

Did You Know?



Star Anise, *Illicium*

- The eight-pointed seed pod from an evergreen tree native to Southwest China and Vietnam, is the spice known as star anise. This small evergreen tree is in the magnolia family, Schisandraceae.
- Star anise flowers are yellow and from a little distance look similar to narcissus.
- Star anise has been used in China for flavoring and medicine for over three thousand years.
- The seed pods are harvested before ripening (green) and sun-dried, resulting in the rich brown color.
- Both the seeds and the pods contain the flavor and are finely ground together. When used in recipes whole, they should be removed before serving.
- Star anise is one of the five spices in the blend, Chinese five-spice.
- In Japan, the bark of the star anise tree has been used to make incense.
- The deep licorice-like aroma has subtle sweet and herbal notes. The flavor is used in sweet, spicy and savory dishes, including baked goods, chilled desserts, sauces, beverages and even red meats.
- The liquors absinthe, Sambuca, and pastis all have infused star anise flavoring.
- Though the flavor is similar, it is not related to anise seed. However, both plants have anethole, a compound responsible for the anise flavor in both seeds.
- Historical medicinal uses included Chinese herbalists using star anise as a stimulant, an expectorant and to treat indigestion to European healers using it in teas for rheumatism and chewing the seed for indigestion.
- Though there is now a synthetic way to manufacture it, star anise contains shikimic acid which is one of the primary components of the influenza-fighting drug Tamiflu.
- Research continues on extracts from star anise, including testing antifungals and antimicrobial compounds.
- According to Chinese folklore, finding a star anise with more than eight points was considered good luck. Star anise was also considered protection against the “evil eye”.
- While similar to *Illicium verum*, the seeds of Japanese star anise, *Illicium anisatum* are quite toxic.

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