

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

What's behind taste in pumpkin flavoring

When I ordered a pumpkin spice-flavored coffee the other day, a friend told me there's no real pumpkin in the flavoring used in the drink. I told her I didn't think there was any pumpkin in any kind of pumpkin spice, and she got upset with me. Am I right?

In general terms, yes, you're right. Pumpkin spice is more accurately called "pumpkin pie" spice — something everyone would be familiar with if they still made pumpkin pie from scratch.

Pumpkin spice-flavored foods are everywhere this season — from cereal and yogurt, to crackers and tortilla chips. Pumpkin pie spice is actually a combination of different spices, including cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and clove or allspice (or both). In fact, you can make your own pumpkin pie spice by combining those ingredients in your own small container.

Commercial pumpkin spice flavoring doesn't normally use the actual spices, though. The Institute of Food Technologists provides a revealing video and fact sheet at ift.org — search for "Pumpkin Spice 101."

According to the IFT, instead of using a blend of spices you'd find in your cabinet, commercial flavor manufacturers use chemical compounds that provide a consistent flavor profile — cinnamic aldehyde for cinnamon, for example, and terpenes for nutmeg. Those are the flavor compounds that emerge when a pumpkin pie is baked, so you wouldn't necessarily get them from just shaking the spice blend into your homemade latte.

These compounds are available at a fraction of the cost of the actual spices, and they're sustainable: The IFT says there's probably not enough actual spice in the world to supply the seasonal demand



image: iStock

for pumpkin spice-flavored coffees, baked goods, cereals, yogurts, liqueurs, candies and other foods and beverages.

Interestingly, the IFT notes that some pumpkin spice flavorings actually do contain some real pumpkin. But you likely won't taste it. According to food scientists, the amount of pumpkin puree added is so small that it does not change the flavor or nutritional profile of the food — but it might appease people like your friend who want to see "real pumpkin" on the list of ingredients in their favorite pumpkin spice-flavored food.

Such foods and beverages are also generally sweetened, just as pumpkin pie filling is. You can immediately taste the difference if you sample regular canned pumpkin alongside canned pumpkin pie filling. Not only does the pie filling have the warm, spicy flavoring, but it satisfies your sweet tooth, too, because of the added sugar. On the other hand, canned pumpkin is simply canned pureed pumpkin without all of the extras.

That said, it's also a great time of year to use canned pumpkin in your cooking. It's low in calories, is full of potassium and antioxidants, and is a great addition to chili, quick breads and many other dishes. You can even make your own pumpkin puree by baking a pumpkin like other types of winter squash. Just be sure to start with a pumpkin made for cooking, not carving: The large jack-o'-lantern types are stringy and bland.

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By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Editor: This column was reviewed by Carol Smathers, field specialist in Youth Nutrition and Wellness for Ohio State University Extension.

Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 364 W. Lane Ave., Suite B120, Columbus, OH 43201, or filipic.3@osu.edu. Please note new postal address as of Oct. 20, 2016.

College Marketing and Communications
364 W. Lane Ave., Suite B120
Columbus, OH 43201
614-292-2011

203 Research Services Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

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