

Home Grown!

The simple pleasures of fresh herbs

Growing and cooking with fresh herbs is one of life's simple pleasures and a favorite pastime that my family and my cooking school students all enjoy. Fresh, home-grown herbs offer us a treasure hunt of possibilities while leading us from our backyards and decks to our kitchens and dining tables. Ask any chef and he or she will tell you that "fresh is best" when it comes to cooking with herbs – their undeniable fragrances, distinct flavors, and earthy textures transform food into sumptuous cuisine.

Steps to herb success

A suburban herb garden can be as easy as tending to pots of basil or parsley or as elaborate as incorporating them into a vegetable garden with rows of tilled soil. Here are some tips:

- I recommend purchasing the herbs you'll use for cooking at a local nursery. Mark your calendars to plant herbs outside after Mother's Day or when the threat of frost has subsided.
- Plant herbs in well-drained soil with full or afternoon sun, and plan to water them in the morning or evening as needed. Herbs are very hardy and generally resistant to pests; pulling weeds from the garden helps them thrive.

• Herbs are as beautiful to look at as they are to eat...so try incorporating them into a decorative border along walkways or mixing them in flower pots on the deck. Plant mint in a pot by your faucets to enjoy the fragrance every time you turn on the water!

Cooking with herbs

My family's favorite herbs include basil, cilantro, rosemary, marjoram, mint, oregano, sage, tarragon and thyme...most of which come in different hybrids with a range of shapes, colors, and tastes. Cooking with these herbs can be as simple as adding them to a green salad, sprinkling them over an oven-roasted chicken, or tossing them over pasta with grilled vegetables. Fresh basil with home-grown tomatoes, mozzarella, a drizzle of our favorite extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and a dash of sea salt defines summer for us!

Each year, my husband and I seek out new hybrids in online seed catalogs and at local nurseries, hoping that we will discover more nuances of our favorites and plants that do better than others in the Midwest. We often debate what, where, and how much to plant (which always makes for a lively conversation!).



Mary Rose Hoover is the owner of Cucina Della Rosa Cooking School, based at the McCauley Design Studio in downtown Barrington. She shares her passion for cooking and entertaining by offering adult cooking classes, private parties, and corporate team-building events. Classes and camps designed especially for teens and children are also available. For more information on Cucina Della Rosa schedules or to order a gift certificate, visit www.maryrosecooks.com or call 847-650-9463.

Whatever your passion for herbs, planning your garden's size, location, content, and favorite herb meals during Chicago's early spring embrace promises to be a rewarding pastime and journey (from garden to table) to share with your family and friends. I agree – "Fresh is best!"

For more information on herb gardening for beginners or how to cook with fresh herbs, visit the Cucina Della Rosa Cooking School at www.maryrosecooks.com.

Mary Rose's Best: Parchment-Baked Tilapia with Herbs

(RECIPE IS PER PERSON)

This recipe offers flexibility to substitute items based on your garden or market's availability. The fish/herb/spice combinations are as endless as your own creativity and guests' preferences.

Ingredients:

- 1 piece of tilapia (approx. 8 oz.)
- 1 tablespoon (by volume) roughly chopped or whole fresh herbs such as parsley, marjoram, oregano, tarragon, or cilantro. Substitute others or combine as you like!
- 1 piece of parchment paper per tilapia (14" x 14" square)
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and pepper to taste
- *Options:* Try adding different combinations of thinly sliced bell or serrano peppers, citrus, garlic, sun-dried tomatoes, salsa, or hot sauce.

Cooking Instructions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Fold the parchment paper from corner to

corner into a triangle and re-open it to place a piece of fish in the center of the fold line.

Drizzle a tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil on the fish and sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Spread herbs and other options evenly over the top of fish. Fold paper back into the triangle and begin to roll the sides together until you have formed a sealed triangular pouch that resembles a half-moon shape. Place on a cookie sheet (with seal facing up) and repeat the process for each dinner guest. Bake for 20-30 minutes until fish is tender. (Note: 20 or more minutes is required for multiple pieces of fish at one time.)

Serve immediately (in or out of the paper), being careful when opening the packets to save the juices and spices and to avoid the piping hot steam.

