

CUMIN

Cumin is the dried seed of a relative of the parsley family, the plant *cuminum cyminum*, that grows to about two feet tall. Next to black pepper, cumin is the most popular spice in the entire world. It is an essential ingredient in Mexican and Indian cooking. Originally from the Middle East, cumin is one of the oldest spices known to man—cumin seeds have been found in 5,000 year old Egyptian pyramids, and cumin was also used by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Cumin is mentioned in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Today, cumin plays a major role in Spanish, Portugese, Moroccan, Middle Eastern and South Asian cuisines. The Spanish introduced cumin to the Americas, and now it's also a big part of Cuban, Mexican and Tex-Mex cooking. It's an essential ingredient of chili powder and curry powder, and is often used in stews, like chili con carne, grills—especially lamb—and in chicken dishes. It flavors some European cheeses, like Dutch Leyden and German Muenster, and is used as a pickling ingredient in sauerkraut. Most cumin today is produced in Iran, North Africa, India and Mexico. You can find cumin sold either in whole, dried seed or ground in the spice shelf of your local supermarket.

Here's an easy dish of baked chicken, flavored with cumin and orange. Preheat your oven to 425 degrees. Take about a pound and a half of chicken thighs, and trim off the excess fat, but leave the skin on. Cut an orange in half, and grate about 1 ½ teaspoon of orange peel. Make a past in a little bowl by mixing together the grated orange peel, 1 ½ teaspoons of whole cumin seed, 1 teaspoon of ground cumin, ½ teaspoon of garlic powder, ½ teaspoon salt, and some freshly ground black pepper. Add 1 ½ teaspoons of oil and squeeze some orange juice into the mixture until it forms a paste. Coat the chicken thighs evenly with the spice paste. Arrange the chicken thighs, skin side up, in a shallow baking pan. Spray with some cooking spray, and thinly slice the orange halves and place over the chicken. Bake the chicken for about 30 minutes. Then, lift the orange slices off the chicken and cook for another 15-20 minutes more to brown the skin and finish the chicken.

I served this with a dish of shredded cabbage. Take about 1 ½ pounds of cabbage—I prefer Savoy but any green cabbage is fine, cut out the core and shred the leaves. Peel and cut a large onion into halves, and finely slice into fine half-rings. Heat 3 tablespoons of oil in a wide, non-stick frying pan over medium-high heat. In a small bowl, mix together ¾ teaspoon of whole cumin seeds, ½ teaspoon of fennel seeds, and 1 teaspoon of sesame seeds. When the oil is hot, drop in the seeds. As soon as the sesame seeds start to pop, add the sliced onion and stir for 3 to 4 minutes, until the onion slices start to brown a bit. Then add the cabbage, and stir and fry for another 6 minutes or so until the cabbage, too, has browned somewhat. Now add about one teaspoon of salt, and some cayenne pepper to taste. Turn the heat down to medium-low, and cook, stirring now and then, for another 7 to 8 minutes or until the onions appear caramelized and soft. Add a tablespoon of lemon juice and ½ teaspoon of *garam masala* powder, stir, and serve.

(*Garam masala* is a pre-made Indian spice blend containing ground cumin, cloves, cinnamon, black pepper and other spices. You can now find it in the spice rack of our local supermarkets. The Indians use just a small amount of *garam masala* in lots of different dishes, stirred in just at the end of cooking.)

With the baked chicken and cumin, I'd serve a fruity gerwurtztraminer or a dry reisling. Baked apples stuffed with raisins, with a little eggnog poured over them, make a seasonal dessert. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.