDITOR'S NOTE: All recipes appearing in the Recipes Using Herbs and Spices section on pages 6-9 are from the "Eat Well -- Be Well Cookbook" Copyright 1986 by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and are used with permission of Simon and Schuster, Inc.

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SPICES, HERBS AND OTHER SEASONINGS — HERE'S THE DIFFERENCE

Spices and herbs include a great variety of vegetable products with distinct aromas and pungent flavors. **Spices** are parts of plants, such as the dried seeds, buds, fruit or flower parts, bark or root. They are usually of tropical origin. Examples include: cinnamon (bark), tumeric (root), cloves (buds), nutmeg (fruit), and caraway (seeds). Spices are sold in whole or ground form.

Herbs are from the leafy parts of temperate zone plants. Examples include: bay, basil, oregano, sage, and thyme. They are sold in crushed or powdered form.

Other seasonings include items such as lime, lemon, or orange juice and peel, nuts, seeds, raisins, and some condiments and dried vegetables. While these are not considered herbs or spices, their aromas and pungent flavors can be used extensively to season foods.

HOW TO BUY SPICES AND HERBS

Look for strength of aroma and color when purchasing herbs and spices. The color should be rich and true, not faded; the smell strong and fresh, not musty. It is best to buy herbs and spices in small quantities, as they will lose their flavor over time. When it is more economical to purchase a large container, do so with a group of friends. Sharing a larger container makes it possible for you to experiment with many herbs and spices, and it involves little expense.

Be cautious of purchasing herbs and spices from bulk containers as frequently offered in "natural" food stores. They may not be sterilized. Spices and herbs need to be sterilized to destroy bacteria and molds which can survive cooking and cause off-flavors and food spoilage.

HOW TO STORE SPICES AND HERBS

Flavors are due to the aromatic oils of a plant. Once these oils (or scents) are lost upon standing, the seasoning ability is gone. Protect the oils by keeping seasoning containers tightly closed and stored in a cool, clean, dry place. The cupboard above the range is handy for storing seasonings, but avoid it. The heat will hasten loss of flavor. When you can no longer detect a seasoning's distinct aroma, discard it; the flavor is gone.

Under favorable conditions spices will retain maximum aroma and flavor up to six months. Whole spices keep their flavor almost indefinitely. Herbs tend to lose flavor more rapidly than ground pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and cloves. However, if herbs are properly stored, they will retain flavor and color for several months.

HOW MUCH TO USE

There is no general rule for the correct amount of seasoning to use, as the pungency of each seasoning, its effect on different foods, and personal tastes, vary. Generally, if a recipe is not available, start with 1/4 teaspoon of spice or herb to four servings of food; per pound of meat, fish or poultry; or per pint of sauce, gravy, or soup. When using red pepper or garlic powder, begin with 1/8 teaspoon. Taste and make allowances for individual preferences as desired.

If you're a novice, introduce only one or two herbs or spices in a dish. Give your palate a chance to get accustomed to the change and to decide the most pleasant blends. Likewise, limit the number of seasoned dishes to no more than two per meal for starters.

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HOW TO SUBSTITUTE DIFFERENT FORMS OF HERBS

If you have the opportunity, experiment with fresh herbs. Better yet, start your own kitchen herb garden. The flavor of fresh herbs is unsurpassed.

When substituting fresh herbs, 3 teaspoons (1 tablespoon) is equal to 1 teaspoon dried, crushed herbs. One teaspoon of a dried, crushed herb is equal to 1/4 teaspoon powdered herbs.

WHEN TO ADD SPICES

The correct time to add spices and herbs to foods depends on the seasoning itself, the food being prepared, and the method of cooking.

The flavor of powdered spices and herbs is released immediately, so they can be added about 15 minutes before the end of the cooking period. Timing is especially important in long-cooking foods so that flavor will not be changed by prolonged heating.

Whole spices are best in long-cooking dishes. Add at the beginning of the cooking period so the long simmering can extract the full taste and aroma. Tie whole spices in a cheesecloth bag for easy removal.

PRESERVING FRESH HERBS AND SPICES

Fresh herbs can be preserved for future use by drying, freezing or by preserving the flavors in vinegar. **To dry:** separate stalks or stems of herbs into small bunches. Tie with string, and hang in a warm, dry, dark place. Leave until the leaves are crisp and brittle. In the summer this takes from three to ten days.

Strip the leaves, and buds or flowerettes, if desired. Place in a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Keep the leaves as whole as possible to preserve the flavor. They can be crumbled when used. Check the herbs each day for a few days to be sure they are sufficiently dry, or mold will develop.

When only leaves are dried, gather the leaves and spread in a thin layer on clean paper. Dry in a warm, dry, dark place until dry and brittle. Store as above.

Basil, parsley, and chives often turn very dark if air-dried. Stems of these herbs can be placed on clean brown paper and heated in the oven at 150° F or less. Leave the oven door cracked to allow moisture to escape. This method takes several hours.

Small quantities of herbs can be dried quickly in some microwave ovens. Check your user's guide to see whether or not this practice is recommended with the particular brand you own. To dry, place several clean herb sprigs or 1/2 cup leaves on a paper towel. Cover with another paper towel. (Do not use those made from recycled paper.) Heat on **HIGH** or **COOK** 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from oven and cool. If not completely dry and brittle, put back in the oven for a few seconds. Drying time may vary with different herbs and with different ovens. Store as you would regular dried herbs. Basil, sage, parsley, mint and oregano retain their appetizing green color when dried this way.

If only seeds are to be used, such as from dill, fennel, or coriander, take care to cut the stems when ripe but before seeds fall. Place a paper bag carefully over a head and tie with string before the head is severed. Hang upside down (seed head down) to catch the seeds as they dry and fall.

To freeze: Place sprigs or stalks of herbs in plastic bags and put into the freezer immediately. When ready to use, snip or chop without thawing for easier handling. Mint, tarragon, parsley,

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chives, sorrel, and marjoram preserve well using this method.

Another good way to freeze is to place chopped herbs in an ice cube tray, fill with water, and freeze. Place the frozen cubes in plastic bags and store in freezer. The cubes can easily be popped into soups or stews when needed.

HOW TO USE SEASONINGS

Here are some tasty and complementary suggestions for using seasonings with certain foods to give you the confidence to start. After that, you are on your own. In seasoning foods, there are no fast rules. Creativity is the key, and praise is the reward.

SEASONING SAMPLER*

Beverages

Tomato juice — basil, dill, marjoram, oregano, lime or lemon juice, tarragon, savory, tabasco sauce

Vegetable juice cocktail — basil, marjoram, oregano, tabasco sauce, savory, tarragon

Breads

Coffeecake, quickbreads — cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, ground cardamom, lime, lemon or orange peel, chopped nuts, raisins, anise

Dumplings or pastry topping on meat or poultry pies — rosemary

Yeast breads — caraway seeds, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, cinnamon, dill weed, raisins, orange peel, lime peel, lemon peel, chopped nuts

Cakes and Cookies — Allspice, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg, raisins, nuts, orange peel, lime peel, lemon peel

Cheese

Cottage — sage, vinegar, chives, onion, vegetable flakes, diced cucumber

Cream — caraway seeds, chili powder, curry powder, garlic powder, onion powder, basil, sage, chopped nuts

Desserts

Custards and puddings — cinnamon, mace, nutmeg, chopped nuts

Pastry and piecrusts — cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, sesame seeds, chopped nuts

Eggs

Deviled — curry powder, dry mustard, rosemary, savory, thyme, dill weed, chives, basil

Omelet or scrambled — basil, chili powder, curry powder, marjoram, rosemary, savory, thyme, chives, fines herbes

Meats

Beef — oregano, garlic, bay leaf

Game — basil, oregano, rosemary, savory, thyme, bay leaf, sage, marjoram

Lamb — dry mustard, rosemary, mint, marjoram, thyme, basil

Pork — garlic, marjoram, sage, orange juice and/or peel, cranberry sauce; crushed caraway seeds mixed with lime or lemon juice, oil and onion; horseradish mixed with applesauce

Veal — basil, marjoram, oregano, thyme, lime or lemon juice and peel

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Pastas (And Other Starchy Side Dishes)

Noodles — sesame seeds, poppy seeds, saffron

Rice — basil, thyme, sage, meat or poultry broth, savory, saffron, curry powder

Spaghetti — fines herbes, lime or lemon butter

Poultry

Chicken, Turkey, and Pheasant — thyme, poultry seasoning, sage, curry powder, lime, lemon or orange juice, rosemary

Duck — curry powder, ginger, orange juice and/or peel, sage

Goose — marjoram, poultry seasoning, sage

Salads

Coleslaw — dill weed or seeds, caraway seeds, crushed pineapple, vinegar, mustard seeds, poppy seeds, raisins, chopped nuts

Potato — dill weed or seeds, diced cucumber, turmeric, tarragon vinegar

Sauces

Barbecue — cayenne pepper, chili powder, cumin, dry mustard, rosemary, thyme, vinegar, lime or lemon juice, onion, garlic, mustard seeds, bay leaf

Hollandaise — tarragon vinegar, cayenne pepper

Marinades — bay leaf, mustard seeds, vinegar, Italian seasoning, lime or lemon juice

Spaghetti — oregano, garlic, basil, marjoram, Italian seasoning, celery, cinnamon, onion, rosemary, fennel seeds

Vinaigrette — basil, dry mustard, tarragon vinegar, lime or lemon juice

Seafood

Clams — marjoram, oregano, poultry seasoning, thyme, tarragon, lime or lemon juice

Crab — lime or lemon juice, vinegar

Fish — dill weed, orange, lime or lemon butter, tarragon, thyme, tarragon vinegar, malt vinegar

Lobster — lime or lemon juice, lime or lemon butter

Oysters — thyme, horseradish

Scallops — garlic, lime, lemon, bay leaf

Shrimp — garlic, lime, lemon, bay leaf, tarragon, horseradish

Soups

Bean — oregano, savory

Beef — bay leaf, garlic, vegetable flakes

Chicken — sage, rosemary, poultry seasoning, thyme

Chicken gumbo — bay leaf, file (sassafras)

Chowders — bay leaf, thyme

Minestrone — basil, oregano, garlic, sage

Onion — marjoram, thyme

Pea — basil, rosemary, savory, mint

Potato — basil, chives, curry powder

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Tomato — basil, marjoram, oregano, thyme, diced cucumber, lime or lemon juice

Vegetable — basil, marjoram, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme, chili powder

Vegetables

Asparagus — sesame seeds, lime or lemon butter

Beans, snap — oregano, dry mustard, slivered almonds, basil, dill weed or seeds, rosemary, garlic, sesame seeds, vinegar

Beans, dried — basil, oregano, marjoram, bay leaf, garlic, onion, chili powder

Beets — vinegar, lime, lemon or orange juice, lime, lemon, or orange peel, allspice, basil, cloves, caraway seeds

Broccoli — lime, orange, or lemon butter; sesame seeds, nutmeg

Brussels Sprouts — dill weed, tarragon, vinegar, lime or lemon butter

Cabbage — caraway seeds, nutmeg, basil, dill weed or seeds, mustard seeds

Carrots — parsley, basil, ginger, nutmeg; lime, lemon, or orange juice; lime, lemon, or orange peel; brown sugar, vermouth, mint, curry powder in lemon, basil vinegar

Cauliflower — dill weed or seeds, rosemary

Cooking Greens — vinegar, lime or lemon juice

Corn — rosemary, marjoram, curry powder, chili powder, green pepper

Cucumber — dill weed, tarragon vinegar, oregano

Eggplant — oregano, basil, garlic

Mushrooms — rosemary, thyme, oregano, marjoram

Peas, green — lime or lemon juice, lime or lemon peel, basil, mint, onion

Peas, field or blackeyed — onion, fresh lean pork pieces

Potatoes, white — chives, onion, poppy seeds, marjoram, rosemary

Potatoes, sweet — cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, crushed pineapple

Spinach — garlic, allspice, nutmeg, lime or lemon juice, vinegar

Squash (summer) — dill weed or seeds, caraway seeds, chives

Squash (winter) & pumpkin — cinnamon, brown sugar, nutmeg, orange juice and/or peel, allspice, ginger, mace, pumpkin pie spice

Tomatoes — basil, oregano, tarragon vinegar, Italian seasoning, dill weed

Turnips — rosemary, nutmeg

**NOTE: Not all food categories are represented. Emphasis is given to those foods that most people are accustomed to seasoning with some salt. An effort is made here to incorporate the use of seasonings other than salt and other sodium-containing compounds, i.e., MSG. In addition, not all seasonings are mentioned. Notably, paprika, black pepper, and parsley have been omitted. The popularity and wide use of these seasonings indicates that guidance for their use is not necessary.*

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HERB BUTTER COMBINATIONS (USE ON VEGETABLES, BREADS, NOODLES)

- chives and parsley flakes
- chives, basil, savory, and lime or lemon
- poppy seeds, marjoram, and paprika
- chives, tarragon, rosemary, chervil, thyme, oregano, and lime or lemon
- chives and lime or lemon
- chives and sage
- dry mustard

HERB SHAKERS

Remove your salt shaker and replace it with an herb shaker. These make novel gifts for holidays or birthdays, and it's a good way to introduce a health-conscious friend to alternative seasonings to sodium.

Use these first two herb shaker combinations on meat, seafood, soup, stews and vegetables.

Bountiful Bouquet Mix

2 tsp. thyme
1 tsp. powdered sage
1 1/2 tsp. rosemary
2 tsp. marjoram
1 tsp. sweet basil

Zesty Herb Mix

1 tsp. thyme
1 1/2 tsp. savory
1 tsp. powdered sage
1 tsp. rosemary
1 1/2 tsp. marjoram
1 tsp. tarragon

Use the following mix on salads, meat, poultry, and vegetables.

All-Around Mix

2 tsp. garlic powder
2 tsp. onion powder
2 tsp. paprika
2 tsp. white pepper
2 tsp. dry mustard
1 tsp. powdered thyme
1 tsp. ground celery seeds

Grind these next three herb shaker combinations in a blender for one minute at high speed or until powdery. Use on meat, fish, poultry or vegetables.

Hot Spicy Mix

1/4 c. instant minced onion
1 Tbsp. sweet basil
1 Tbsp. ground cumin
1 Tbsp. garlic powder
1 Tbsp. cracked black pepper

Herbed Celery Mix

1/4 c. instant minced onion
1 Tbsp. dill seeds
1 1/2 tsp. celery seeds
1/4 tsp. tarragon

Peppy Mix

1 1/2 Tbsp. leaf thyme
1 1/2 Tbsp. leaf marjoram
1 Tbsp. leaf rosemary
2 tsp. powdered sage
1 tsp. ground black pepper

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Use the Ancestral Herb Mix in ragouts.

Ancestral Herb Mix

1 tsp. powdered thyme
1 tsp. instant minced onion
1 tsp. garlic powder
1 1/2 tsp. black pepper
1/4 tsp. ground mixed spices
1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg
1/4 tsp. ground ginger

RECIPES USING HERBS AND SPICES

Herbs and spices can add flavor to a variety of recipes without adding salt. Try the following recipes and see how tasty foods low in salt can be.

Pasta Primavera

2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
1 clove garlic, minced
1 c. green beans (about 2 ounces)
1 1/2 c. chopped zucchini (about 1 large)
1 1/2 c. chopped broccoli (about 1/3 bunch)
1/2 c. fresh peas
4 c. ripe plum tomatoes, chopped (about 8 medium)
1 tsp. chopped parsley
1 tsp. basil
1/2 tsp. thyme
1 tsp. oregano
1/2 tsp. pepper
1/4 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. crushed red pepper
1/3 c. Parmesan cheese
1 lb. spaghetti

Heat oil in large skillet and saute garlic, beans, zucchini, broccoli and peas about 2-3 minutes until tender crisp. Add tomatoes, parsley, basil, thyme, oregano, pepper, salt and red pepper. Simmer about 5 minutes until tomatoes are tender. In large pot, bring about 1 quart water to a rolling boil. Add spaghetti and stir to separate. Cook about 8-10 minutes until al dente (somewhat firm). Drain well in a colander and put pasta in large serving bowl. Add primavera sauce, and Parmesan cheese; toss and serve immediately. Makes 6 servings.

Nutrients per serving

425 Calories
3 milligrams Cholesterol
10 grams Fat
200 milligrams Sodium

Lemon Rice

1/2 clove garlic, minced
2 Tbsp. margarine
3/4 c. chicken broth
3/4 c. water
1 1/2 c. enriched white rice
2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
1 Tbsp. lemon juice
1 tsp. grated lemon rind

In a medium saucepan, slowly saute garlic in margarine until golden. Add rice and stir for 1 minute. Add broth and water and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce to a simmer, cover and cook until all broth is absorbed. Do not stir. Add parsley, lemon juice and rind. Mix lightly with a fork. Makes 4 servings, about 3/4 cup each.

Nutrients per serving

190 Calories
trace of Cholesterol
6.5 grams Fat
208 milligrams Sodium

Strawberry Parfait

1 c. regular long-grain rice
2 c. skim milk
3 Tbsp. cornstarch
3 Tbsp. sugar
1/2 tsp. grated lemon rind

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1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/8 tsp. ground nutmeg
1 egg, beaten
1 tsp. vanilla extract
2 c. sliced fresh strawberries

Prepare rice as label directs, omitting salt, add butter; cool slightly. In medium saucepan, combine milk, cornstarch, sugar, lemon rind, cinnamon and nutmeg; bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Pour a small amount of hot mixture into egg, stirring constantly. Return mixture to saucepan; cook and stir over low heat until slightly thickened. Stir in cooked rice and vanilla. Pour into bowl. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, about 3 hours. In each of 6 parfait glasses, layer 1/4 cup rice mixture and 2 rounded tablespoons strawberries. Repeat layers of rice mixture and strawberries, ending with strawberries. Makes 6 servings, about 1 cup each.

Nutrients per serving

215 Calories
50 milligrams Cholesterol
1 gram fat
55 milligrams Sodium

Lentil and Vegetable Medley

3 c. water
1 c. chicken broth
1 c. lentils, washed and sorted
1 tsp. chili powder
1/2 tsp. thyme, crushed
1/8 tsp. pepper
4 tsp. vegetable oil
1/2 c. chopped carrot (about ½ small)
1/2 c. chopped onion (about ½ medium)
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 c. chopped tomato (about 2 medium)

In medium saucepan over medium-high heat, heat water, chicken broth, lentils, chili powder, thyme and pepper to boiling, reduce heat to low, cover and simmer about 30-35 minutes or until lentils are tender. Meanwhile, in a large skillet heat oil over medium-high heat. Add carrot, onion and garlic and saute about 7 minutes until tender. Stir in tomatoes; cook about 2 minutes more. Mix with lentils. Makes 4 servings, 1 1/2 cups each.

Nutrients per serving

250 Calories
0 milligrams Cholesterol
6 grams Fat
200 milligrams Sodium

Nouvelle Beef Stroganoff

1 lb. lean beef round, cut into 2" strips
2 Tbsp. oil
1 medium onion, chopped
2 c. sliced mushrooms (about 6 ounces)
3/4 c. beef broth
3/4 c. water
3 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 Tbsp. tomato paste
1 tsp. dry mustard
1/4 tsp. oregano
1/4 tsp. dill weed
2 Tbsp. sherry (optional)
1/3 c. low-fat plain yogurt

In skillet in hot oil, cook onions until translucent. Add beef and mushrooms; cook until browned. Remove from skillet with slotted spoon. In bowl, mix broth, water and flour; pour into skillet, stirring constantly until smooth and slightly thick. Add tomato paste, mustard, oregano, dill weed and sherry. Blend well. Add meat mixture and cook 20-25 minutes until meat is tender and sauce is reduced. In bowl, combine yogurt, and add 3 tablespoons meat sauce. Reduce heat; slowly pour yogurt mixture into meat mixture. Simmer about 5 minutes. Serve with noodles or potatoes. Makes 4 servings, about 1 cup each.

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Nutrients per serving

300 Calories
75 milligrams Cholesterol
13 grams Fat
320 milligrams Sodium

Lemon-Garlic Brussels Sprouts and Carrots

1 Tbsp. margarine
2 10-oz. packages frozen Brussels sprouts, thawed and halved (about 3 cups)
1 c. julienne cut carrots (about 2 medium)
1 garlic clove, minced
3/4 tsp. basil, crushed
1/8 tsp. pepper
1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice

In large skillet over medium heat, melt margarine. Add Brussels sprouts, carrots, garlic, basil and pepper; saute about 7 minutes until tender, stirring frequently. Stir in lemon juice; cook about 2 minutes longer, stirring occasionally. Makes 6 servings, 2/3 cup each

Nutrients per serving

60 Calories
0 milligrams Cholesterol
2 grams Fat
45 milligrams Sodium

Ratatouille-Stuffed Peppers

4 tsp. vegetable oil
1 c. chopped eggplant (about 1/3 med. or 1/2 lb.)
3/4 c. chopped tomato (about 1 large)
3/4 c. chopped green pepper (about 1/4 small)
1/2 c. sliced zucchini, halved (about 1/2 medium)
1/2 c. chopped onion (about 1/2 medium)
2 garlic cloves, minced
3/4 tsp. basil, crushed
1/4 tsp. oregano, crushed
1/8 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. pepper
4 small green peppers
1 tsp. grated Parmesan cheese

In medium saucepan heat oil over medium-high heat. Add all ingredients except whole green peppers and cheese and cook about 10 minutes, covered, stirring frequently. Remove cover and continue to cook about 5 minutes longer. Meanwhile, remove top quarter of peppers; core and remove seeds. Parboil peppers in boiling water to cover about 6 minutes until tender crisp; drain. Preheat broiler. Spoon an equal amount of vegetable mixture into each pepper; sprinkle each with 1/4 teaspoon cheese. Place on broiler rack; broil 3 inches from heat source about 2 minutes. Makes 4 servings.

Nutrients per serving

95 Calories
1 milligram Cholesterol
5 grams Fat
95 milligrams Sodium