

Pucker Up With Lemon

Lemon is the super citrus! Some chefs and foodies swear that lemon can make just about anything taste better.

In most U.S. stores, the pile of yellow lemons is usually either Lisbon or Eureka varieties. A more specialty variety of lemons that can be found seasonally is Meyer lemons. They're typically sweeter and more aromatic, which makes them great for use in raw preparations such as relish or a salad.

Choose lemons that are heavy for their size, give slightly when gentle pressure is applied, and have a pleasant fragrance. Select lemons that have a vibrant yellow color and glossy skin. Pale lemons may be a sign of an older fruit. Avoid lemons that are too soft, wrinkled, or have signs of mold.

A medium-sized lemon usually provides around 2 tablespoons of juice. If you're buying lemons by the pound, figure that a single pound will give you about three-fourths of a cup to a whole cup of juice.

While lemons can be stored at room temperature away from sunlight, they last much longer in the refrigerator. Keep lemons in a sealed bag in the crisper of the fridge. They'll last three weeks to one month. Cut lemons should also be stored in an airtight container or a resealable plastic bag in the refrigerator. Lemon zest can be stored in the fridge for up to three days.

Kept whole or cut in slices, lemons can keep up to four months in the freezer. Freeze lemon juice in ice cube trays for up to four months. Lemon zest can be dried or frozen for months.

It is important to wash lemons. Wash the skin so that any dirt or bacteria residing on the surface will not be transferred to the fruit's interior.

Before juicing, I like to zest my lemons, even if I don't need grated lemon zest immediately. Whether using a microplane, grater, or peeler, you only want to take off the yellow outermost layer of the lemon - that's the zest. Once you start to see the spongy white layer underneath, stop!

Freshly squeezed lemon juice is always going to taste better. To get the most juice from lemons, start by rolling them against the countertop, pressing down with the palm of your hand to help break up some of the cells and loosen the membranes. Work with room-temperature lemons for easier squeezing.

You have several options for juicing the lemon once it is zested and halved. The tools include an electric juicer, a manual lemon squeezer/citrus reamer, and a fork or spoon.

Unless you're in a bind, avoid bottled lemon juice sold at the store, as it's often loaded with preservatives and chemicals. Additionally, it is often concentrated, so using the amount the recipe calls for can sometimes overwhelm the dish and your palate.

Lemons can also affect the texture and color of other plant foods. Lemon juice can help preserve the color of red foods and prevent them from turning purple or blue. Be aware that adding lemon juice too early in the cooking process can cause the greens to fade.

Lemon juice can also inhibit the browning caused by oxidation in cut fruits. Submerge the fruit in a mixture of 1 tablespoon of lemon juice and 1 cup of water. Allow the fruit to soak for 5 minutes, then drain. The fruit slices will appear fresh for up to several hours.

The zest of a lemon is a great way to add lemon flavor to a dish without adding extra moisture or acidity.

Lemon juice makes a great base for marinating grilled fish and meat, as well as for roasting fish or chicken.

The acidity ("sour" flavor) of the juice adds brightness and liveliness to any recipe. It balances the other flavors, specifically the sweet ones, while also tempering the spiciness of hot foods.

When life gives you lemons, make sure they're juicy! Whether you're garnishing a drink, making lemonade, or flavoring a dish, the juiciness of your lemon matters.