

All About Umami

Umami has been described as a savory, comforting flavor that promotes salivation and builds on itself without overwhelming the dish. It is one of the basic tastes, along with sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. Most likely you have tasted umami before, as it occurs naturally in a variety of foods including meat, fish, vegetables, and aged or fermented ingredients.

Unlike sweet and salty, which tastes are the most intense on the tip of the tongue, umami spreads across the entire tongue, coating the taste buds and lingering for several minutes.

In order to fully understand umami and how to use it, we'll have to delve into its chemical makeup. The flavor profile comes from amino acids within the food. These amino acids can be divided into three taste components: glutamate, inosinate, and guanylate.

Think of glutamate as the main component that makes up the umami flavor. Foods that can be categorized as having umami, such as tomatoes, broccoli, asparagus, and cheese, have glutamate. Inosinate and guanylate are more like divisions of umami.

Fish, poultry, pork, and beef all contain high concentrates of inosinate. Vegetables and fungi, in particular dried mushrooms, are higher in guanylate. The process of fermentation, curing, and drying ingredients intensifies the umami flavor, which is why foods like cheese and jerky have a funky yet delicious flavor.

When glutamates are combined they become an umami bomb, a savory flavor bomb that detonates the dish with deliciousness without tasting overwhelming.

So, now that we've gone through what makes up the umami flavor, let's talk about some specific umami bomb ingredients and how to use them.

Worcestershire is a fermented sauce and a powerful ingredient that can be easily incorporated in dishes that already have an umami flavor profile. Worcestershire consists of a combination of anchovy, vinegar, onion, soy sauce, garlic, brown sugar, and cloves. The umami flavor derives from the soy sauce and anchovies. I find it can add depth to meat marinades, Bloody Mary cocktails, cocktail sauce, and even the simplest meals such as sloppy joes and burgers. Worcestershire is complex and has notes of sweetness and saltiness, so make sure you taste before adding anymore salt to the dish.

Soy sauce is another fermented sauce that is commonly used in Chinese and Japanese cuisines. Its umami flavor comes from fermented soy beans. Even though it is often associated with Asian flavors, soy sauce is very versatile and can be used in a variety of international ways. Use it as a quick marinade, stir it into a stew for added flavor, or use it in a stir-fry or noodle dish. With soy sauce, there are many possibilities and they are all delicious. Keep in mind that soy sauce is very salty as well, so use salt sparingly if you're also planning to use soy sauce in a dish.

Maggi sauce is vegetable protein based and can be thought of as Switzerland's soy sauce. Like Worcestershire and soy sauce, Maggi sauce is high in sodium and should be used sparingly to add depth to stews and soups. It can also be used as a light sauce on top of something as simple as fried eggs.

Nutritional yeast is a deactivated yeast that is flaky in texture and yellow in color. It is popular among vegans for its cheese-like flavor and smell. It is often used as a cheese substitute and is also a delicious topping on potatoes, tofu, vegetables, and even popcorn. If I don't have any parmesan cheese, I will sometimes use nutritional yeast instead.

Tomato paste is a wonderful way to add umami to pasta, pizza, sauces, and stews. It's made from tomatoes that have been cooked, pureed, then cooked again until thick and pasty. It's a great way to thicken up a dish with a powerful umami flavor. There's a misconception about how to use tomato paste. Instead of simply adding it to a dish, consider taking the extra time to cook and caramelize the paste. This brings out the true umami flavor.

Anchovy paste can be best described as a flavor amplifier. If you find that a sauce is falling flat on your taste buds, try adding a small amount of anchovy paste. It's also a great background flavor in pastas and dressings such as Caesar.

Fish sauce has been used globally throughout history, but it is most common today in Asian cuisines. It is made from fish that has been covered in salt and fermented for an extended period of time. This gives it a strong umami flavor which is great for giving a dipping sauce a fully developed flavor. Fish sauce is often compared to soy sauce in its saltiness, so, as always, a little goes a long way.

Umami is essential in balanced and delicious cooking. Since many umami flavors can be layered on top of one another, it's a perfect way to make a simple dish deliciously complex.