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# Lindsay Marie Morris

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## BLOG

### Fennel: A Nutrient-Rich, Zero-Waste Vegetable with Versatile Uses

November 30, 2024

Tags: Food, vegetable, fennel



Fennel Photo by Hlove Fruit & Veg from Europe

Prized for its bulbs, leaves, and even seeds, fennel is the ultimate zero-waste food. It's also rich in fiber, potassium, vitamin C, and manganese.

To explore the origins and uses of fennel, I reached out to "I Love Fruit & Veg from Europe," a global initiative that promotes the mindful consumption of high-quality European fruits and vegetables both within Italy and abroad. Their purview includes organic produce and products with PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) certifications, advocating for healthier, safer, and more sustainable diets. The initiative is supported by Italian producer organizations such as Apitalia, A.O.A., La Deliziosa, Meridia, and Terra Grù and is co-funded by the European Commission.

"I Love Fruit & Veg from Europe" Campaign Manager and Coordinator Manuela Barzan shared more

about this flavorful vegetable.

#### WHERE DOES FENNEL COME FROM ORIGINALLY?

Common fennel (*F. vulgare*) or *fianochetto* is native to Southern Europe and countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea but has become naturalized worldwide. To the ancient Greeks, fennel was a symbol of victory, known as "marathon," lending its name to the battle of Marathon (490 BC), where legend has it the battle unfolded in a fennel field. The Romans, too, embraced fennel as a symbol of achievement, fashioning its leaves into wreaths to crown champions in their games.

Florence fennel, or *fianocchio* (*foeniculum vulgare var. azoricum*), is a cultivated variety from the same family as wild fennel. Developed in 17th-century Italy, it resembles wild fennel at the top with similar stalks, fronds, and flowers, but at the base, it forms a white, layered structure often called a "crown." Although commonly referred to as a bulb, it's not a true bulb—it's layers are crisp and carry a mild anise flavor.

#### WHERE AND HOW IS FENNEL TYPICALLY GROWN?

India is the largest producer of fennel, which is grown for its seeds and is widely used in cooking and traditional medicine. Spanish missionaries brought fennel to North America, cultivating it in their medicinal gardens. In California, it is now commonly referred to as wild anise and grows abundantly along roadsides and in pastures across the U.S., where it is often regarded as a weed.

Bulb fennel (*fianocchio*) is grown globally but thrives in warm, moist environments. Various cultivars can be harvested at different times based on their growing location, with the general harvest season in Italy spanning from spring to fall.

In the U.S., fennel is considered a cool-weather crop and is typically available from fall through early spring, although grocery stores stock it year-round. However, since fennel is a relatively minor crop in the U.S., any out-of-season supply (not sourced from California or Arizona usually) comes from a greater distance.

#### WHAT PARTS OF THE FENNEL PLANT ARE USED AND HOW?

Every part can be used in some way! Bulb fennel is grown for its seeds, essential oil, fronds (leaves), and swollen leaf base, which is consumed as a vegetable. While the stalks can be tough and somewhat stringy, they are often used to flavor stocks. The fronds can serve as a garnish or be incorporated into marmalades and sauces.

Common fennel is primarily cultivated for its seeds, which possess a more aromatic quality than those of cultivated fennel and have a robust flavor reminiscent of licorice.

#### WHAT ARE THE NUTRITIONAL BENEFITS OF FENNEL?

Fennel is a nutrient-dense, low-calorie food that offers several health benefits, including:

- **Rich in antioxidants:** Fennel is abundant in various antioxidant compounds that help shield cells from damage caused by free radicals, potentially lowering the risk of chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease.
- **Colic relief:** Colic, a frequent issue for newborns, can be effectively alleviated with fennel, whether used alone or combined with other herbs. Fennel seeds are commonly included in gripe water, a well-known remedy for this condition.
- **Menstrual pain relief:** Research indicates that fennel might lower the production of prostaglandins, hormones linked to painful periods.
- **Enhanced digestion:** Traditionally, fennel is consumed after meals in many cultures to support digestion and minimize gas. Studies suggest that fennel may help by reducing inflammation in the intestines and decreasing the levels of gas-producing bacteria. Additionally, fennel oil has been found to alleviate symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome.

#### WHAT ARE SOME FAVORITE SICILIAN RECIPES THAT FEATURE FENNEL?

- **Sicilian sausage:** Known as *salsiccia*, these sausages are made from coarsely chopped pork mixed with fennel seeds. They are typically sold in coils on skewers, weighed by the pound.
- **Pasta con le Sarde:** This dish is a staple in Sicilian cuisine. According to legend, when Euphemias of Messina returned from exile in Tunisia to lead a military campaign in 827, his Arab cooks created this recipe using the first ingredients they found upon landing at Mazara's harbor. The combination included wild fennel, raisins, pine nuts, and the freshest sardines available.
- **Pork and fennel ragu:** For this dish, start by removing the casing from Sicilian sausages, squeezing out the pork, and cutting it into pieces. Saute shankles in a bit of wine, then add the sausage and combine it with tomato sauce and a teaspoon of fennel seeds. For a twist, you can substitute the tomato sauce with fresh ricotta. This ragu pairs beautifully with *coniarone*, a short, twisted pasta native to Sicily.

#### HOW DO YOU RECOMMEND PREPARING FENNEL TO BRING OUT ITS BEST FLAVORS?

Fennel bulbs can be prepared in various ways, including steaming, grilling, roasting, or braising. They are often served with olive oil or butter. They offer a sweet, subtly anise-like flavor that pairs especially well with fish.

To enhance the flavor of Florence fennel when using it raw in salads, slice the bulb and let it soak in ice water for an hour in the refrigerator.

Antonio Carluccio said in *Complete Italian Food*, "Fennel has such a sweet taste and pleasant aroma that it was often served at the end of a meal as a dessert in Italy. It is delicious in every form, raw or cooked, and indispensable in *penneuno* [tender spring vegetables served sliced and raw to dip in newly pressed olive oil with a little salt and pepper]."

#### CAN YOU SHARE ANY TIPS FOR SELECTING THE BEST FENNEL?

When selecting fennel bulbs, look for those that are white or pale green, firm, and heavy. Steer clear of any that appear yellowing, dry, or starting to shrivel. The fronds should be vibrant and crisp, not wilted.

As fennel ages, it becomes drier and tougher, with a more intense anise flavor. However, removing the outer layers will make the inner part less tough.

#### HOW DO YOU STORE FENNEL?

Sturdy fennel bulbs and stalks can be stored in the refrigerator for an extended period. However, the fronds may lose their crispness, so it's advisable to detach them, wrap them in a paper towel or newspaper, and place them in a container in the fridge. Keeping the fronds dry can help extend their freshness.

#### WHAT OTHER INGREDIENTS COMPLEMENT FENNEL IN RECIPES?

Fennel pairs especially well with fish.

The chopped young leaves can enhance the flavor of salads and various dishes, and they are commonly enjoyed alongside oranges.

#### WHY SHOULD PEOPLE TRY FENNEL?

Fennel is a highly versatile vegetable that can be enjoyed raw or cooked. It is easy to incorporate into various dishes without generating waste. It is rich in fiber, low in calories, and boasts numerous health benefits.

Here are some common ways to include fennel in your meals:

- Sip fennel tea, a soothing herbal infusion made by steeping fennel seeds in hot water. This traditional remedy is often utilized to promote digestion and reduce bloating and gas. You can find it in tea bags or make it by steeping whole fennel seeds.
- Incorporate fennel into salads for an extra crunch.
- Substitute fennel stalks for celery in soups or stews.
- Wrap fennel with other root vegetables in foil and roast in the oven until tender.
- Use the bulb stalks, and fronds as a flavorful base when roasting chicken or pork.
- For a tasty side dish, roast fennel wedges seasoned with salt, pepper, and butter.

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