

## OREGANO



- Along with the other herbs grown in the area, oregano is a niche crop in Yuma County. Grown for use by specialty restaurants, the fresh herb is grown and packed here in Yuma and flown to various US locales and later used in a variety of culinary treats.
- Although oregano is heavily associated with Italian cuisine it is likely that it originated in Greece. The word oregano comes from the Greek, meaning “joy of the mountain.” Ancient Greeks believed that cows that grazed on fields of oregano produced tastier meat.
- Oregano is also believed to calm nerves and is used to cure sea sickness.
- Oregano is actually a particular herb flavor, rather than a particular herb. There are several species in different families that impart this particular flavor and are all known as oregano.
- The ancient Greeks made creams derived from oregano leaves and used them to treat sores and aching muscles. Traditional Chinese doctors have used oregano for centuries to relieve fever, vomiting, diarrhea, jaundice and itchy skin. In Europe, the herb is still used to improve digestion and soothe coughs.
- Little contemporary research has been done on the medical uses of oregano. The work that has been done shows that this herb contains two essential components, thymol and carvacol, which are also found in another herb, thyme.
- It's difficult to trace oregano's early history with any certainty because of this herb's relationship to its cultivated cousin marjoram. Both are of the same genus, and their popular and botanical terms have long been confused. It seems clear, however, that oregano was not as widely used in cooking as was marjoram, except along the shores of the Mediterranean. There, in Italy, Greece and other countries, cooks recognized its affinity for tomato-based sauces, lamb, seafood and almost any garlic-flavored dish, and it became a tradition to pick wild oregano and use it in many dishes.
- In the "new world," cooks in Mexico used oregano to flavor chile-based dishes, but in North America, cookbooks rarely mentioned oregano until after World War II. Then, returning GIs brought back a love for pizza, and oregano was "discovered" in this country. Not only did pizza call for oregano, it placed it right on top where people noticed its enticing flavor and aroma.
- From an herb that the Department of Commerce didn't list separately in import reports due to low volume, oregano use grew to one and a half million pounds a year by the 1960s, and has since grown to over fourteen million pounds. More recently, oregano has enjoyed a boost from the current boom in Mexican-style foods.
- Long-established trade practices also recognize the leaves of certain Mexican plants as oregano, since their flavor and aroma bear a resemblance to Mediterranean oregano. Mexican

oregano, however, is from the genus *Lippia*, quite distinct from *Origanum*. Species used in Mexico today are *Lippia graveolens* and *Lippia berlandieri*.

- As compared to the Mexican oregano, the Mediterranean product is a smaller leaf of somewhat lighter green color and milder, sweeter flavor. Compared to sweet marjoram, however, it is stronger and has a slightly bitter, minty taste.
- Compared to the Mediterranean herb, Mexican oregano is a much stronger, robustly flavored oregano; some describe its flavor quality as "wild." The leaves in their original form are larger and a somewhat darker shade of green, and their stronger flavor comes from a higher essential oil content, around 3% to 4%.
- Oregano's hint of sweetness combined with some spiciness adds warmth to any dish. Fresh oregano can be difficult to find in the marketplace and because dried oregano has a stronger flavor than the fresh, use it sparingly. Mediterranean (Greek) oregano is typically milder than Mexican oregano, the former being used in pizza seasonings and the latter sometimes called for in chili recipes.
- Thymol, an extract derived from oregano, can be used to help loosen phlegm in the lungs, according to Norman R. Farnsworth, Ph.D., director of the Program for Collaborative Research in the Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In Germany, where herbal medicine is popular, syrups containing thymol are frequently prescribed for even the most serious kinds of coughs. In the United States, you're most likely to find thymol in cough remedies such as cough drops and in topical cough and cold products such as VapoRub.
- The ingredients in oregano that soothe coughs also help unknot muscles in the digestive tract. Oregano also has a reputation as a menstruation promoter.
- For a warm, spicy tea that can settle the stomach or soothe a cough, use one to two teaspoons of dried herb per cup of boiling water. Let it steep for ten minutes.
- Oregano, which has a distinctive aroma and slightly bitter taste due to a high concentration of phenolic acids, can vary greatly in potency – some strains are uniquely delicate or mild while others are quite strong. Greek oregano tends to be the most pungent; the chemical make up of Spanish, Italian, and Turkish varieties results in milder herbs, often with more floral or woody notes.
- Though Mexican oregano is a notably potent variety, this oregano isn't actually part of the oregano family. Mexican oregano actually belongs to the *Lippia* genus, a member of the verbenaceae family. And while we're on the topic of misnamed herbs, Cuban oregano is really a member of the mint family, though you shouldn't concern yourself with the name too much – the tender leaves are particularly flavorful and are considered a delicacy in some tropical and Asian regions.
- Oregano is most characteristic of Italian, Mexican, and Greek cuisine, though it does make frequent appearances in other world cookery. The herb pairs very well with basil, and to-

gether the two act as the foundation of many Italian dishes: pasta sauces, pizza, grilled vegetable and meat dishes, etc. While there isn't a great deal of history documenting oregano's global use throughout the last several millennia, the herb began to noticeably infiltrate American spice racks with the onset of the pizza boom in the late 1940's and 1950's.

- While the herb-wise Italians may be credited with popularizing oregano in the United States, other Mediterranean regional cuisines had already been utilizing the plant for centuries as well. The most notable example is probably Greek cuisine, which often pairs the aromatic leaves with lemon juice, olive oil and little else. This combination is then used in nearly every meat or fish dish associated with Greek fare, from grilled meats to roasted lamb and then some; oregano fries, a popular Greek-food transplant commonly found in stateside Mediterranean restaurants, as well as the ever popular Greek salad both rely on the herb to define themselves as Greek-food staples...without the oregano, they'd just be another side order.
- Oregano also appears in many other cuisines including Mexican, Cuban and Spanish, all which use the leaves to add dimension to simple bean dishes and soups, or to some meat and/or vegetable-based entrées. Americanized Tex-Mex fare also uses oregano (chili con carne just isn't the same without a dash), and the herb is added frequently to chili powder blends used in cooking.

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