

It might be time to freshen your spice shelf

MIAMI (MCT) — You don't need the conical clay pot called a tagine to make the Moroccan braise of the same name — a deep saute pan will do. But you do need fresh spices.

Properly stored in airtight containers, away from light and heat (never above the stove), ground spices have a shelf life of six months to a year. After that, their flavor and aroma fades.

Give your spices the sniff test to see if they're still fresh; if they're not strongly scented, toss them in the trash. Purchase replacements in the smallest quantities you can find to avoid future waste.

Most spices are dried seeds, stems, pods, berries, bark, roots, buds or fruits. Their flavors come from volatile oils that are released on grinding, so whole spices last much longer.

Whole nutmeg or cinnamon can be

grated with a fine, hand-held grater. Small seeds like cumin, coriander, caraway and fennel can be ground in a coffee grinder reserved for that purpose.

When you're done, clean the grinder by running some fresh bread through it.

This recipe for Chicken Tagine With Apricots and Almonds will reward your efforts with wonderful flavor.

CHICKEN TAGINE WITH APRICOTS AND ALMONDS

A green salad and a loaf of good bread are all you need to complete this meal. The seasoning is well-balanced by the citrus acidity, fresh melon and flinty mineral notes of DeLoach Sauvignon Blanc Ritchie Vineyard 2007 (\$30).

- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 3 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, each cut into thirds
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter

- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large red bell pepper, cored, seeded and chopped

- 6 garlic cloves, pressed or minced
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped shallot
- 1 cup homemade chicken broth or top-quality canned
- 1/4 teaspoon saffron threads
- 5 sprigs fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 5 sprigs fresh cilantro
- 1 cup dried apricots, each halved
- 1/4 cup honey
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 cups couscous
- 3/4 cup toasted blanched whole or slivered almonds

Mix flour, cinnamon, ginger, salt, cumin, turmeric and pepper in a self-sealing plastic bag. In batches, add the chicken and toss to coat.

Heat oil and butter in a deep saute pan over medium heat. Working in batches, brown the chicken on each side and transfer to a plate. Add the onion, bell pepper, garlic and shallot to the pan; cook 3 to 5 minutes, until beginning to soften.

Return chicken to pan; add broth and

saffron. Tie together the parsley and cilantro sprigs with kitchen string and add. Cover, reduce heat and simmer about 30 minutes, until the chicken is tender and cooked through.

Meanwhile, put the apricots, honey and cinnamon sticks in a small saucepan with 1 cup water. Bring just to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, about 25 minutes, until apricots are plump and liquid is reduced.

Add apricot mixture to chicken and simmer 10 more minutes. Check and adjust seasoning as needed. Discard cinnamon sticks and herb bundle.

Place couscous in a medium bowl. Pour on 1-1/3 cups boiling water, stirring to mix. Cover tightly with foil and set aside 5 minutes.

Fluff with a fork. Serve chicken over couscous, garnished with almonds. Makes 6 servings.

Per serving: 835 calories (32 percent from fat), 29.2 g fat (7.6 g saturated, 13.7 g monounsaturated), 204.7 mg cholesterol, 58.2 g protein, 85.6 g carbohydrates, 8.5 g fiber, 847.6 mg sodium.

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