

[Ask the Chef](#)

Curry Powder vs. Garam Masala What's the Difference?

By [Carol Blonder](#) Thu., Mar. 24 2011 at 9:33 AM

This week's question for the Chef: Is there a difference between curry powder and garam masala and how are they used?

That ubiquitous bottle or tin of yellow powder from the spice shelf at the grocery store only hints at the flavor delivered by the curry powder found in the kitchen of an Indian cook. **In authentic Indian cooking, curry powder is made fresh and often the spices are chosen and mixed specific to a dish it is used to flavor.**

Homemade curry powder varies by region throughout India and is now used widely in other cuisines. Family preferences add to the variety of curry powder recipes handed down and adapted by each generation.

Traditional curry powder is a **blend of 20 ground herbs and spices**. The pre made curry powder we are most familiar with is a British colonial adaptation of the complex spice blend.



Curry powder is used as a seasoning, adding flavor and color to a dish. Common ingredients include cardamom, dried chile, cinnamon, clove, coriander, cumin, fennel, fenugreek, mace, nutmeg, red and black peppercorn, poppy seed, sesame seed, saffron, tamarind, and turmeric. Madras curry powder packs some heat.

Garam masala is also a blend of spices; **one composed of fewer spices than the 20 or so called for in traditional curry powder**. Translated from Hindi, garam masala means warm or warming spice, referring to the warmth it adds to a dish.

Like curry powder, variations can be found in Indian cuisine, region-to-region and cook-to-cook. The ingredients used in preparation of a specific dish influence

the spices and herbs chosen for the blend.

Garam masala is **used as a final seasoning in a dish**, either stirred in at the end of the cooking time or sprinkled on top. Whole spices, herbs and seeds are first **toasted or fried in oil or ghee** until they darken a bit in color and release their aromatic oil. The blend is then cooled and ground to a powder.

Both curry powder and garam masala **lose their pungency quickly**, which is a good reason to mix up your own blends. Once ground and placed in a jar with a tight seal, a homemade blend is best used in 2-3 months. Buying prepared curry powder or garam masala? Treat your taste buds and buy at an Asian or Indian grocery.

Garam Masala

- 3 Tablespoons coriander seeds
- 3 Tablespoons cumin
- 2-3 inch cinnamon sticks, broken into pieces
- 1 Tablespoon cardamom seeds
- 1 Tablespoon whole cloves
- 1-teaspoon fennel seeds

1. In a small pan combine and heat the spices and seeds until they darken in color and smell fragrant (about 5 minutes). Cool
2. In a spice grinder, grind the spice mix to a powder
3. Store in an airtight glass container for up to 3 months