

USING AROMATICS IN YOUR OVEN

You can get a lot more from your oven by varying the fuel you use. Let Tracy open the door to a whole new world of flavours in your food.

by **Tracy Hansen**

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Smoking

We've always smoked things in our oven. Not serious, preserving style smoking, but just the using of smoke to imbue things with flavour.

To learn the basic method, read up a little on fish smoking and then have a go at doing something with these basic techniques in mind. I like to smoke ocean trout pieces rolled in sesame seeds. If you flake this fish over warm roasted sweet potato dotted with a little butter and scattered with freshly chopped coriander, you get the most beautiful visual and scented salad that just melts in your mouth.

Citrus peel also works a treat for this sort of 'lite' smoking. We scrupulously save any nice thin mandarin peel and dry it out in the just-warm oven overnight and then use it for a wood oven spin on the classic Duck à l'Orange, amongst other things. Kaffir lime leaves and stems are similarly lovely and pungent, particularly with chilli-ed up seafood and any sort of apple prunings and peelings are wonderful to infuse into pork. Tea is great for smoking too. I know I sound obsessed with duck, but wait till you try some duck smoked over a handful of Earl Grey ...

Packaging

If you have access to a grape vine, the prunings make nice aromatic oven wood and the blanched leaves make a great lightly-scented wrap material and act as a tenderiser for stew-y meats. Slow roasted goat pieces marinated in red wine and cooked wrapped in vine leaves are amazingly succulent. Baked ricotta cakes covered in vine leaves also look and taste fantastic.

This use of aromatics as a protective cloak is actually really handy for wood-fired oven cooking. A loose wrap of slightly damp fennel or dill or coriander stalks is perfect to half-steam delicate things and really helps to keep them moist. A whole small trout or bream stuffed loosely with some lemon slices, soured in some white wine, pepper and butter and then wrapped in lots of those long ungainly fennel stalks straight from the garden (the ones that are heading to seed) will cook to perfection on a tray in the oven and the smell will have everyone drooling. You can also 'Asian' your fish up by using coriander stalks, soy, ginger and lime.

Of course, the absolute hands-down winner in the scented packaging stakes would have to be cardamom. Plant some in your garden as soon as you can, because even if you never get to pick a pod (and I've been waiting seven years now!) the leaves are in a class of their own. Little parcels of chicken thigh meat and yoghurt wrapped up in



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cardamom leaves, put on a tray and baked for an hour in the WFO are just unbeatable and anything cooked or heated up on cardamom leaves will be permeated by that wonderful heady odour — saffron prawns baked on (already cooked) coconut rice with a cardamom leaf under them are just delicious and a thick Asian-style rice pudding wrapped into little cardamom covered parcels and reheated, makes a fragrant, no-fuss desert.

Tools

Back to old and woody garden things, I try to keep quite a lot of strong rosemary and lemon grass stalks in the garden because you can make such fantastic skewers out of them. Our sweet little local Queensland scallops speared on lemongrass skewers, dobed with butter, glazed with white wine and really quickly roasted over the coals are a bit of a fave starter here. Moroccan minced lamb on rosemary stem kebabs also gets the big tick from my man.

There you go, a Cook's Guide to Aromatherapy!



The woody aromatic herbs make really cute marinade brushes. Slappin' some marinade on a beautiful hot piece of meat with a bunch of rosemary or sage smells great and really makes you feel good.

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