

FOOD OF THE MONTH

Basil

Why

When most of us think basil, we think Italian food. But there's a lot more to this herb than pesto. In fact, it's native not to Italy, but rather Southeast Asia, India, and Northeast Africa.

Culinary expert Dr. Foo Swasdee, a Bangkok-born chef with a PhD in food science and her own product line of gourmet foods, loves holy basil, an Indian variety that is peppery and pungent. She also cooks with Thai sweet basil, which has licorice and spice notes. By contrast, Italian sweet basil is quite tender and mellow.

So this summer, consider dropping some different basil seeds — cinnamon, lemon, Thai, or holy — into your herb garden. Or pick up some of these unusual varieties on your next trip to your local farmers' market.

How

Pad Ga-prao Gai Sap (Thai Holy Basil Chicken)

Dr. Foo Swasdee teaches this stir-fried basil dish to her students at cooking classes at Satay restaurant in Austin. You can substitute tofu, shrimp, pork, or beef for the chicken in her recipe, and you can throw in other fresh vegetables such as thinly sliced carrots.

- 3 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
- 1-2 tablespoons chopped Thai chili pepper (jalapeño can be substituted)
- ½ pound ground chicken breast
- ½ cup sliced white mushrooms
- 1 ½ tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- ½ tablespoon sugar
- ½ tablespoon sweet soy sauce (optional, see note)
- ½ cup chicken stock or water, if necessary
- 1 small red bell pepper, thinly sliced
- ½ cup fresh go-proo (Thai holy basil, see note)
- Salt, to taste

Heat oil in a large saucepan or wok on high heat. Add garlic and stir-fry until golden brown. Stir in Thai chili pepper to taste. Stir in chicken, cooking until chicken is half-done, approximately one to two minutes.

Reduce heat to medium and add mushrooms, fish sauce, oyster sauce, sugar, sweet soy sauce, and stock (or water) if pan needs liquid. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are soft and liquid has reduced by half.

Add red pepper; pinch the basil leaves between your fingers (to release the essential oils) and add basil. Cook, stirring, until basil leaves are wilted. Season to taste with salt. Serve with steamed jasmine rice. Serves two.

Note: If you can't find sweet soy sauce, you can substitute ponzu sauce. And if fresh holy basil isn't available in your area, substitute sweet basil and add a dash of cayenne pepper to approximate its peppery bite.

Your First Time

Find fresh Italian and Thai sweet basil in the produce sections of groceries, and more varieties at farmers' markets and ethnic specialty markets. If you can't use all your fresh basil right away, trim the stems, place upright in a small jar of water (as though it were a bunch of flowers), and refrigerate. Later, you can toss it into salads, stir-fries, soups, or just about any recipe that calls for tomato or coconut milk, says Dr. Foo Swasdee, owner and chef at Satay in Austin.



Where

AUSTIN: A romantic garden, cooking classes, and basil-laden favorites like yum nuer (Thai beef salad) and gang dang (Thai red curry) entice herb and spice lovers to **SATAY**. This shrine to south Asian cuisine is also a favorite among vegetarians and health nuts for its flavorful dishes prepared with low-fat and organic ingredients. 3202 W. Anderson Lane, Suite 205, (512) 467-6731, www.satayusa.com