

Sumac



With a deep red hue and trademark citrusy tartness, sumac is one of the most instantly recognizable spices of the Middle East. Although sumac has yet to become a household ingredient in every American kitchen, this unique and exotic spice has long been lauded around the world for its bold flavor and health-giving properties.

In addition to its rich culinary history, which dates back beyond the Roman empire, the health benefits of this ancient spice were first documented thousands of years ago in Greek medicinal texts, which noted sumac's antiseptic qualities. Today, this versatile ingredient is used worldwide to enhance and compliment the flavors of everything from hearty grilled meats, to fresh vegetables, to delicate desserts.

What Does Sumac Look and Taste Like?

Sumac has a flavor typically likened to the tartness of lemon, though the spice has a milder fruity profile that balances acidity. Some of the trademark characteristics of sumac spice include:

- A deep, purply red tone.
- A coarse grind, rather than a fine powder.
- A sour, acidic flavor.

Where Does Sumac Come From?

The sumac plant is a wild bush that primarily grows across the Mediterranean region, stretching from Italy to Greece to Lebanon. While sumac is most commonly used in the Middle East, and can be found cultivating in places like Turkey and Iran, the sumac flower is primarily grown in temperate and subtropical areas of Africa and North America.

Although the exact place of origin of this wild plant is unknown, sumac has been used for medicinal and culinary purposes around Europe, Africa, and the Middle East since medieval times, and was frequently used in Roman kitchens as a source of acidity prior to the arrival of lemons to the area. In North America, sumac has historically been used by Native Americans to create healing beverages and smoking mixtures for ceremonial purposes.

What Are The Different Types of Sumac?

Some Middle Eastern markets stock an array of sumac spices available from some of the 150 varieties of sumac plants, including staghorn sumac, littleleaf sumac, Sicilian sumac, winged sumac, and sourberry sumac. The two most common forms of cooking sumac, typically found in sumac spice blends, are:

- Fragrant sumac (a.k.a. Lemon sumac)
- Smooth sumac (a.k.a. Scarlet sumac)

Although all sumac sold for consumption is safe to eat, there is also a poisonous form of the plant found in the wild, which is identifiable by its white berries and drooping leaves in contrast to edible sumac's bold red berries.

What's the Difference Between Ground Sumac Powder and Whole Sumac?

The majority of sumac found in grocery stores and marketplaces is ground from the dried berries of the sumac bush and sold as a coarse powder. While it is possible to purchase whole sumac berries in some parts of the world, it is uncommon to find these berries in most areas.

4 Ways to Use Sumac

Given its complementary flavor, sumac can be used to enhance a wide variety of dishes. While sumac is most commonly used in Middle Eastern cooking, this versatile spice has wide-reaching culinary potential:

1. It is a standard ingredient in za'atar, a popular Mediterranean spice blend used to top everything from pita to lamb chops.
2. It is commonly dusted over a variety of dishes—such as meats, salads, breads, and desserts—as a colorful garnish, and to lend a touch of citrusy acidity.
3. It can be used as a substitute for lemon juice or vinegar, and has a less pungent, overpowering flavor than its acidic counterparts.
4. It can be used as part of a meat rub or marinade, to enhance the natural fats with its bright flavors.

