



## Plenty Fresh

Nutritionist **Ellie Krieger** uses fresh herbs to amp up flavor in a healthful way.

AS A NUTRITIONIST AND A BORN FOOD LOVER, I'm a walking contradiction to many people. How do I reconcile a foodie's focus on flavor and indulgence with the nutritional wisdom that I should cut back on such flavor builders as butter, cream, cheese, and bacon? Well, I don't always have to—I use healthier flavor boosters instead. Think chile peppers, ground spices, fresh aromatics like ginger and garlic, and my absolute favorites: fresh herbs.

Herbs are one of those magical ingredients that have the power to transform a dish. Not only do they add tremendous flavor, but they also infuse food with enticing aromas and beautiful color. And if that weren't enough, they're full of health-protective antioxidants and are a surprisingly rich source of vitamin A.

**A Major Player** While it's easy to think of herbs as a garnish or a subtle hint in a dish, I encourage you to take a new look at them as a major player. A generous dose of basil, mint, dill, or parsley can make any hum-drum green salad burst with flavor. Add fresh mint to a standard turkey sandwich, and it's like hitting the refresh button. A bunch of basil, parsley, or cilantro puréed with olive oil and a touch of lemon juice makes a vibrant salsa verde that's great for drizzling over scallops or grilled fish or meat. And heartier herbs like rosemary, thyme, and sage make terrific rubs and marinades for roasted meats and poultry.

Such herbal abundance translates well into many grain dishes, too. In traditional Middle-Eastern tabbouleh, for example, fresh, grassy flat-leaf parsley is a dominant ingredient, held aloft by robust bulgur wheat. In the same vein, I love making light, summery pastas that rely heavily on a combination of aromatic fresh herbs for flavor impact. The recipe here is a go-to summer dish for me that's simple, fresh, and full of flavor: It takes advantage of the bounty of zucchini and leaves it to the herbs to deliver the freshness of the season right to the plate—no cream or butter required.

**Nutritional Wisdom** That's not to say we should ban butter and other flavor standbys. I use all those ingredients in my own cooking, but strategically and in small amounts for maximum effect (a little freshly grated Parnigiano, for instance, goes a long way in this penne dish). But a liberal amount of fresh herbs sprinkled on a dish just before serving gets the job done in a way that tastes good and is good for you. That's my kind of nutritional know-how.

### good to know

- Fresh herbs are full of antioxidants and vitamin A.
- Let herbs be a major player in a dish, not just a garnish—think cups, not teaspoons.
- Swap ½ cup Parmesan sprinkled on pasta for a handful of fresh herbs, and keep the big flavor while saving about 100 calories.



For Ellie, there's big flavor in fresh herbs.



## penne with zucchini, fresh herbs, and lemon zest

Serves 4 (serving size, 2¼ cups)

- Kosher salt
- ¾ lb. whole wheat penne
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 medium zucchini (8 oz. each), cut in half lengthwise and sliced crosswise into ¼-inch-thick half moons
- 4 large cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 tsp. finely grated lemon zest
- Freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 3 Tbs. coarsely chopped fresh mint

- 3 Tbs. coarsely chopped fresh basil
- 3 Tbs. coarsely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

**Bring a large pot** of well-salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the penne and cook according to package instructions until al dente. **Meanwhile**, heat the oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add the zucchini and cook, stirring occasionally, until barely tender and just starting to brown, about 3 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until the garlic is soft and fragrant, an additional

2 to 3 minutes. Remove from the heat. Stir in the lemon zest, ¼ tsp salt, and ¼ tsp. pepper. **Reserve ½ cup** pasta cooking water and drain the pasta. Add the pasta to the zucchini mixture along with the Parmigiano, mint, basil, and parsley. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Toss to combine, adding some of the reserved water if necessary to moisten the pasta, and serve immediately.

*Registered dietitian Ellie Krieger is a Fine Cooking contributing editor.*