

Mint

You'd be hard-pressed to find a restaurant kitchen that doesn't have a prolific supply of mint on hand. One of the most versatile herbs, the aromatic leaves enhance both sweet and savory dishes.

There are more than 25 varieties of mint, but we tend to stick with peppermint for culinary uses, and while it's considered more of a year-round plant, it's actually more of a springtime herb.

It tends to grow better in warmer weather, so you'll find farmers from as far as Fresno with wild mint at local farmers' markets. They say that the season has been fairly normal, and the mint is bright and fragrant right now.

Though it's still used often as a garnish, mint has benefits that range far beyond appearance and flavor. It aids digestion and an upset stomach, and is rich in nutrients like vitamins C and A.

How to select: Choose bunches that stand up and don't droop. Look for whole, unblemished leaves attached to crisp stems. The leaves should

be a vibrant green color without dark brown or yellow spots.

How to store: Wrap bunches of mint in damp paper towels to store in the fridge. Placed inside of a plastic bag (left partially open so it's not airtight), the mint should stay fresh for several days.

On menus: In San Francisco, try mint ice cream with hazelnut meringues at Incanto; mint and English pea tagliolini at Flour+Water; strawberry-mint soda at Coi; and sautéed peas with mint, shallots and crispy lonza at Barbacco. At Gather in Berkeley, you'll find Sonoma lamb with mint and aged Sierra Nevada goat cheese.

Other ideas for using: Steep fresh mint in hot water, then strain, for a soothing hot tea, or add sugar to the same mixture and freeze to make mint granita; add chopped mint to a fruit or vegetable salad to punch up the flavor; chop and mix with citrus zest or make a mint pesto to spread over grilled fish, chicken or lamb.

—Amanda Gold

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Minted Cucumber-Lime Soda

Makes 1-2 drinks

The mint in this refreshing drink comes from two different sources — the fresh herb is muddled with fresh cucumber and lime juice, and is also used to flavor the agave syrup, which acts as the sweetener. Use the seltzer to your liking; the base is pretty strong, so if you like a milder drink, you can divide the juice between two glasses and top with more seltzer.

4 ounces peeled, sliced English cucumber (if using regular cucumber, seed as well)
1/4 cup tightly packed mint leaves + more for garnish
Juice of 2 limes
1 to 1 1/2 ounces minted agave syrup (see Note)
Seltzer or unflavored soda water, to taste

Instructions: In a cocktail shaker, muddle the cucumber slices with the mint leaves, lime juice and 1 ounce of the agave syrup until the cucumber is crushed. Cover and shake well to combine; then strain into 1 or 2 highball glasses filled to the top with ice, depending on how strong you want the drink. Top with seltzer water to taste. If you want the drink sweeter, add another 1/2 ounce of the agave syrup. Garnish with a sprig of fresh mint.

Note: To make the minted agave syrup, bring 1/2 cup agave syrup to a slow boil with 1/4 bunch of fresh mint. Remove from heat and let steep for at least 30 minutes, then strain. The leftover syrup will hold in the fridge for several weeks.

